

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*  
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**"At the Bottom of Avon River:  
A Partial Alphabet of Objects for Louis Zukofsky and HD"**

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**A. Anthology**

The word is of course Greek, "a flower gathering," early applied to collections of short lyric poems. But there is also the *logos* of *anthology* – the knowledge of flowers. An exemplary collection of specimens which sheds light on its subject through profusion, abundance, excess. An anthology creates a context – Elizabethan poetry, the love lyric, erotica – an Eliotic "tradition" or "simultaneous order" or utopian "ideal order" in which part is subservient to ever-expandable whole (Eliot 38). In their critical writings on Shakespeare, both Louis Zukofsky and H.D. attempt a gathering of related materials, ultimately shaping a context into which they project their Shakespeares. "The context I call Shakespeare," Zukofsky writes, is "the context of the *definition of love*" his 'anthology' of quotations – *Bottom: On Shakespeare* – exists to embody (Bottom 326). Quotation after quotation is gathered to assemble the "definition," proved purely by excess. But Zukofsky also gathers quotations that assemble a philosophical context for the context of the definition: "One can imagine an anthology of things Shakespeare's lines – as eyes so to speak – would like to have read" (Bottom 106). Thus sections of *Bottom* which gather the "Greeks" in whom Zukofsky finds "Echoes of Shakespeare out of his time" (381), or his "*small Latin anthology*" (395), or the "abridged" *Tractatus* of Wittgenstein that exists within the body of *Bottom*. *By Avon River* has also been called "a compact anthology" (Collecott 226); it is indeed largely a gathering of Elizabethan lyrics, with Shakespeare's own work nowhere in sight. Thus her text is literally "by" (beside) Avon River (Shakespeare). Both H.D. and Zukofsky appear to implicitly follow Pound's suggestion that "The way to study Shakespeare's language is to study it side by side with something different and of equal extent" (Pound 59).

**B. By Avon, At Bottom**

"The mind should see bottom," Zukofsky elaborates from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, glossing a scene in which Achilles's "mind is troubled, like a fountain stirr'd" (Bottom 392, *Troilus and Cressida* III, iii, 301). Attempting to see the bottom of *Bottom*, I find H.D. a better guide and precedent – in terms of form – to Zukofsky's (and Olson's and Duncan's and Howe's) experiments in scholarly prose than the obvious "fathers:" Pound, Eliot, Williams. Williams comes close in *In the American Grain*, as does Pound in *The Spirit of Romance* and *ABC of Reading* (another veritable anthology). But H.D. is the great blender of prose genres amongst the modernist poets. Fiction, memoir, and

scholarship merge in *The Gift* and *End to Torment*; the anthology, poetry, autobiography and criticism in *By Avon River*; *Tribute to Freud* is a working out in prose of the serial poem form H.D. will rely upon in *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*. If *Bottom* is, as Zukofsky contends, “a long poem” and an attempt at fusion with Shakespeare and “a work of poetics” and “a poet’s autobiography” (Prep 167) – all at once – then there is no better guide to this textual and generic multiplicity than the prose texts of H.D.

### C. Critic Collector

“The ideal way to present the next section of this booklet would be to give the quotations WITHOUT any comment whatever. I am afraid that would be too revolutionary” (Pound 95).

Proper criticism would produce a prose with the same “direction” as the poetry it reads, as it arises “from the same source” (Prep 14); thus, “a scientific definition will probably find it unnecessary to distinguish between prose and poetry” (10).

Mark Scroggins notes *Bottom*’s “complete disdain of the conventions of scholarly prose” (51).

“I have also endeavoured to preserve the living tradition, though sometimes at variance with the discoveries of modern scholarship” – “Remembering Shakespeare always, but remembering him differently” (HD 30,31).

“It is even possible to imagine a reading of *Bottom* as a parody of literary exegesis” (Rifkin 95).

Not quite parody, but not quite “disdain” either. *Bottom*, like *By Avon River*, criticizes criticism for its “blindness to the meaning of its forms” (Bernstein 12), laying bare the bones of scholarship – the otherness of the object of study – the pure secondariness of the reader – by reducing criticism to what it is at base: a patchwork of quotations, a site of citation, the iterable threads of which discursive tapestries are woven. *Bottom*, a weaver.

“Poetry convinces not by argument but by the form it creates to carry its content” (Test 52).

If ‘*A*’ is “an allegory of what it means to be a poet” (Perelman 174), then *Bottom* is an allegory of what it means to be a critic?

The critic as “krino” – “to pick out for oneself, to choose. That’s what the word means” (Pound 30).

One might suggest that the contemporary academic essay-as-a-collage-of-quotations finds its genesis not in any prose tradition but in the citational poetry of modernism, and that critics today continue to create degraded versions of *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*, finding arguments in the entanglements of the citations they have “shorn against their ruin.”

## H. The Heretical Heart

The “thinking heart:” “*the primary objects of desire and thought are the same*” (Bottom 60).

“The mind may compromise but the heart cannot” (HD 74).

“Shakespeare’s ten tragedies...are dramatic variants of the same definition of love” as is found in Cavalcanti’s “Donna mi priegha” (Bottom 134).

“Eleanor’s *school of love* found strange pupils at the Court of Henry VIII” (HD 78).

“The poet is always suspect,” “spreading the germs of a deadly heresy, the worship of beauty” (HD 83, 82).

“[T]he heart...is the organ which produces true knowledge,” an “organ” of “perception” (Corbin 221).

Both H.D. and Zukofsky attempt to body forth a tradition of love-thought, vestigial in the Elizabethan lyric and having its roots in Renaissance Florence and the Provençal troubadours, Ovid and the Greek mysteries.

## I. Eyes

H.D.’s Elizabethan poet-heretics reject “dogma or even inspiration from another:” “They must see for themselves” (HD 83). H.D.’s emphasis on seeing here is of course everywhere in *Bottom*, a text aspiring to be “all eyes,” and the thesis of which is “love sees” (Bottom 39). “In Hebrew the word for *word* is also the word for *thing*. The roots and stems of grammar are foresights and hindights so entangled that traditions and chronologies mean little if not an acceptance, a love of certain, living beings for words as seen things” (104). This leads Zukofsky to emphasize “How carefully editors look” (294), pursuing to the end “these eyeing intimacies of print” (442). I want here to note, briefly, two aspects of Zukofsky’s editorial eye. First, in tracking the relationship between love and seeing through Shakespeare’s (and others’) texts, Zukofsky relies primarily on the paratactic *nearness* of the words, their collocation or co-incidence within a given passage. “Love” and “seeing” form something of an ideogram – one which Zukofsky’s editorial elisions highlight by bringing the terms into closer proximity (see, for example, his elisions in *Alls Well that Ends Well*, Bottom 306). Zukofsky appears to comment upon his ideogrammatic method when he notes that the repetition of the terms of his “definition” “relentlessly reduce[s] the dramatic extensiveness [of the Plays] to instant transformations” (316). He is after, in other words, a Shakespeare which one can “sight read,” taking in the plays “at a glance.” *Dichten = Condensare*.

The second point about Zukofsky’s “eyeing intimacies” that I wish to make involves his reading of the following lines from *Antony and Cleopatra*: “I had a wound here that was like a T, / But now ’tis made an H” (IV, vii, 8). “Word” and “thing” virtually unite as Scarus discourses on his body, on historical events as they are written on his body, and

on the mutability and readability of the mark itself. Zukofsky comments on the ability of capitalization to “call[...] up to itself the momentous eye” (Bottom 33). The entire discussion is heavily deictic – about the self-pointing of language – a reminder of the materiality of texts. When Scarus’s lines are cited again, they are juxtaposed with another line from *Antony and Cleopatra*, rendered in the Folio as “The little o’th’ earth,” but later typically printed as “The little O, th’ earth” (Bottom 442, *Antony and Cleopatra* V, ii, 81). The transformation of Scarus’s T into an H is mirrored in the editorial slippage between the Folio’s “little o’th” and later editions’ “little O, th” – a “textual scar that draws attention to the metamorphosis going on in a published text” (Bishop 9). Much can be made of the difference a little capitalization, and the transformation of an apostrophe into a comma, make: Antony is “little *of* the earth,” rather than his mouth being directly compared to “The little O, the earth”? What matters here – for Zukofsky – is that 1) Cleopatra is “seeing love” in her description of Antony, and 2), that editors of Shakespeare are themselves failing to “see,” and thus “love” what they edit, when they fail at such “eyeing intimacies.”

## N. Nostalgia

Scroggins notes the nostalgia of Zukofsky’s apparent desire to revert “to an earlier, prelapsarian stage of thought and language” – one where words and things, signifiers and signifieds, were not so dangerously adrift (79). Charles Bernstein notes much the same when he comments on Zukofsky’s nostalgia “for a primal world of instant, unmediated perception” (Bernstein 149). I want to argue that Zukofsky’s nostalgia – in *Bottom*, at least – is not primarily a nostalgia for a perfect, un-fallen linguistic state (note the above discussion of his “eyeing intimacies”: for the “careful” editor *words* are still, as always, material *things* seen), nor even a nostalgia of the sort we might see in H.D.’s expressed desire “to recall echoes of the great period” of Shakespeare’s day (HD 69); rather, it is the nostalgia of the collector – a nostalgia for a context created through collection. “The collector,” Benjamin tells us, “...brings together what belongs together,” taking up “the struggle against dispersion” (Benjamin 211). “The historical object is reborn as such into a present day capable of receiving it, of suddenly ‘recognizing’ it,” Eiland comments in his Forward to *The Arcades Project* (xii). Thus the collector’s nostalgia is not a nostalgia for the past *as* past, but for the past re-deployed in a *present* collection – a new context that is “a plenum-of-places [sites/cites], as an encompassing whole made up of particular places [sites/cites] in dynamic interaction with each other” (Casey 378). All ages are contemporaneous. Ideal order. Palimpsest.

Both Zukofsky and H.D. are interested in variation, in collecting what is different but “of equal extent.” As anthologists they gather what lies adjacent or paratactically near their subjects. They stretch out citational nets to gather in the stars they read by. “We have imagined,” H.D. writes, “only one true way of recalling these, our poets” (HD 33) – through their collocation, co-incidence, and contrast, through their texts and through the cited tangle of lines their “lines...would like to have read.”

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