

## THE GIFT OF HEEDING : CHARLES REZNIKOFF AND THE POETICS OF ALTERITY

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Though our thoughts often, we ourselves  
are seldom together.  
We have told each other  
all that has happened; it seems to me –  
for want of a better word – that we are both unlucky.  
Even our meetings have been so brief  
we should call them partings, and of our words  
I remember most “good-by”. (*CP I*, 119)

### Argument

What if it were much too late for the Other? What if its book seemed lost, irrevocably lost, lost beyond recovery? What if this Other (not that abstracted, theoretical Other-as-the-source-of-desire which Theory moulds into fetish, but this Other *one* expected here as person or self) were so irremediably lost as to leave only a vestige, a present absence, cinders of book? And what if – reflecting this incommunicability – one also inferred one’s loss to this Other? What doings would remain for poetry? Sensing the void between “I” and “you”, and knowing that every “you” senses it also, who would listen to his Other while remaining unheard or heard only as a phatic “good-by”? Can there be poetry after names are become pronouns? And if one dared heed his or her Other, what manner of ethico-poetic project could be built on the heeding of an Other whose interiority is – by definition – foregone? Beyond Romanticism’s sentimental memorializing of a presence made absent by time or circumstance, what can be done with the ever-present absence of that which was lost from the start?

The difficulties in offering any testimony of naught appear insurmountable. And yet such a project might become less improbable if one heeded not that forgone Other, but rather its silhouette, that found alterity which – deprived of all interiority – remains after the loss of that Other-as-self. More than the hypostatic Other, what would be heeded – or, rather, denounced – here would be that collective disinterest by means of which it has always been forfeit. What would be denounced here would be effacement. And such a poetics of erasure would not be wholly without redemption; would not the Aristotelean framing of the Other as epiphenomenal – by absence, by suppression of

selfhood – foreground the interiority lost, even while never qualifying, revealing or restricting it, in a secularized apophysis, a negative theology of the here Other, a negative allology?

“Should I, like Abraham, become the Hebrew,  
leave Ur of the Chaldees, the accident of place,  
and go to other pastures, from well to well;  
or, the Jew, stay [...]  
These are my people  
Russian and Ukrainian,  
Cossack and Tartar, my brothers –  
even Ishmael and Esau;  
know myself a stitch, a nail, a word  
printed in its place, a bulb screwed in its socket,  
alight by the same current as the others  
in the letters of this sign – Russia.  
Or better still,  
there is no Russia;  
there are no peoples, only man!” (*CP I*, 163).

### Three Reznikoffs

At the risk of being reductive, one could say that, among the readings of Charles Reznikoff’s poetry, three critical tropes predominate – each associated to a particular set of works reflecting one specific aspect of his literary *corpus*. Stylistic, the first trope addresses his minimalist poetics – where parataxis, legal terminology, seriality and objectivity blend in order to form a prosy verse obsessed with immediacy and reminiscent of legal terminology. Aligned with the progressive politics of the 1930’s and 1940’s, the second emphasizes the poet’s denouncement of the violence, social exclusion and inequality pervading the late XIX and early XX century United States. Psycho-biographic, the last focuses on his ambivalent relation with his own identity as a first-generation Jewish-American. Before attempting to bind these tropes into an interpretation of the potential mystical character of Reznikoff’s denouncement of erasure, let us take a moment to discuss the three in greater depth.

### The Stylistic Trope

This trope stresses the apparent simplicity, objectivity and narrative neutrality of Reznikoff’s poetics – a trait beautifully exalted by George Oppen in the eulogy “This is / heroic this is / the poem // to write // in the great / world small”<sup>1</sup>. Within this reading, the hyper-referentiality of Reznikoffian verse – with its impersonal narrative voice – would

epitomize the ideal of self-effacement lauded by modernists from T.S. Eliot to Gertrude Stein, surpassing the vacuum between subject and object (and, by metonym, between signifier and signified) in order to create reified, hyper-immediate poems where “the appearance of the art form as an object” would be possible<sup>2</sup>. Though highlighted by other Objectivists and reiterated by Robert Franciosi and Charles Bernstein, this ideal of the poem-as-thing originates in Reznikoff himself, who – while discussing the fascination with denotative legal terminology – ventures at a (curiously metaphorical) indictment of connotation and symbolism in the autobiographic “Early History of a Writer”:

I found it delightful  
to climb those green hights,  
to bathe in the clear waters of reason,  
to use words for their daylight meaning  
and not as prisms  
playing with the rainbows of connotation:  
after the dim lights, the colored phrases, the cloying music,  
the hints of what the poets meant  
and did not quite say  
(for to suggest was to create  
and to name was to destroy –  
according to the Symbolists, at least),  
the plain sunlight of the cases,  
the sharp prose,  
the forthright speech of the judges;  
it was good, too, to stick my mind against the sentences of a judge,  
and drag the meaning out of the shell of words.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “In Memoriam Charles Reznikoff” appears in the rear cover Reznikoff’s collected poems.

<sup>2</sup> Zukofsky 274. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot proposes an “impersonal theory of poetry” where the poet is compared to a catalyzing “bit of finely filiated platinum” which acts more as a “medium” than as substance or “personality”. This hyper-realist – and yet tangentially mystical and adamite – view is reiterated by Stein in “What Are Master-Pieces”, where high art is conditioned to a deferral of identity. Here, identity would be substituted by an entity which – reminiscent of the Plotinian *non-ens* – is defined as that which “is with a thing in itself and not in relation” (149). Reznikoff makes a similar point in “First, There Is the Need”.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Poems II*, 168-169. A similar posture towards language is expressed in page 171: “I had been bothered by a secret wariness / with meter and regular stanzas / grown a little stale. The smooth lines and rhymes / seemed to me affected, a false stress on words and syllables – / fake flowers / in the streets which I walked”. In “First, There Is the Need”, Reznikoff advocates referentiality:

With respect to the treatment of subject matter in verse and the use of the term “objectivist” and “objectivism”, let me again refer to the rules with respect to a testimony in a court of law. Evidence to be admissible in a trial cannot state conclusions of fact: it must state the facts themselves. For example, a witness in an action for negligence cannot say: the man injured was negligent crossing the street. He must limit himself to a description of how the

The apparent, self-proclaimed simplicity of Reznikoff's verse, however, may be deceptive. After all, hyper-realism and narrative neutrality are far from characteristic of his entire *corpus*. While words are mostly used "for their daylight meaning" in *Testimony*, in *Uriel Accosta* and in third-person testimonial sequences of *Going to and Fro and Walking Up and Down*, *Inscriptions* and *Poems*, devices such as metaphor, religious symbolism, personification, hyperbole, amphibole, paradox and prosopopeia abound in his non-observational works, where the grammatical first and second persons predominate. And, even where testimonial poems are concerned, it would be naive to assume that the continuing repetition of legal case histories, character observations and life-stories does not entail secondary meanings – especially when juxtaposed to the poet's often expressed project to mourn his lost Others. Bernstein explicates the cumulative effect of such serial modulations:

In Reznikoff, the process of composition is as much a matter of the shaping of sequences as of the creation of particular element of the sequence: the otherwise unrepresentable (and overlooked) space between poems has become the location of the work's *poesis* of unfolding and refolding, separating and recongealing. In Reznikoff, the meaning of the poem is always twofold: both in the detail and in its sequence. That is, the detail works in counterpoint to its locus in a series to create the meaning of the poem [...] Reznikoff is a "literary realist" only if one unit is considered in isolation, as has been the assumption of most readings of his work. Understood serially, in terms of their plasticity, the poems can no longer be read with the trivializing appreciation of being plain, descriptive, flat, simple, artless, and unassuming; or as being without rhetorical effect or "modernist discontinuity"<sup>4</sup>

Describing – in terms of "adjacency", "perambulation", "coincidence" and "cuboseriality" – the paratactic juxtaposition of poeticized case histories whose interrelations remain unexplicated and untotaled, Bernstein maintains that testimony in Reznikoff vies for a "recovery of the ordinary [...] bearing witness to things not seen, overlooked" (226). He suggests the counter-intuitive result of this formal splintering: far from being without

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man crossed... The conclusions of fact are for the jury and let us add, in our case, for the reader. (In Bernstein, 226).

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, 216-217 and 222. In *L'Imagination Symbolique*, Gilbert Durand, stresses the importance of repetition in surpassing symbols' "fundamental inadequacy". According to Durand, repetition of linguistic symbols – far from tautological – is a "perfecting of cumulative approximations" in which "the

transcendence, the deferral of the reflexive self in favor of unqualified immediacy borders mystical pan(en)theism – elevating the hypostatic into an absolute unattainable by words, and yet immediately (though imperfectly) perceptible, in a negation-rhetoric reminiscent of mystical apophasis<sup>5</sup>. More importantly, and in an aspect perhaps under-emphasized by Bernstein, it also highlights the ethical, redemptive role of the testifying self in restoring immediacy to a near-forgotten Other<sup>6</sup>. This view of writing as a form of resisting erasure is beautifully expressed in the first poem of *By the Well of Living and Seeing*. In a reference to Reznikoff's maternal grandfather, whose supposedly nihilistic works were destroyed after his death to avoid potential reprisals from the Tzarist regime, the poem suggests an understanding that – in speaking for an Other – the poet not only memorializes, but actualizes it, lending it his words:

My grandfather, dead long before I was born,  
died among strangers; and all the verse he wrote  
was lost –  
except for what  
still speaks through me  
as mine. (CP II, 91)

### **The Progressive Trope**

Beyond this implicit responsibility in restoring the words of his grandfather, however, Reznikoff exhibits a more universal sense of social commitment. This trope is particularly emphasized by Michael Davidson, who reads *Testimony* as a critique of the myths of opportunity, justice and tolerance underlying American national mythology. Resorting to Homi Bhaba's description of national narratives as discourses imposing a causal teleology of progress

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set of all symbols on a theme clarifies these symbols, one through the others, adding to them a supplementary symbolic 'power'" (17, my translation).

<sup>5</sup> Mystical nothingness (*Ayin*, in Kabbalah) is central to negative theologies – Christian and Judaic. Offering an intuitive sense of the Godhead, it is marked by extended hyperboles on this Absolute (*Ein Sof*) – which are then denied emphasize the unintelligibility of this absolute and the blasphemy of predicating it. Mamonides stresses the importance of such disclaimers: "The description of God by means of negations is the correct description – a description that is not affected by an indulgence in facile language.... With every increase in the negations regarding God, you come nearer to the apprehension of God (58-59)." In his later works, Reznikoff sketched more explicitly theological uses of apophasis, as in the following passage from *Jews in Babylonia* (1969): "If you cannot look at the sun – / only one of God's ministers – / how can you see God Himself? (CP II, 175).

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein (235) insinuates this highlighting that testimony becomes, in Reznikoff, an "event" or action.

and uniformity upon the heterogeneous, even contingent “scraps, patches and rags” of quotidian existence, Davidson approaches Reznikoff’s poetization of Nineteenth-Century court briefs as a “Janus-faced phenomenon pointing both at the integrity of the speaker and at the discursive frame within which he or she speaks” (Davidson, 150). In this reading, *Testimony* attempts to foreground “the institutional legal structure within which a national history is written” (170) – in a denouncement of the ideological-institutional-linguistic framework within which this writing occurs, of what Foucault would call its *episteme*.

Though interesting, Davidson’s interpretation of *Testimony* carries a problem: it implies that Reznikoff’s resorting to the law as a source of language and subject alike resulted from an ironic project to denounce the arbitrariness and the ideologization of the legal system, a premise disavowed by the poet himself<sup>7</sup>. Still, Davidson makes two secondary, underdeveloped observations which appear instrumental in understanding Reznikoff’s poetic project. Reading Shoshana Felman, he emphasizes testimony’s paradoxical capacity to communicate incommunicability, to collectivize isolation, to create a collective space wherein trauma may be, if not expressed, at least acknowledged so as to “extend solitude – the fact that a witness can report on only his or her experience – to others” (149). More importantly, Davidson stresses the pragmatic duality of the title *Testimony* – which, originally referencing the depositions made by the witnesses and victims uncovered by Reznikoff in the courtroom briefs, is gradually reoriented to Reznikoff’s own uncovering of these depositions, a quasi-epiphanic dislocation:

Reznikoff’s oft-quoted remark about the Objectivist poet being one “who is restricted to the testimony of a witness in a court of law” has permitted many of his readers to assume a correspondence between poet and witness, thus effacing the poet’s active role in selecting materials and interpreting relations between one subject and another. The example of *Testimony* suggests, on the contrary, that the poet serves not as a witness but as editor – a witness of witnesses – whose arrangements of legal documents supplies a social narrative for acts of private observation; Reznikoff stated as much in his

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<sup>7</sup> In “Early History”, Reznikoff emphasizes how he was “delighted” to realize that he, too, “could think like a lawyer” (*CP II*, 169). And though admitting having been frustrated by his legal studies, he attributes such frustration to the desire to write which they aroused: “what bothered me most, unlooked for / and against will and reason, / with the suddenness of a fever, / was the longing to write: / as if all that I had seen and heard and remembered / and, for the most part, felt only slightly, / was not gone, as I had thought, / but stored in a reservoir / that now, filled to the brim, was overrunning – / pouring over on all sides” (*CP II*, 170).

interview with L. S. Dembo: “Something happens and it expresses something that you feel, not necessarily because of *those* facts, but because of entirely different facts that give you the same kind of feeling” (Davidson 151).

This is important. Referring to Eliot’s concept of the *objective correlative* (and, with it, Stanislavsky’s *emotional memory* and Freud’s *transference*), Reznikoff’s peripatetic analysis of testimony to Dembo suggests – through adjacency and anaphora – an analogy between witness and hearing public. The analogy is – quite etymologically – both re-ligious and sym-bolic: in relating an event, a witness not only relives that particular historical happening, but reminds its spectators of equivalent events in their own experience. For the herald Reznikoff, however, testimony borders the angelic. As Davidson suggests, the ambiguity regarding which “you” experiences “the same kind of feeling” in the passage above presupposes a twofold role for testimony: more than just the chronicled words of an epiphenomenal Other, the compositional act becomes – by the public nature of its commitment to that Other – a performance in which the poet pars himself simultaneously to both the protagonists of the narrative-poems found in works such as *Testimony* AND to his audience. More than a mere memorial, Reznikoff’s compositional act thereby becomes an “event”, enactment or performance – a self-conscious heeding whereby erasure can be resisted, the “girder, still itself among the rubbish” (*CP I*, 121). As we shall see, it is by no coincidence that the poet dedicates much of his poetry to the description and lauding of such exemplary empathic acts.

Evidently, the pragmatic result of this enactment is that Reznikoff – as a “witness of witnesses” – ultimately plays a dual part in his testimonial works: like those whose experience he recovers, he must speak; but, in order to do so, he must listen, like his public. He must not just look, but look, see and relate what was seen. Though never explicated in relation to the witnessed Others of *Testimony* (which would be impossible, given the narrative neutrality upon which the poem is based), this symbolic convergence<sup>8</sup> between speaker and speech-subject is painfully expressed in “Separate Way”, where isolation itself becomes the bond between monadic entities. Ignoring the painfully poor rhymes, notice the pronominal expression of solidarity implicit in the

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<sup>8</sup> Though underplaying the meta-pragmatic importance of relating what is seen, Bernstein (225) suggests the importance of the binomial “looked” and “saw”, recurrent in Reznikoff. This blend of



gradual collapse of the apparently differentiated “we” into a state of equivalence in death with the initially isolated “you”:

We heard your jokes, your stories, and your songs  
know of your rights and all your wrongs,  
but we are busy with our own affairs.  
Sorry? O yes! But after all who cares?  
You think that you have something still to say?  
Perhaps but you are growing old, are growing grey.  
And we are too.  
We’ll spare another friendly word for you;  
and go our separate ways to death<sup>9</sup>.

### The Psycho-biographic Trope

This reading of isolation as a groundwork for selfhood, where the realization of the Other’s inaccessibility is elevated to the status of a universal trauma forming the individual, is not unrelated to the hybrid sense of identity shared by many first-generation Jewish-Americans in the late XIX and early XX centuries. Stephen Fredman, Norman Finkelstein and Charles Bernstein all emphasize how this reflexive sense of exile often cores Reznikoff’s self-understanding as Jew and writer, footing his poetic project in much the same way as it did those of other Objectivists such as Zukofsky and Oppen. Within this psycho-biographic approach, poetry becomes the forum wherein the poet – compared by Fredman to a *luftmenschen*, one of the floating characters of Yiddish comedy – attempts to negotiate his Hebrew heritage within the often hostile framework of Christian-European Hellenism, in a conflict exemplified by the poem *Hellenist* and by the 40<sup>th</sup> fragment of *Inscriptions*:

Hellenist  
As I, barbarian, at last, although slowly, could read Greek,  
at “blue-eyed Athena”  
I greeted her picture that had long been on the wall:  
the head slightly bent forward under the heavy helmet,

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listening and speaking, of passive contemplation and active composition, is described as the “essence of genius” by another Modernist concerned with immediacy, Gertrude Stein.

<sup>9</sup> *CP I*, 171-172. In “Autobiography: Hollywood”, the convergence between observer and observed is given a Whitmanian, pan(en)theistic tone: “I would be the rock / about which the water is / flowing; and I would be the water flowing / about the rock. / And am both and neither / being *flesh*” (*CP II*, 46). In *Five Groups of Verse*, convergence becomes temporal: “My thoughts have become like the ancient Hebrew / in two tenses only, past and future – / I was and I shall be with you” (*CP I*, 72).

as if to listen; the beautiful lips slightly scornful. (*CP I*, 107)

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Because, the first-born, I was not redeemed,  
I belong to my Lord, not to myself or you:  
by my name, in English, I am of His house,  
one of the carles – a Charles, a churl;  
and by my name in Hebrew which is Ezekiel  
(whom God strengthened)  
my strength, such as it is, is His.<sup>10</sup>

In both poems, the juxtaposition between Hebrew and Christian-Hellenic is clear, as is the “scornful” disinterest with which the latter “blue-eyed”, hegemonic culture meets the unassimilated – and perhaps unassimilable – “barbarian”. Equally clear is the unheeded churl’s consciousness of this disinterest, a consciousness in terms of which he defines himself as belonging – in his Hebrew and English name alike – to an unqualified “Lord” whose identity can be read in terms of both Christian-European vassalage and Abrahamic covenant. Curiously, it is this ill-defined “Lord” who has “strengthened” Charles-Ezekiel, supplying him a bilingual, culturally ambivalent and yet powerful identity. More than passively accepting himself as a Jewish-American hopelessly torn between Hebraism and Hellenism, Reznikoff wields his liminality as a basis for self-definition, tailoring it into a provisional (though fecund) groundwork for selfhood. Paul Auster emphasizes the creative potential inherent to this cultural betweenness:

Neither fully assimilated nor fully unassimilated, Reznikoff occupies the unstable middle ground between two worlds and is never able to claim either as his own. Nevertheless, and no doubt because of this ambiguity, it is an extremely fertile ground [...] Reznikoff’s poems are what Reznikoff is: the poems of an American Jew, or, if you will, of a hyphenated American, a Jewish-American, with the two terms combining to form a third and wholly different term: the condition of being in two places at the same time, or, quite simply, the condition of being nowhere (in Fredman, 15).

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<sup>10</sup> *CP II*, 80. The same betweenness is reiterated somewhat more bitterly, in poem 46 of *By the Well of Living and Seeing* where the “closet” Jew, despite his best efforts at multiculturalism and integration, is warned of inevitability of intolerance and persecution: “You understand the myths of the Aztecs \ and read with sympathy \ the legends of the Christian saints \ and say proudly: \ though you were born a Jew \ there is nothing Jewish about you. \ But the ancient Greeks would still have thought you a barbarian \ and even the Christian saints might not have liked you; \ and the Nazis \ would have pried from your witty mouth \ your golden teeth” (*CP II*, 103).

Still, it would be simplistic to assume that Reznikoff understands his betweenness in solely religious, or exclusive, terms; as Fredman stresses, “the word *between* signals simultaneously distance and connection, like any medium, it brings things together and holds them apart” (27). And, though repeatedly resorting to the *Torah* to express a longing for a lost Jewish heritage, as in the recurring lamentations regarding own his ignorance of Hebrew, Reznikoff avoids depicting loss as *exclusively* Jewish. In fact, his sentimental longing for the Hebrew often appears analogous to that for the lost Other. In both, a lamented absence – or unattainability – becomes instrumental in advocating not a homogenous integration, but an interested acceptance of difference which motivates the reconciliation of individual, group and universal identities, making it possible for one to speak a forgotten “Hebrew in every language under the sun” (*CP I*, 126). A simple comparison of the following two poems should evidence the parallel sense of absence and mourning with which Reznikoff addresses both his Others and Hebrew – and the ethical imperative of recovering that which is lost:

How shall we mourn you who are killed and wasted,  
 sure that you would not die with your work unneeded,  
 as if the iron scythe in the grass stops for a flower? (*CP I*, 16)

How difficult for me is Hebrew:  
 even the Hebrew for *mother*, for *bread*, for *sun*  
 is foreign. How far have I been exiled, Zion<sup>11</sup>.

### **Beyond Identity**

Exile, therefore, is not only from Zion and from Hebrew, but from that Other which though here present, remains lost. Instead of taking refuge in the prophetic discourse which Harold Bloom demanded of him, or any other form of self-absorbed identity politics, Reznikoff’s genius lies in quarrying from his Judaism a thriving symbolic arsenal from whence to denounce that erasure of Other which – promoted by mechanization, urbanization and

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<sup>11</sup> *CP I*, 72. The longing here expressed towards Hebrew is somewhat qualified by the next poem, where Reznikoff boyishly and jokingly complains about the difficulty in learning the language: “I have learnt the Hebrew blessing before eating bread; / is there no blessing before reading Hebrew?” The same sense loss can be found in the opening poem of *Jerusalem the Golden* which – preceding “*Hellenist*” – compares Hebrew to the dancing women of the Song of Songs (6:13): “The Hebrew of your poets, Zion / is like oil

depersonalization – would hypostatize in the carnage of World War I and the mass-graves of the Jewish *Shoah* and Romani *Porrajmos*. As in the fore-quoted “Separate Way”, the initial differentiation between the mourning “we” and the mourned for “you” is perceived as contingent on the pragmatic locus of enunciation and ultimately founders in the universality of isolation, making this very sense of isolation into the *sine qua non* of a heeding of ones Others. This foundering of cultural distinction is painfully repeated in Reznikoff’s remembrance of the farewell he gave his sickly grandfather before leaving for college. After failing to understand a Hebrew blessing the dying man had uttered, the young student promises to return “in June”, but soon identifies another source for his paternal grandfather’s grief:

Perhaps my grandfather was in tears for other reasons:  
perhaps, because, in spite of all the learning I had acquired in high school,  
I knew not a word of the sacred text of the Torah  
and was going out into the word  
with none of the accumulated wisdom of my people to guide me,  
with no prayers with which to talk to the God of my people,  
a soul –  
for it is not easy to be a Jew *or, perhaps, a man* –  
doomed by his ignorance to stumble and blunder<sup>12</sup>.

Despite its brevity, perhaps even because of it, the disclaimer “or, perhaps, a man” suggests a patent universalization. Far from exclusive, Reznikoff’s identity-loss and cultural liminality form the prerequisite for what Fredman will describe as his “stance of compassionate advocacy” (22) towards the other immigrant groups of Depression and post-Depression New York. From his sense of historical isolation and hybridity as a Diaspora Jew, from his loss of Hebrew, the poet finds a privileged imagery upon which to edify his ethico-poetic project of heeding the analogously marginal Others surrounding him. Though

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upon a burn, / cool as oil; / after work, / the smell in the street at night / of the hedge in flower. / Like Solomon, / I have married and married the speech of strangers; / none are like you, Shulamite” (*CP I*, 107).

<sup>12</sup> *CP 2*, 167 – my emphasis. In his reading of Reznikoff’s relation to a Jewish messianism based on the idea of deferment, Finkelstein (201) highlights how, in *Jerusalem the Golden*, vocabularies and images from the *Torah* are applied to an ill-defined collective “we” potentially composed of Jews and non-Jews alike. The same lending of a Jewish vocabulary to non-Jews can be found in the Kaddish concluding “Separate Way” – a blessing which, first addressed “upon Israel and upon the rabbis”, is redirected “upon Israel and upon all who live” and finally universalized “upon Israel / and upon their children and children upon all the children of their children / in this place and in every place, / to them and to you / life” (*CP I*, 185-186). Reznikoff is quite explicit in his ridicule of identity-as-negation-of-the-Other in a rarely quoted, though amusing, little poem: “At the zoo, the camel and the zebra are quarreling: / Trying to bite each other / Through the bars between them. / Of course, they come from different continents” (*CP 2*, 95).

characteristically and consciously Jewish, Reznikoff refuses to restrict his scope of interest to Jewish subjects, to approach identity exclusively as a “gluttony for *mine* / that still would feed / the failing *me*, the dying *I*” (*CP II*, 84). Quite on the contrary, he often reserves a “silence only golden” to his Jewish counterparts, while lending his diasporic vocabulary to those around him in much the same way as a painting on his wall offers an image which helps a Puerto-Rican janitor express his own exile in *The Fifth Book of the Maccabees*:

His eye caught the print of a water-color by Winslow Homer  
Which I have hanging: a palm tree in the Bahamas.  
“That is my country”, he said,  
and kept looking at the print  
as one might look at a photograph of one’s mother  
long dead<sup>13</sup>.

Curiously, this offering – or its refusal – of a symbolic token of interest (usually a smile, image or name) across strangers of different ethno-cultural backgrounds forms the single most recurrent trope in Reznikoff’s testimonial works<sup>14</sup>. More than by words, by effective communication, isolation is surpassed by the offering of a gift which – though usually worthless and often ignored or misunderstood – expresses interest or compassion in the unattained Other, even if this interest is understood in the light of “entirely different facts that give [him] the same kind of feeling” (Reznikoff in Davidson 151). Within Reznikoff’s anatomy of solidarity, redemption is minimal and yet also magical in its restriction to the exchange of an ill-expressed intent condensed, by metonym, into an offered object or witnessed gesture – a translation of the very incommunicability separating him from his

<sup>13</sup> *CP II*, 115. In a letter to one of the editors of the Menorah Journal, Reznikoff is explicit about his perception of Jewishness as being – above all – a vocabulary: “The land that we Jews hold in common – free from any mandatory power – is ideas expressed in words: this is the only land of Israel. We have been in possession three thousand years and are a people only because of it. I think of the Menorah Journal as a colony” (69). Curiously, the word “silence” appears in Reznikoff mostly associated with a profound intimacy where words are no longer necessary. Besides *CP I*, pages 118 (56), 119 (59), 168 (IV), see the last stanza of the beautiful “Kaddish” the poet wrote describing and lamenting his mother’s death: “I know you do not mind / (if you mind at all) / that I do not pray for you / or burn a light / on the day of your death: / we do not need these trifles / between us – / prayers and words and lights” (*CP II*, 56).

<sup>14</sup> Not unrelated to the already discussed convergence between observer and observed, this gift-of-interest theme can be found – among other places – in *CP I*, pages 14 (4), 24 (17), 32 (11), 36 (24), besides *CP II*, pages 30 (XVI and XVII), 42 (XVI), 43 (XVII and XVIII), 62 (3), 85 (1), 96 (21), 191 (38), 210 (III). It seems to contrast with the motif of the ignored call, often expressed by the discovery of a vestigial index of an erased self, predominant in the darker *Testimony I*, pages 44 (3), 45 (4), 46 (2), 56 (6), 63 (7), 69 (8), 73 (12), 80 (3), 100 (1), 102 (3), 107 (IX), 164 (VIII), 175 (4), 190 (6), 205 (1), 229 (7).

Others. The result of the exchange is a ritualized, even if bitter, communion which the poet will witness, catalyze and even – though only occasionally – participate in:

The young fellow walks about  
with nothing to do: he has lost his job.  
“If I ever get another, I’ll be hard!  
You’ve got to be hard  
to get on. I’ll be hard, all right,”  
he says bitterly. Takes out his cigarettes.  
Only four or five left.  
Looks at me out of the corner of his eye –  
a stranger he has just met; hesitates;  
and offers me a cigarette (*CP II*, 33).

Evidently, there is more to the young fellow’s gesture than a cigarette – especially as the solicitous gift is offered immediately after a near-Darwinist defense of the “need to be hard to get on”. Even in dire adversity, even emerging “out of the corner” of an eye, generosity prevails – in a victory made all the more redemptive by the adversities it must overcome and, above all, by the minimalist nature of that which is offered. Much like Reznikoff himself does in his poems, the unemployed youth submits a mostly symbolic token to his stranger: a cigarette which will literally dissipate into smoke. And yet the very attention given to this offering, the fact that it is worth a poem, indicates that – in spite of its limitations, or rather... because of them – it must be read as synecdoche, as that redemptive girder which, poeticized by Reznikoff, George Oppen so enthusiastically lauded:

Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies  
A girder, still itself among the rubbish. (*CP I*, 121).

### **Mending, Kabbalah, Pantheism**

I think behind any poem there’s a background of experience and emotion that explains its moving quality. Sometimes even the poet himself may have forgotten the background. It’s a mystery. (Reznikoff in Dembo Interview)

In the synecdoche, there is a mending. As any reader of mystical literature will notice, the ethical necessity of Reznikoff’s girder echoes the idea of *tikkun hapanim* – the mending of the crystalline vessel shattered upon receiving the divine emanation after God created the cosmos by

withdrawing into himself. More than the actual cosmogony of Kabbalah, a mystique probably unappealing to the pragmatically-minded Reznikoff, the correspondence is found in the belief that every action reproduces and even perfects the original divine act of creation-through-enunciation, acquiring thereby a universal significance. Understood as an *olam katan*, a micro-cosmos reminiscent of the cosmos entire, the individual is has – by synecdoche – the potential capacity to mend the universe, perhaps divinity itself<sup>15</sup>. Symptomatically, Reznikoff often presents “light” in terms of its reflection upon something – an indexation to tactile objects not unlike the way negative theologies stress the emanation of the divine upon the immediate<sup>16</sup>. Such representations of light in terms of geometric or crystalline shapes remit to the mending of vessels in *tikkun*, especially when the light is associated to speech acts analogous to that of creation:

Speaking and speaking again words like silver bubbles,  
we walk at dusk through rain.

The sky has grown black with a tinge of red from the street-lamps;  
Triangular pools form in the square cracks of the pavement,  
Noisy with rain.<sup>17</sup>

Whether in a deliberate reference to Kabbalah or in the unwitting secular representation of the same latent ideology or episteme which informs mysticism in the first place, the contiguity between ethically heeding the Other, speaking and casting light upon a darkened world abounds in Reznikoff, indicating that the poet perceived an ontologically vital function in language. Though not necessarily in reference to an unknown Other, and with

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<sup>15</sup> Bernstein (223-225) emphasizes the parallels between Reznikoff’s poetry and pan(en)theistic mysticism; Fredman reads two of his poems in terms of *tikkun*, which he describes as “a restoration of the divine context to a particular experience” (75). Shared by Christian mysticism, the synecdochic ethics of *tikkun* is attributed by Jorge Luis Borges to *Genesis 18:26*, where God offers to spare Sodom if he finds “fifty righteous people in the city”. In his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges briefly describes the Lamed Wufniks, 36 destitute saints who unknowingly justify the universe before God, forming its unwitting pillars... or girders.

<sup>16</sup> See *CP I*, pages 114 (35) and 170 (II), *CP II*, page 121 (19), besides the following segment from *By the Well of Living and Seeing*: “From where I lay I could not see the moon / nor the yard itself / but the garage roof was shining like a quadrangle of light / against the darkness: / a quadrangle of light / against the darkness” (*CP II*, 136).

<sup>17</sup> *CP I*, 35. The same theme is developed in the next poem: “Suddenly we noticed that we were in darkness; / so we went into the house and lit the lamp. // The talk fell apart bit by bit and slid into a lake. / At last we rose and bidding each other good night went to our rooms. // In and about the house darkness lay, a black fog; / and each on his bed spoke to himself alone, making no sound” (*CP I*, 35). Similar associations of successful communication with light and of its opposite with darkness are found in *CP I* (13 and 43), *CP II* (33 and 103) and *Testimony I* (89).

greater distancing of an impersonal narrator, the same structure is found repeatedly in the testimonial section of *Uriel Accosta*. In the following poem, about an illiterate woman who asks her son to read to her, notice how the lad's minimal mending of his mother is associated – by parataxis – to light and to a natural, cosmic order expressed in terms of time:

As he read, his mother sat down beside him. “Read me a little.”  
 “You wouldn’t understand, Ma.” “What to you care? Read me a little.  
 My father used to cry when I talked to him about it,  
 But he cried because he couldn’t afford to educate the boys – even.”  
 As he read, she listened gravely; then went back to her ironing.  
 The gaslight shone on her round, ruddy face and the white cotton sheets that  
     she spread and ironed;  
 From the shelf the alarm-clock ticked and ticked rapidly<sup>18</sup>.

Given this epiphany of the transcendent within the immediate, could Reznikoff be described as a pantheist? Perhaps, but the term needs qualification. Pantheism is often understood as a paradoxically monistic atheism according to which the cosmos is coadunate with the entirety of a divine inexorably immediate and incapable of transcendence. Stretching the argument slightly, even the radical immanence of Marx could be described as a pantheist. But pantheism mystique can also be understood a view wherein the immediacy of creation is permeated by the divine, being sacred “in God”, even while emphasizing that no individual create thing exhausts the divine – a view closer to negative theology which might better be described as pan(en)theistic<sup>19</sup>. While Reznikoff wields the term “God” much too often for the prior view, there are various indications that he may have held the latter, an understanding shared by some of the diasporic Jewish authors to whom he often refers.

Ever savvy, Fredman emphasizes how Reznikoff's use of biblical imagery – with its lamentations regarding the loss of the same Zion which he refused to visit with his wife, Marie Syrkin – implies a secularized Judaism where the gradual replacement of the *Torah* by history as a source of selfhood epitomizes the exilic identity of the Diaspora, in a meta-Judaism of sorts. More than expressing a Zionism which Reznikoff never

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<sup>18</sup> *CP I*, 59. This *tikkun* of the quotidian is further expressed in a eulogy to an elevator man which may have inspired Oppen's aforementioned “In Memoriam Charles Reznikoff”: “The elevator man, working long hours / for little – whose work is dull and trivial – / must also greet each passenger / pleasantly: / to be so heroic / he wears a uniform” (*CP II*, 30).

<sup>19</sup> The distinction between pantheism and panentheism is borrowed from Jeffrey Burton Russell.



embraced in literal terms, the use of biblical *topoi* – such as the longing for Hebrew – would thus describe the loss of radical immanence, of a Real whose expression requires an Adamite correspondence between word and thing. Here, the culmination of Jewishness would be represented by historical characters such as Uriel da Costa and Baruch Spinoza – both Iberian *Marranos* (Jews converted to Christianity) whose failed attempts to re-embrace Judaism ultimately founded a philosophical return to, and a consecration of, immediacy:

Reznikoff's own unswerving commitment to "recovering familiar realities in such a way that they appear dynamical present and invigorate the mind" makes him the model Objectivist. In his conception, divinity can only be recovered immanently, by an ethical immersion in the details of mundane existence. Looking to figures such as Da Costa and Spinoza, Reznikoff plumbs the sources of immanentist thought in Jewish history and brings them into an American context that weds Judaism and natural supernaturalism (64-65).

Though underplaying the universalism manifest in the analogous position which the Other and Hebrew occupy within Reznikoff, Fredman is felicitous in associating the poet to Spinoza – especially to the rejection of any personal representation of God as a form of self-indulging anthropomorphism. And the influence is confirmed by Reznikoff himself, who states: "To me God is not a human being, that is, talking of putting his hand over anyone" (in Fredman 67). Not without prodding the paternalism and worldliness implicit in the "Lord's Prayer" which Jesus teaches his apostles in Matthew 6: 9-13 and Luke 11: 2-4, the poet expresses a similar pan(en)theism in the "Spinoza" segment of *Jerusalem the Golden*. Notice the association between God and the grotesque "worm at our feet", followed by repeated refusal of any attributive discourse as a means of expressing the divine – both resources typical of Negative Theology and of a Kabbalah which, like Spinoza, is historically linked to Iberian Judaism<sup>20</sup>:

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<sup>20</sup> The association between the Divine and the worm has recurred for at least 1500 years. In his *Celestial Hierarchies*, Christian mystic Dionysius Aeropagite defends this "blasphemy as a means of "arousing the upward-turning part of the soul, and stimulating it through the ugliness of the images" (3). Moses Cordovero maintains that the entire universe participates in the Divine, though without ever exhausting it:

Anything visible, and anything that can be grasped by thought, is bounded. Anything bounded is finite. Anything finite is not undifferentiated. Conversely, the boundless is called Ein Sof, Infinite. It is absolute undifferentiation in perfect, changeless oneness [...] No letter, no name, no writing, no thing can confine it. [...] Ein Sof has no will, no intention, no desire, no thought, no speech, no action – and yet there is nothing outside of it (In Matt 29-30)

He is the stars,  
multitudinous as the drops of rain,  
and the worm at our feet,  
leaving only a blot on the stone;  
except God there is nothing.

God neither hates nor loves, has neither pleasure nor pain:  
were God to hate or love, He would not be God;  
He is not a hero to fight our enemies,  
nor like a king to be angry or pleased at us,  
nor even a father to give us our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses;  
nothing is but as He wishes,  
nothing was but as He willed it;  
as He wills it, so it will be (*CP I*, 128).

The rejection of the paternal, humanized God, however, in no way changes the ethical imperative of mending. As is the case with the Kabbalistic *tikkun*, the very analogy between God and her shattered manifestation in the individual establishes a responsibility between that individual and the part of the divine accessible to him – the immediate Other. In one of the few points under-addressed by Fredman, Finkelstein stresses how the heeding of the Other implicit in the composition of a work such as *Testimony* pragmatically reflects this responsibility. And Reznikoff not only meta-pragmatically emphasizes his own consciousness of such responsibility, but – as we have seen – even offers his own vocabulary as a Diaspora Ashkenazi to describe his Other's otherness, thereby inducing a pragmatic refocalization<sup>21</sup> whereby he and this Other become symbolically analogous:

Jewish history, not Jewish belief or tradition, is what Reznikoff draws upon to maintain himself as a Jew. The treatment of Jewish history in Reznikoff's poetry is itself a product of Jewish history, and being a Jew in this historical sense is crucial to him as a poet. For Reznikoff, poetry gives meaning to history: just as history becomes the arbitrator of Judaism, so poetry becomes the arbitrator of history<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> By pragmatic I mean how a text creates meanings within a specific context of enunciation; by meta-pragmatic, how this same text addresses the context of enunciation within which it is creating meaning. By pragmatic refocalization, I mean how a text alters the contexts within which it creates meaning. While the first two terms are of common usage, the third owes much to Vincent Crapanzano's idea of pragmatic reorientation.

<sup>22</sup> Finkelstein, 197. In his non-testimonial works, Reznikoff emphasizes the redemptive potential of his poetry, a potential often juxtaposed to the futility of "nights spent in talking", with "shining words, sometimes like fireflies in the darkness – / lighting and going out and after all no light" (*CP I*, 36). Though usually restricted to how the poet his own existence, this redemption is often framed in terms

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of a comparison with the Other. Take the following poem from “Inscriptions”, placed immediately after a lengthy eulogy in which Jews are portrayed as “compassionate”, “loving”, “generous” and “teaching”:  
“The Indian of Peru, I think, / chewing / the leaf of a shrub / could run all day. / I, too, / with a few lines  
of verse, only two or three / may be able / to see the day through”. (*CP II*, 62)

## Poetry and Erasure

At night, after the days work, he wrote. Year after year he had written, but the  
right words were still not all there, the right rhythms not always used.  
He corrected the old and added new.

While away on a business trip he died. His children playing about the house,  
left home by the window out at work, found the manuscript so carefully  
written and rewritten.

The paper was good to scribble on. Then they tore it into bits. At night the  
mother came home and swept it out (*CP II*, 58).

“Mother died at 7:30 Sunday morning.  
She never did come to herself.  
She tried very hard to say something,  
but it was too late.” (Letter in *Testimony I*, 221)

If the gift can be described as the most recurrent literary *topos* in Reznikoff’s testimonial works, erasure – usually condensed in the image of the burnt-book – appears with a near-obsessive frequency within his entire literary *corpus*. It is found in his posthumously published novel *The Manner Music*, where a talented, though unrecognized avant-garde composer is committed to Bellevue Hospital after destroying his entire life’s work. It reappears in various smaller poetic fragments, such as one where the indifferent passing of an express train by a station is compared to “a notebook forgotten on a seat in the bus, / full of names, addresses and telephone numbers: / important, no doubt, to the owner / but of no interest whatever / to anyone else. / Words like drops of water on a stove – / a hiss and gone”<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps forming the foundational scene of Reznikoff’s self-understanding as poet, erasure is also present in the autobiographic novel *By the Waters of Manhattan* (1930), where the poet describes the destruction of the life-writings left by his grandfather Ezekiel, whose wife – Hannah – incinerates the manuscripts even while saying: “Here’s a man’s life”. The same story is related in “Early History of a Writer”, where it is understood as having strengthened Reznikoff’s resolution to publish his poems while still alive:

I knew two stories to strengthen me in my resolution [...]  
[A story by Balzac] And my mother’s story of her father

<sup>23</sup> *CP II*, 103. See also *CP II*, 76 (“Scrap of paper / blown about the street, / you would like to be cherished, I suppose, / like a bank-note”) and even a pragmatically unindexed, fragmentary poem in *Testimony I*: “The bleating of calves / kept overnight at a slaughterhouse / to be slaughtered in the morning” (45)

who became a kind of broker  
making his little commissions on sales of cattle or wheat  
and beguiled his spirit as he wandered about the countryside  
writing verse in Hebrew –  
until he suddenly died of influenza far from home.  
And when with his bundle of clothes there was brought back a sheaf of papers

–

his verse, the writing of thirty years –  
my grandmother burnt every scrap of it, dearly as she loved him;  
for fear that the writing which she could not read  
or, if she could, did not understand,  
might send her children to jail  
should any of it be construed as treasonable against the Czar.  
Well, I would leave no writing of mine,  
if I could help it,  
to the mercy of those who loved me.  
I would print... (*CP II*, 175-176).

And the erasing of a life's voice is also recurrent in *Testimony*, which – amidst endless murders, accidents, assaults, hate-crimes and industrial accidents – reserves a limited though symptomatic space to much less violent incidents detailing the purloining of property. Revisiting the burnt-book in tales about unanswered letters and falsified testaments – a word whose very etymology reminisces of “testimony” – the majority of these narrative poems can be found in the “Property” sections of *Testimony*. The poem opening the first these sections in *Testimony I* presents the story of a weakened man who, surrounded by an undefined “they”, is pressured into signing what one assumes to be a will or deed. Notice how the narrative poem's compositional style – with its lack of detail, ambiguity, non-predication and anonymous, as opposed to pseudonymous, characters – contrasts with the predominant style of *Testimony*, as if deliberately presenting the scene as archetypal:

They held the light very close to him,  
But he could not see.  
They asked him to sign the paper,  
and someone put a pencil in his hand  
to make his mark.  
He could not take hold of it –  
even feel it<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> *Testimony I*, 33. The burnt-book, this loss of the voice of the Other, reappears in a poem about a woman who leaves a small note in her husband's trunk as he abandons her: “I married you for love; / I have lived with you for love”; / and I would have clung to you forever for love; / signed it, “Your wife,” / and addressed the note, “My husband.” // Then the nurse locked the trunk / and the expressman took it away. / But she did not hear from her husband” (*Testimony II*, 210). Usually manifest as a never-

The only *topos* common to Reznikoff's entire *literary corpus*, erasure also appears in a passage from an earlier version of *Testimony* which – quoted by Michael Davidson – was published in 1934 as part of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”. In a case of internal focalization and explicit symbolism atypical of *Testimony* (both traits which may account for its having been excluded from the recitative version), the narrator describes a dream which a criminal, “Jim”, has in prison after murdering a shopkeeper: “His two hands were tied together, and were on fire; there was a book hung before them – it had a leather cover just like the one they swore him on at the trial – the book caught fire and all the leaves were burning” (Davidson, 164).

What, then, can be made of this recurrence of the burnt book? As should be clear, it mustn't be read separately from other *topoi* reoccurring in Reznikoff, especially those of the individual's isolation and of the symbolic gift which heeds the Other. After all, it is through the ethically imperative heeding of the Other (understood as a cultural, not a psychoanalytic category) that the individual expresses his own isolation, thereby surpassing it, but even perfects a fragmented world. Despite the pain of incommunicability, however, Reznikoff does not portray erasure exclusively as loss, as a waste of alterity. Though at least some heeding of the Other remains imperative, the poet recognizes the necessity of erasure as part of a natural process of renovation – in a theodicy of sorts:

Of course, we must die.  
how else will the world be rid of  
the old telephone numbers  
we cannot forget?  
The numbers  
it would be foolish –  
utterly useless –  
to call<sup>25</sup>.

Intuitively, the presence of a poem thus accepting the erasure of self appears to disavow any interpretation of Reznikoff's as struggling against such erasure. And yet one must take in to consideration the fact that, far from a quixotic revolt against the inevitability

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answered call, a falsified letter or an erased will which defines a (often dying) self, the burnt-book also appears in *Testimony I* pages 33 (2), 34 (3), 36 (4), 41 (X), 55 (5), 70 (9), 71 (11), 76 (13), 121 (3), 153 (V), 199 (11), 200 (12), 201 (13), 218 (1), 221 (2), 223 (4), 228 (7), and in *Testimony II*, pages 38 (4), 40 (5), 77 (1), 79 (4), 121 (9), 185 (4), 204 (11).

<sup>25</sup> *CP II*, 81. In a reference to Rabbi Marc-Alain Ouaknin, Fredman highlights understandings of the burnt book as “a necessary sacrifice for the continuity of interpretation” (43). Reznikoff will use it alternately as a symbol of erasure in general, of anti-semitism and of renewal.

of death, his poetic project represents a denouncement of the fact that any given individual be unheeded in his passing. In fact, it is the very inevitability of dissolution that makes solidarity all the more imperative – that makes the mere existence of “old telephone numbers” all the more essential within his minimalist, synecdochic redemption. What must be avoided is not the passing, but the indifference by means of which one may pass wholly unacknowledged. Compare the relative conformity of the poem above with the despair of the following, part of the 1818 *Rhymes* and a curious precursor to Eliot’s *Wasteland*:

The dead are walking silently.

I sank them six feet underground,  
the dead are walking silently and no sound.

I raised on each a brown hill,  
The dead are walking slow and still. (*CP II*, 13)

An intense sense isolation, silence, immobility and asphyxiation seems to accompany these “dead” who, though plural, appear incapable of forming any type of community – a sense only accentuated by the indifference of the narrator who “sank them six feet underground”. Curiously, it is a sense not unlike that predominant in Reznikoff’s testimonial poems, whose very objectivity reflects the absence of a linguistic space for communion, for the heeding of the Other – an isolation which the poet establishes only to then redeem in his very compositional act or by the lending of his privileged diasporic vocabulary to his Others. Never quite reached, the characters of *Testimony* can only appear as epiphenominal, found and beyond qualification. And yet it is this narrative impersonality which ultimately generates “a sense of confronting the raw voice or materiality of [this] Other” (Fredman, 47). If the subaltern can not speak, at least his silence can be acknowledged – and described in terms of one’s own silence.

And even if depicted as secular, such heeding can not escape the profoundly re-ligious backdrop which sustain its ethical project. As DuPlessis and Quartermain emphasize, the very idea of testimony – a “swearing by one’s very “testes”, in etymological frankness” – marks “the spot where legal and religious discourses meet” (16). Behind that objective account of

the immediate here and now whose importance Reznikoff oft-emphasizes<sup>26</sup>, it also entails “the spirit of reporting to God, for his book of the Last Day”. Most importantly, it can also be read as a profoundly – though never explicitly – self-conscious enactment and promotion of the solidarity and interest by means of which complete erasure could (and the subjunctive is here essential) have been avoided.

### **In Memoriam**

An irony remains: the same Reznikoff who tailored an ethico-poetic project on the denouncement of erasure silently<sup>27</sup> bittered the same neglect into which he had refused to cast his own Others – holding, at best, a peripheral position in the American Modernist cannon. And though often lamented, such lack of receptivity appears under-addressed in its sources – identified as Reznikoff’s refusal to adopt a neo-romantic prophetic tone, as the “natural” obfuscation resulting from being contemporaneous to Pound and Eliot or as the hybrid position of a Jewish-American poet divided between the Hebraic and the Hellenic<sup>28</sup>. Still, a particularly insightful – if also reductive – explanation of this marginality is proposed by Zukofsky, who views this effacement as the price paid for producing texts so immediate and objective as to offer critics little room for analysis. Here, the dismissal of Reznikoff’s poetry would result from a minimalism which renders impossible the interpretative busy-work on which criticism is based:

Rezi’s neglect has been largely I think due to the fact that he is of little use to those who would teach and explicate a poem. Rezi’s poetry is merely perfect and

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<sup>26</sup> “The birds sing / in the spring woods: here now, here now, / here, here, here!”, reads one of the first poems of *By the Well of Living and Seeing* (CP II, 92) In *Inscriptions*, the two deictics center a similar word-play:

The dogs that walk with me are Now and Here  
and a third dog I do not trust at all,  
for he would lead me far into the past  
and there I’d lose myself: his name is If. (CP II, 80)

<sup>27</sup> Robert Shapiro emphasizes Reznikoff’s stoicism: “[He was] the only poet I’ve ever met who never uttered a complaint about the way life had treated him, no talk at all about more successful poets, no criticism of a culture that had given him almost nothing and had lavished gifts on meretricious entertainers” (in Franciosi 269).

<sup>28</sup> The first two explanations, by Harold Bloom and Hugh Kenner, are summarized by Stephen Fredman (1-10); more interpretative, the third is posited by Fredman himself.



profound and infinitely moving. The least of Rezi's one line poems says more – does more – than anything that anyone can say about it<sup>29</sup>.

The argument is interesting: few poets render paraphrase or explication as heretical as Reznikoff, who would personify the Objectivist ideal of a writing “which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (Zukofsky 273). ‘Rezi’ says what is – and no more can be said of this saying because what is... is. Still, Zukofsky, with this quasi-adamite interpretation of his forerunner, underplays the problematic behind the pretense of art-as-truth-as-*adequatio* implicit in his apology; as Roman Jakobson highlights<sup>30</sup>, meta-discursive claims to adequacy between word and world become tautological when historicized – every age, movement and vanguard will define and defend it's own perspective as representing what *is*. The *Weltanschauung* changes, as does the metaphor; the pretense to adequacy, however, remains. Or, as Gertrude Stein stresses:

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon who everything is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it [...] and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.<sup>31</sup>

Doubtless, the culturally divided Reznikoff was no perlocutor of morality or myth. Less deliberately obscure, self-referential and (apparently) erudite than Pound or Eliot, less explicitly performatic, he avoided weaving explicitly meta-pragmatic commentary into his

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<sup>29</sup> In Franciosi, 265. Zukovsky's explanation of the relative disinterest in Reznikoff is seconded by both Bernstein (233, 236) and Fredman:

Reznikoff's poetry may have been extremely difficult for critics like Kenner and Bloom to see because it resides in plain sight, inviting neither reference-hunting nor interpretation as a psychodynamic struggle. In opposition to the modes of twentieth-century poetry that have managed to gain critical acclaim, Reznikoff devoted himself to banishing obscurities from his poetry, presenting instead a bare pattern of events in the brightest possible light (11).

<sup>30</sup> This point is made in “On Realism in Art”:

Classicists, sentimentalists, the romanticists to a certain extent, even the “realists” of the nineteenth century, the modernists to a large degree, and, finally, the futurists, expressionists, and their like have more than once steadfastly proclaimed their faithfulness to reality, maximum verisimilitude – in other words, realism – as the guiding motto of their artistic program (Jakobson 39).

<sup>31</sup> Emphatically, Stein repeats the same passage, *ipsissima verba*, on two occasions in “Composition as Explanation” (21, 24). Reminiscent of the Baroque, this radically reflexive perception of the historical contingency of one's point of view – and the performativity resulting from this perception – seems typical of the Modern worldwide.

poetry – especially his narrative pieces (Francosi 264). And even the few attempts at self-criticism which he made in interviews and letters avoid the paradoxes and obscurities by means of which writers often seduce critics; by definition, the very immediacy implicit in the ideal of a poem-as-object – in “writing [...] which is an object or affects the mind as such” (Zukofsky 274) – renders the mediational role of criticism meaningless. Still, this same “objectivity” and “sincerity” could be attributed to poets – most of them female, such as Emily Dickinson and Cristina Rousetti – who occupy central positions in cannon. Perhaps, as Bloom seems to suggest, *real* men ought to be more prophetic and self-referential about their poetry....

Still, a hand-full of atrociously poor rhymes notwithstanding, the reason for Reznikoff’s erasure may be simpler – and more disheartening – than that suggested by Zukovsky or Bloom. Despite the fetishizing of alterity characteristic of contemporary criticism, perhaps our interest in the Other exists predominantly not as an ethical commitment, but as an exercise of abstraction. perhaps we have made of the academically appealing category of the “other” a tenured alternative to the ever-unpleasant task of heeding this here Other. Succumbing to the most perverse logic possible, perhaps we have fashioned our “seat upon the dais” out of our words – but only words – regarding the “common table”:

**Te Deum**

Not because of victories  
I sing,  
having none,  
but for the common sunshine,  
the breeze,  
the largess of the spring.

Not for victory  
but for the day’s work done  
as well as I was able;  
not for a seat upon the dais  
but at the common table (*CP II*, 75).

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