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Zukofsky's Plautus: "A"-21 on Page and Stage

For the two full-length poetic translations he made in his lifetime, American poet Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978) chose texts by ancient Roman poets. The first and far more well-known of these was the complete *Catullus*: a nine-year collaborative effort with Celia Zukofsky completed in 1966, published in 1969, and reviewed that same year by classicist-translator Burton Raffel, who dismissed it as a "never-never land of phonetic aping," useless to Latinists and non-Latinists alike (*Arion* 8, 441). The second was a version of Plautus' *Rudens* done by Zukofsky alone, completed in 1967, and incorporated into "A" (the long poem in twenty-four parts he spent half a century composing) as its twenty-first section. *Catullus* has since found sympathetic readers, including even a few classicists. "A"-21, by contrast, remains largely unknown among professional Latinists, this despite our current and growing interest in translation theory and reception history. And even specialists in contemporary American poetry paid it almost no critical attention during the last century. (The present century, happily, is looking more hospitable.) In introducing this American *Rudens* to a classicist audience this paper will focus chiefly on "A"-21's rigorous poetic form: how that form makes it different from, and similar to, other Englishings of classical poetry from the Renaissance into late modernity; what kinds of relation to Plautus' original are implied in Zukofsky's translating practice and thereby enabled for a reader (or spectator) of "A"-21; and what interest and benefit a close study of this poetic translation may offer specifically to classicists.

Understanding of "A"-21's form has been distorted by a hasty presumption of similarity to Zukofsky's other Latin translation. *Catullus* is taken to be a "homophonic" translation—that is, one in which the attempt to approximate the source text's *sound* has the force of an overriding principle—and "A"-21, accordingly, has been described as "homophonic" as well, only less so. In fact, the formal principles on which these two translations are based differ from each other fundamentally, and neither is based primarily on anything like homophony. *Catullus* is a line-by-line translation in which every translated line has (nearly) precisely the same number of syllables as the original. "A"-21 is a line-by-line translation in which every line of the original is rendered by an English line of exactly five words. (This rule is suspended for the acrostic *argumentum* at the play's head and also for the *voice off* passages that are Zukofsky's own insertions into the original text.)

Zukofsky's translation of the *Rudens* is thus a "homophonic" one to about the same degree and in about the same way as Pope's translation of the *Iliad* is a "verbatim" one: that is to say, so little as to be effectively not so at all. Nearly every line of Pope's *Iliad* hits upon, touches, grazes the "literal" meaning of Homer's Greek, but Pope's chief concern everywhere is to bring Homer's narrative, dramatic, and affective thrust over into English verses while remaining everywhere unswervingly loyal to his own overriding formal constraint: the heroic couplet. Take the previous sentence, read "sound" for "literal meaning" and "five-word line" for "heroic couplet," and you have the principle of Zukofsky's poetic practice as a translator of Plautus' *Rudens*.

A handout will elucidate some examples of what Zukofsky's ear heard in Plautus' Latin and how he strove to reproduce each verse's defining gesture in a tightly constrained form, to produce a dramatic poem that, for all its ferocious concision, conveys much of Plautus' colloquial exuberance and, perhaps surprisingly, very much of Plautus' humor as well. The 15-minute presentation will include brief clips of "A"-21 in staged performance from a 2004 production directed by Giles Scott and mounted at Barnard College as part of a conference for the birth centenary of Louis Zukofsky.