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Testimony, objectivism, and poetic form in Charles Reznikoff's Holocaust

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Abstract

This essay examines the gradual development of Charles Reznikoff's testimony form Holocaust poetry, which ultimately rejected the traditional lyric forms of his earlier works in favor of a stark, Objectivist poetry that culminated in *Holocaust* (1975)—a poem based on the transcripts from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials. The WWI poems from Reznikoff's first volume *Rhythms* (1918) underscore the importance of music to his early elegies in contrast to the blunt, impersonal testimonies in *Holocaust*. In *Rhythms*, Reznikoff employs traditional conventions ironically to convey war's unpoetic reality while the poetic speakers in *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down* (1941) seek refuge in those forms at the same time they question the value of the forms when confronted with violence. However, thirty years after the Holocaust, the traditional forms could no longer provide solace in the face of an overwhelming history of suffering.

Keywords: Charles Reznikoff, Holocaust poetry, Objectivism, poetic form, testimony, *Holocaust*

In his essay "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," Elie Wiesel argues that the voices of witness testimony constituted to an important new genre in the post-World War II literary imagination: "But then there are the witnesses and there is their testimony. If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we all feel we have to bear testimony for the future" (9). Bearing witness to the Holocaust has taken a variety of forms including legal testimonies, survivor narratives in written and video formats, as well as poetry. However, as Sue Vice claims "it is not poetic but prose testimony that is typical of Holocaust eyewitness, while Holocaust poetry is considered a separate and self-contained genre" (7). The work of American Objectivist poet, Charles Reznikoff, challenges such generic distinctions between legal and artistic and prose and poetry testimony, particularly his poem *Holocaust*, which is based on transcripts from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials. He created the work by editing the transcripts, removing most of the personal names and first-person utterances, and providing the testimonies without a poetic speaker's overt emotional response. The formal complexity of *Holocaust* has sparked more critical debate than any of his other works, perhaps because of the enormity of the poet's task to find a poetic form that represents the experiences of Holocaust victims without objectifying or aestheticizing their suffering. Charles Bernstein classifies the poem as "Reznikoff's most problematic work at a technical—in the sense of aesthetic or formal—level, in the sense that no American work of poetry had found a form to adequately acknowledge that which is beyond adequate acknowledgement; so that *Holocaust* stands apart and beyond the achievement of Reznikoff's *Poems* and *Testimony*" (238). While I agree that *Holocaust* confronts weighty formal as well as aesthetic issues by transforming survivor testimonies in a long, free-verse poem, I would argue that the form of the poem

developed gradually out of Reznikoff's formal experiments in *Poems* and *Testimony*. Few critics have examined *Holocaust* in relation to his earlier poems, particularly those in *Rhythms* (1918) and *Going to and Fro and Walking Up and Down* (1941). These earlier works reveal a gradual shift away from traditional forms and figures toward a free-verse form of seemingly objective testimony. Reznikoff employs the testimony form in *Holocaust* to represent and to critique simultaneously the Nazi's objectification and dehumanization of the Jews. This testimony form of *Holocaust* objectifies the individual voices of its human subjects in order to show the horrors that can result from such an objectification.

Before analyzing Reznikoff's poetry, though, it is important to examine Objectivism and Reznikoff's role in that movement. The "Objectivist" label is often invoked in criticism of Reznikoff's work. For example, Norman Finkelstein argues that *Holocaust* "could be regarded as the endpoint of Objectivism's testimonial strain, as the subjectivity and presence of the poet virtually disappears" (31). Yet, definitions of 'objectivism' vary from critic to critic and even from the creators of the movement themselves. In the February 1931 issue of *Poetry*, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, and other Jewish American poets published works influenced by Ezra Pound's Imagism under the name "Objectivists." However, from the beginning of the movement, the term was only loosely defined, and poets developed their own versions of Objectivism. Reznikoff himself downplays the significance of the label, claiming "We picked the name 'Objectivist' because we had all read *Poetry* of Chicago and we agreed completely with all that Pound was saying. We didn't really discuss the term itself; it seemed all right—pregnant. It could have meant any number of things" ("Charles Reznikoff" 196-97). The variety of the poetry in that 1931 issue demonstrates the distinct approaches of the individual Objectivist poets. To

Reznikoff, 'objectivism' was clearly tied to his training and experiences as a lawyer evaluating the testimony of witnesses:

> By the term "objectivist" I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject-matter and, if he writes in verse, by its music. Now suppose in a court of law, you are testifying in a negligence case. You cannot get on the stand and say, "That man was negligent." That's a conclusion of fact. What you'd be compelled to say is how the man acted. . . . The judges of whether he is negligent or not are the jury in that case and the judges of what you say as a poet are the readers. That is, there is an analogy between testimony in the courts and testimony of a poet. ("Charles Reznikoff" 194-95).

Paradoxically, Reznikoff's poet as witness "restricts" himself to factual testimony precisely to stir emotion; testimony poetry is "objective" not in its absence of emotion but in its indirect expression of the poet's feelings through the choice and arrangement of source material. Reznikoff's legal training undoubtedly shaped his poetics. After studying at New York University Law School, he was admitted to the bar in 1916 but gave up private practice in 1917 when he discovered that his interest in law was scholarly. Reznikoff published his first volume of poetry, *Rhythms*, in 1918 and began contributing a wide range of prose and poetry to the *Menorah Journal*, an influential English-language Jewish literary and intellectual journal. Following a series of assorted jobs, he returned to his legal roots in 1930 by working as a writer for the legal encyclopedia *Corpus Juris* at the American Law Book Company in Brooklyn. In 1934, Reznikoff published a long prose work, *Testimony*, based on the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century American court cases he had read for the *Corpus*. He converted a section of *Testimony* into verse and published it in his 1941 collection *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down*. Reznikoff released the first poetry volume of *Testimony: The United States 1885-1890: Recitative* in 1965 followed by the second, *Testimony: The United States 1891-1900:*

Recitative, in 1968. At the recommendation of his wife Marie Syrkin, Reznikoff applied his testimony technique to *Holocaust*, published in 1975.[1]

In the autobiographical section "Early History of a Writer" from his 1969 collection *By the Well of Living and Seeing*, he claims his study of the law taught him how to judge his own poetry with a critical eye and pare it down to its essential elements:

> I saw that I could use the expensive machinery
> that had cost me four years of hard work at law
> and which I had thought useless for my writing:
> prying sentences open to look at the exact meaning
> weighing words to choose only those that had meat for my purpose
> and throwing the rest away as empty shells.
> I, too, could scrutinize every word and phrase
> as if in a document or the opinion of a judge [. . .]
> leaving only the pithy, the necessary, the clear and plain. (*The Poems* 329)[2]

The metaphor of the poet "prying" sentences apart as if they were "shells" searching for the "plain" "meat" and discarding the rest echoes Pound's Imagist advice to poets, advocating "the direct treatment of the 'thing'" by stripping poetry of unnecessary artifice and rhetoric (199). Reznikoff came to view conventional forms and techniques as empty shells that must be discarded. In "Obiter Dicta," a manuscript found among his papers after his death, Reznikoff goes into more detail listing the shortcomings of traditionally formal poetry: "when I grew older [. . .] I grew tired of regular meters and stanzas; they had become a little stale; the smooth lines and the rhymes I used to read with pleasure now seemed affected, a false stress on words and syllable" (*The Poems* 371). He equates the "pleasure" of conventional poetry, its "smooth," seamless technique, with deceit. For Reznikoff, free verse became the antidote to "stale" forms:

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[1] Syrkin writes in "Charles: A Memoir," "while he was obdurately producing more *Testimony* I urged him to use the technique of law cases for another project—the Nazi extermination of European Jewry" (64).

[2] All citations to Reznikoff's poem's, except *Holocaust*, correspond to page numbers in *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff*. As Seamus Cooney notes in his edition, Reznikoff often omitted sequence and section titles and numbers in various editions of his works.

"The brand-new verse some American poets were beginning to write [. . .] seemed to me, when I first read it, just right: not cut to patterns, however cleverly, not poured into ready molds, but words and phrases flowing as the thought; to be read just like common speech" (*The Poems* 371). Here, Reznikoff equates metrical poetry with static "molds" and artificial "patterns" and the "irregular," "rough" rhythms of free verse with authentic "common speech."

This rejection of traditional forms and effects toward an Objectivist, free-verse testimony form, however, did not occur as quickly as Reznikoff's autobiographical writings suggest. The poet sought comfort in traditional forms and genres in his poems written during World War II, World War II, and the Holocaust. But, thirty years after the Holocaust, those forms could no longer provide solace in the face of an overwhelming history of violence and suffering. The WWI poems from his first volume *Rhythms* (1918) underscore the importance of music to his early elegies in contrast to the blunt, impersonal testimonies in *Holocaust* (1975). In *Rhythms*, Reznikoff employs traditional forms and conventions ironically to convey war's unpoetic reality. However, the poetic speakers in *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down* (1941) seek refuge in those forms and figures at the same time they question the value of the forms to represent violence and suffering. Reznikoff's post-WWII poetry moves away from traditional forms, rhymes, and rhythms, culminating in *Holocaust*. The formal features of *Holocaust*—including a distanced, third-person perspective, awkward syntax resulting from passive-voice constructions, sequential organization of impersonally numbered poems with blunt titles, harsh rhythms, extreme irony and understatement, and avoidance of figurative language, poetic diction, and rhyme—grew out of a long process of searching for an appropriate form to portray sympathetically the suffering of Holocaust survivors without aestheticizing their pain. This testimony form of *Holocaust* objectifies the individual voices of its human subjects,

simultaneously recording the Nazis' dehumanization of the Jews in the camps and the horror of Nazi anti-Semitism.

In the World War I poem 13 "Romance" from *Rhythms* (1918), the speaker clings to traditional forms and genres, like the romance, even while asserting their disappearance:

> The troopers are riding, are riding by,
> the troopers are riding to kill and die
> that a clean flag may cleanly fly.
>
> They touch the dust in their homes no more,
> they are clean of the dirt of shop and store,
> and they ride out clean to war. (*The Poems* 6)

The opening lines echo the refrain from Alfred Noyes's popular poem "The Highwayman": "The highwayman came riding— / Riding— riding" (192). Reznikoff's troopers, like Noyes's highwayman, are riding towards their own death. The pat, monosyllabic end-rhymes—*by/die/fly* and *more/store/war*—reproduce the neat, "cleanliness" of the soldiers going to war. Each line also contains four stresses. But, as Robert Franciosi argues, "the innocent rhythm in the opening lines and the use of 'clean' throughout the poem is an ironic attack on the illusion of clean war" (266). Indeed, the allusion offered in Rupert Brooke's famous WWI sonnet "Peace" in which soldiers go off to war like "swimmers into cleanness leaping" further supports Franciosi's claim (Brooke 312). The ironic repetition of "clean" registers the impossibility of a tidy war for those who are "riding to kill and die." The neatness and order of the poem are deceptive like the false claim of a clean war. "Romance" voices the death of chivalric figures of romance that influenced Victorian poets like Noyes. The poem criticizes the idea of a chivalrous death in battle, but it does so by employing traditionally formal figures and techniques ironically. Here, we see the beginning of Reznikoff's movement away from traditional forms and effects. His poem criticizes its own form, but it does not completely reject it.

Like "Romance," the following poem "14," originally titled "On One Whom the Germans Shot," registers the devastating effects of war while critiquing its own traditional figures. The poem laments the death of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the young Vorticist sculptor killed in the First World War, with suspiciously pastoral imagery:

> How shall we mourn you who are killed and wasted,
> sure that you would not die with your work unended,
> as if the iron scythe in the grass stops for a flower? (*The Poems* 6)

The subject is conventional: the young artist killed in his prime. In the tradition of lyric poetry, the first-person speaker focuses on the effect of the artist's death on "we [who] mourn you." The poem assembles the traditional imagery of the pastoral mode (the scythe, the grass, and the flower), but it also registers the effect of the mechanized warfare of WWI on that imagery. The poem designates the scythe, which is typically associated with the Grim Reaper, as an "iron" scythe, a machine of war, dispassionately cutting down the young soldier. The final punctuation mark in poem "14" questions the effectiveness of the scythe as war figure, and this suspicion of figures and metaphors intensifies in Reznikoff's later Holocaust poetry. The poem is strategically open ended: "'shall' implies a selection of possible responses, but Reznikoff seems to question whether one *can* find an adequate response by furnishing no answer within the poem," a question at the heart of *Holocaust* as well (Franciosi 265). Although the poem questions the usefulness of pastoral imagery in an elegy commemorating a young artist killed in a modern war, it does not completely abandon tradition. Its lines may not rhyme, but they are shaped into one stanza with each line containing five stresses. "Romance" and "On One Whom" rely on traditional forms to critique earlier conventional depictions of death and war in poetry.

Like these two poems from *Rhythms*, poem "VIII" from the first section of Reznikoff's 1941 volume, *Going to and Fro and Walking Up and Down*, questions the form that a poetic

elegy should take; this time in reference to World War II rather than World War I. *Going* consists of five large sections—"A Short History of Israel; Notes and Glosses," "Autobiography: New York," "Autobiography: Hollywood," "Testimony," and "Kaddish"; each section contains discrete poems ranging from a representation of the biblical exodus of Israelites recounted in extensive catalogues and repetitions, to short Objectivist portraits of contemporary city life and city dwellers, to a four-part testimony-form poem based on early American law reports, and ending with a Kaddish for Reznikoff's mother. The free-verse poem "VIII," from "A Short History of Israel" section, examines the efficacy of a metaphor comparing dead birds to the destruction of the Jews throughout history. Like the earlier Gaudier-Brzeska elegy, this poem does not provide an answer; it ends with a question:

> A dead gull in the road,
> the body flattened
> and the wings spread—
> but not to fly out of the dust
> over the waves;
> and a robin dead beside a hedge,
> the little claws drawn up
> against the dusty bundle:
> has there been a purge of Jews
> among the birds? (*The Poems* 181-82)

The speaker contrasts the "flattened" gull, its "wings spread," with the robin's claws "drawn up | against the dusty bundle." Even though the gull and robin are opposed in their positions, the *spread/dead* rhyme and the *dust/dusty* associations link them, as do the semicolon between the two descriptions and the repetition of "and." The poem's first eight lines would seem a prime example of Objectivism, heavily influenced by Imagism, more so than the previous two poems in *Rhythms*. The distanced speaker witnesses the details of two images and avoids commenting on their significance. However, the last two lines introduce an observant speaker searching for interpretive significance and asking how the history of the exodus of the Jews, a history related

earlier in the sequence, influences the way he understands two dead birds on a New York street. The syntactic structure draws together the two bird descriptions and the destruction of the Jews into the speaker's provocative question. Reznikoff's Objectivism combines precision with the indirect evocation of emotions. The ending simultaneously clarifies the relationship between the birds and the Jews by constructing a metaphor and undercuts that metaphor with a question, casting doubt on that very metaphor. "VIII," like "Romance," draws on an earlier poetic tradition while it reveals the obsolescence of the figures it derives from the past. The poem alludes to famous bird poems like Shelley's "Skylark" and Keats's "Nightingale," and the seagull imagery in particular evokes the birds in Old English elegies like "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" where human-sounding gulls' cries stir up memories of the speaker's former life. In "VIII," the robin, usually associated with springtime and renewal, symbolizes death and destruction. The poem's other formal features enhance the emotional impact of these figurative details. The three shortest lines in the poem, two beats each—"the bódy fláttened," "óver the wáves," and "amóng the bírds"—suggest the human lives cut short by violence. The choice of "body" humanizes the dead bird, and "Over the waves" points the poem toward the violence occurring overseas in European battlefields. These devices and precise free-verse lines in "VIII" create an alternative free-verse song in place of the silenced birds.

The form of that poetic song changes throughout the individual poems and sections of *Going*. As a case in point, the fourth "Testimony" section consists of four, numbered free-verse poems. The section title "Testimony" and its footnote—"based on cases in the law reports"—frame the poems in legal terms, distinguishing these poems from others in *Going* (*The Poems* 206). In 1933, Reznikoff initially published this same material, based on the law reports from early American history that he read for his work on the *Corpus Juris* encyclopedia, in the form of

a long work in prose. However, he later recast sections of the prose into these free-verse poems. Reznikoff created this testimony form for his wartime volume and continued to develop it for the next thirty years of his life. In fact, Stephen Fredman connects these early testimony works to Reznikoff's last major poem, claiming that "the American text of *Testimony* (in each of its several forms) forms a direct precursor to Reznikoff's last book of poems, *Holocaust*" (114). Similarly, Sylvia Rothchild connects the historical records of violence from those works directly to *Holocaust*: "Reznikoff, writing his Testimonies, caught previews of the violence and pain in other places and generations that show how far men can go. The poems created from the law reports of several states offer a record of human behavior different in scale but not in substance from the testimony Reznikoff took from the Nuremberg Military Tribunal Trials and the record of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem" (292). Reznikoff himself invokes T.S. Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative" to explain his approach to the poems: "*Testimony* may be explained by T. S. Eliot's 'objective correlative,' as I understand it. 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" ("Charles Reznikoff" 202). "Testimony" links the outrage Reznikoff felt in response to World War II to the cruelty of early industrial American society and paves the way for Reznikoff's use of testimony in *Holocaust*.

Reznikoff's first three free-verse "Testimony" poems in *Going* chronicle the violent details of law reports in plain language from a third-person perspective, repeating significant words and phrases for emphasis. The individual poems function as discrete units, like law reports for distinct cases; they vary in terms of their number of lines, use of rhyme, meters, use of dialogue, and imagery. In "Testimony," Reznikoff details the violence against those who are marginalized by society, particularly "minorities, women, and immigrants" (Jockims 111). The free-verse

poem "II" represents the objectification of a child laborer as becomes a victim of an industrial machine. The speaker introduces its subject: "Amelia was just fourteen and out of the orphan asylum; at her first job—in the bindery, and yes sir, yes ma'am, oh, so anxious to please. She stood at the table, her blonde hair hanging about her shoulders" (*The Poems* 207). The poem opens with an intimate portrait of Amelia; it names her and offers details about her life. But the speaker also situates Amelia in an impersonal, mechanized environment, a place for counting and accounting. Her job in the bindery is "knocking up": "counting books and stacking them in piles to be taken away." The lines assimilate Amelia into the counting; she is "fourteen" working at her "first" job at one of the "twenty wire-stitching machines" bending down to pick up the "three or four" books that fall under the table. She is thus part of the industrial machine by being part of the workforce, a fact that is gruesomely actualized with her merging with the bindery machine in the poem's final lines:

> She felt her hair caught gently;
> put her hand up and felt the shaft going round and round
> and her hair caught on it, wound and winding around it,
> until the scalp was jerked from her head,
> and the blood was coming down all over her face and waist.

The machine "gently" catches her hair just as the systematic r*ou*nd/w*ou*nd/ar*ound* assonance conveys the steady movement of the hair winding into the machine. One the one hand, the poem is objective in its use of the third-person perspective and blunt language to describe the scene. However, Reznikoff is not merely transcribing testimonies here. He mobilizes the formal features of poetry, such as the long lines and the repeated sounds, to convey the violent way an industrialized society treats marginalized figures like Amelia. Though the poem details the way vulnerable young workers, like Amelia, become victims of an industrial machine, thereby losing

their identities, it also seeks to restore Amelia's humanity by recounting her story that might otherwise have been lost among a piles of historical testimony.

Thirty years later, we see the results of Reznikoff's continued exploration of the testimony form in *Holocaust*. Reznikoff's wife describes the poet's method for letting the facts of the survivor testimonies speaker for themselves: "Only the records of the Nuremberg Trial and of the Eichmann Trial were to be his sources; nor would he allow himself any subjective outcry. Again the bare facts, as selected by him, would speak for themselves: there would be no tampering with the experience through imagery or heightened language" (Syrkin 64). Some critics did indeed praise the poem's presentation of "the bare facts." For example, Henry Weinfield identifies Reznikoff's "move away from lyric subjectivity, toward what we have come to refer to as 'Objectivism'" as an important development in his poetry (227). Todd Carmody argues that Reznikoff's "unwillingness to step into the position of the survivor" (104) resists dangerous or ineffective "models that often call on us to identify with survivors in order to understand the Holocaust" (86). Other critics, though, consider Reznikoff's blunt presentation of the material as insensitivity toward the suffering of Holocaust victims. Paul Auster contends that Reznikoff's formal strategies are ineffective and even disingenuous: "The holocaust, which is precisely the unknowable, the unthinkable, requires a treatment *beyond the facts* in order for us to be able to understand it—assuming that such a thing is even possible" (161). Robert Alter also faults *Holocaust*'s dispassionate representation of testimonies, claiming it contains a "numbing pointlessness in the constant repetition of savagery and murder without the slightest interpretative response on the part of the poet, without the slightest intimation of historical options beyond or after genocide" (50).

In response to such criticism, I would argue that the abstraction of a poetic presence from *Holocaust* doesn't admit an unwillingness to engage with the material or insensitivity towards it; rather, it enables the poet to focus on the individual testimonies. By suppressing his own emotional responses to the testimonies in his poem, Reznikoff elicits a complex reaction in readers. In his last interview in 1976, Reznikoff defends his approach to the material: "You don't just throw up your hands and say 'Oh, how terrible!' You don't simply go and put out your own emotions. But if you stay faithful to the facts themselves—for they are the important part—if you present them as clearly as you can, then a response will surely follow" ("Charles Reznikoff—A Profile" 14). Reznikoff places the responsibility of the emotional response and interpretation on the reader, not on the text of the poem itself, and this connects to Reznikoff's theories of an Objectivist poetics that achieves an emotional reaction through the selection and arrangement of the source materials. The poem's preface relentlessly establishes the validity of its subject, stating "*All that follows is based on a United States government publication,* Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals*, and the records of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem*" (Reznikoff, *Holocaust*). The International Military Tribunal tried twenty-four high-ranking military and political leaders of Nazi Germany for crimes against humanity from November 14, 1945 to October 1, 1946. A United States Military Tribunal later prosecuted more than one hundred additional defendants in a series of twelve trials from October 1946 through April 1949. Nazi S.S. Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem lasted 114 sessions from April 11 to August 14, 1961 and was broadcast worldwide. The Tribunal convicted Eichmann and executed him by hanging. Hannah Arendt published her well-known *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in response to the trial, arguing that "the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and

still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (276); thus, the trial revealed, in her now-famous phrase, the "banality of evil" (292). Arendt's contention that the first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's Zionist motives confused the issues in the trial and that Jewish Councils played a collaborative role in the Holocaust sparked a backlash among Jewish intellectuals such as Reznikoff's wife, who "led the charge in the Jewish press" against Arendt (Carmody 95). During the trial, Reznikoff worked as a typesetter at Syrkin's *Jewish Frontier*; in that position "he must have been exposed to the controversy brought about by the Eichmann Trial and brought to a head by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*."

Published in 1975 more than ten years after the Eichmann trial and thirty years after the event itself, *Holocaust* immerses its readers in factual testimonies Reznikoff altered and transformed into free-verse poetry. The poem enumerates the deportation, torture, and murder of Jews from the early 1930s to the 1943 rescue in Sweden. *Holocaust* is the product of a poet deeply engaged with history and the assessments of historical events over time. Its overall organization and structure seem to cast Reznikoff as a historian rather than as a poet. Unlike Reznikoff's other poetry volumes, this one contains a "contents" page uniformly listing its twelve sections in Roman numerals as if they were chapters in a book, beginning with "Deportation" and ending with "Escapes." The chronological progression of the sections from "Deportation," to "Invasion," "Ghettos," "Gas Chambers and Gas Trucks" implies a mechanistic organization depicting the escalation of early Nazi policies forcing Jewish emigration in 1933 to the systematic extermination of the Jews and the Final Solution. A section titled, "Author's Notes," follows the last poem, further adding to the historicity of the poem. The ordered contents page, author's notes, and preface identifying the sources indicate that what follows is not a book

of poems but rather a methodically organized historical account of a methodically organized atrocity.

Yet, however much *Holocaust* is structured as a historical document, it is also a highly crafted work of art in which Reznikoff stages his own trial. The poem's twelve sections suggest the twelve trials under the US Tribunal. But the purpose of this poetic trial is not to judge or sentence the guilty. Gone is the legal apparatus in the original testimony—records, judges, lawyers, juries, sentences, and verdicts—and in its place are the voices of the survivors. *Holocaust* tests the limits of poetic form to represent and respond to an event that many claim is unrepresentable and unspeakable. In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive,* Giorgio Agamben explores the problem of representation in terms of survivor testimony, arguing that "testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to" (13). According to Agamben, in order for language to convey this impossibility, it has to break down and "give way to a non-language… that no longer signifies" (39). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub also identify complexities in Holocaust testimony by examining the Holocaust as "a radical historical *crisis of witnessing*, and as the unprecedented, inconceivable, historical occurrence of 'an event without a witness'—an event eliminating its own witness" (xvii). This "crisis of history" is then "translated into a *crisis of literature* insofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated" (xviii). The "imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust" conflicts with "the impossibility of telling" (79). As a poem that bears witness to the testimonies of others, *Holocaust* is thus inevitably characterized by contradictions.

Its contents page creates an illusion of order and logic only to convey, paradoxically, a lack of order and logic. The individual poetic sequences are far from uniform: "Work Camps"

consists of ten numbered sections, while "Research" and "Escapes" each contain only two. And "Escapes," the longest and final section of the volume, is ironically more about death than liberation. "Research" includes a poem from the perspective of German physicians justifying their torture of the Jews as scientific experimentation "for the good" of the German people; while the "Entertainment" section details how S.S. officers tormented prisoners for their own enjoyment (9). The notes to those sections don't clarify the poetry with objective facts and figures, as notes in a typical historical document would; they complicate it with irony and understatement. For example, the note on the Warsaw ghetto uprising section juxtaposes the deaths of "thousands of Jews" with "the burden on every S.S. man or German police officer during these actions to drive out the Jews from Warsaw" (9). The final note, which concludes *Holocaust* as a whole, only condemns the Nazis through irony: "the spirit of the S.S. men and the police officers, it was noted by one of their superiors, was 'extraordinarily good and praiseworthy from the first day to the very last'" (90). The poem does not attempt to explain why the Holocaust happened or how the atrocities committed should be punished; instead, it examines the operation of the Nazis' brutal and systematic practices.

The poem connects the Nazis with organization, efficiency, and technology at the same time it exposes that the blind pursuit of these practices, often considered a mark of a highly civilized culture, can result in the utter destruction of civilization. The S.S. officers in *Holocaust* are constantly preoccupied with procedures and orderliness in service of horrific immorality. They reduce the prisoners to abstract numbers, force prisoners to place the bodies of murdered Jews "on the ground / in a pattern: / Jews and Poles / in groups of five" (17-18) and "behind trees that had been cut down | and set up in rows" (46). The insistent repetition of the Nazis "ordering" throughout the poem—"the S.S. men ordered the Jews off the wagon" and "then ordered them to

take off their clothes" and "then they ordered the Jews to get on their knees"—stresses the importance of organization and commands in relation to the work camps, death camps, and trains while contrasting this order with the complete breakdown of a moral law and order (7). The Nuremberg and Eichmann Trials attempted to define legally "crimes against humanity" and to prosecute the defendants according to a new set of legal criteria. However, Arendt argued that the Eichmann Trial exposed "the inadequacy of the prevailing legal system and of current juridical concepts to deal with the facts of administrative massacres organized by the state apparatus" (294).

On the surface, *Holocaust* itself seems to approach its subject and sources in a distanced and systematic way, suggesting "the Nazi ideology and methods [that] imposed anonymity upon their victims as part of their program of genocide" (Shevelow 304). For the most part, the poem employs passive voice and a distanced third-person perspective, omits personal names, avoids metaphors and figurative language, and is unemotional, all characteristics conveying the S.S. officers' depersonalization of individual prisoners. Yet, sections of *Holocaust* flatly contradict those formal characteristics; the poem doesn't blindly follow its own orders. The poems in which Reznikoff switches perspective, employs figurative language, or conveys subjective emotions stand out against the backdrop of formally flattened testimonies, thereby acknowledging the impossibility of a completely objective poetic treatment of the Holocaust. For example, the first-person perspective, figurative language, and irony in "Research" register the loss of individual and collective identities. The first poem is from the Nazi doctors' point of view justifying their torture of the Jews:

> We are the civilized—
> Aryans;
> and do not always kill those condemned to death
> merely because they are Jews

> as the less civilized might:
> we use them to benefit science
> like rats or mice:
> to find out the limits of human endurance
> at the highest altitudes
> for the good of the German air force. (9)[3]

The ironic repetition of "civilized" registers the barbarism of the scientists. The *c*ivilized/*sc*ience alliteration connects human experimentation and study with this supposedly advanced society. The uncharacteristic use of "we" here conveys Fascism's destructive nationalism and insistence on a collective, homogenous Aryan identity. The composite "we" crushes the voice of the individual "I." Vice claims that "the only first-person utterance that remains in *Holocaust* is in the section entitled 'Research'" (11), and Carmody argues that "when the first-person 'I' does appear, it is always spoken by a Nazi" (91). But neither of these claims is entirely accurate. There are instances of prisoners and S.S. guards asserting their individuality and speaking in the first person, as with the "slender young woman with black hair, [who] pointed to herself and said, 'I am twenty-three'" (*Holocaust* 24) and the S.S. man who "would say a kind word" to the Jews and confesses, "I didn't know where I was being sent to. / I didn't know about this, / and when I found out I asked at once for a transfer" (48). The shifts in perspective indicate moments when individual voices break free from the constraints of the historical record and trial testimony.

While "Research" sets up a strict division between us and them, the poem's metaphor confuses that distinction. The separation of the poetic line after "science" instead of after "mice" invites the question of who really is the rat in this comparison. From the doctors' perspective, the scientists "use" the Jews as they would a lab rat or mouse. But the line break implies that the

[3] Reznikoff refers to the contemptuous association between Jews and rodents put forth in Nazi propaganda like the anti-Semitic film "The Eternal Jew" (1940), created at the urging of the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, which juxtaposed images of rats in cellars with Jews emigrating from Palestine.

experimenters are the rats. Here, Reznikoff is mobilizing the power of lines breaks in his free-verse poem to complicate the prose testimony and create new meanings and associations. "For the good of the German air force," "for the good of the Germany navy," and "for the good of the German army" is an empty refrain (9). There is nothing "good" about "Research." Instead, the poem lists the graphic mutilation of the Jews in elaborate catalogues:

> wound them and force wooden shavings or ground glass
> into the wounds,
> or take out bones, muscles, and nerves,
> or burn their flesh—
> to study the burns caused by bombs—
> or put poison in their food
> or infect them with malaria, typhus, or other fevers—
> all for the good of the German army.
> *Heil Hitler!* (9)

The poem's first twenty lines are all part of one single sentence linked together by punctuation—commas, dashes, colons, and semicolons—and conjunctions—*and, for, or*—that magnifies the overpowering effect of all these experiments, as torture itself aims to amplify pain and push human limits. The repetition of "wound" and the *w*ound/*w*ooden/*w*ounds alliteration aurally "forces" sounds into the ear as doctors "force" wood and glass fragments into open lacerations. The "or" repetition registers the unending forms of torture occurring in the camp hospitals. In "Research I," torture and violence breed more hate. "Research I" expresses emotion indirectly; it attacks the Nazi ideology by adopting a detached voice and revealing the gross irony of its appeals to a civilized and scientifically advanced society. The repetitions, punctuation, and line breaks all work to enhance the emotional effect of the words.

"Research" also demonstrates the way the meanings of words themselves are infected by Nazi ideologies. The poem betrays a deadly mistrust of language. While it is true that Reznikoff's earlier poems question the very metaphors they construct in *Rhythms* and *Going*;

those poems still suggest faith in language's ability to communicate clearly and concisely. In *Holocaust,* though, language is deliberately used to conceal what is really happening at the camps. For example, the poem marks the Nazis' deceptive use of language with quotation marks: "the entertainment squad" (4), "Cloakroom [and] hairdressers" (28), "To the baths" (28), "Lazarette" (38), and "road building" (59). These are euphemisms for Jews tortured for entertainment, rooms for their clothing and hair removed from the bodies sent to the gas chambers, the building where doctors experiment on Jews, and hiding traces of mass graves sites. In some cases, surviving in the camps requires prisoners not only to decode these lies but even to lie convincingly themselves about their health, age, or occupation. In another instance of verbal deception, the trains on the way to the death camps and work camps pass through stations disguised to hide their real purpose:

> And the transports were arriving all the time;
> large transports daily—even twice a day.
> Flower beds were later set up around the platform to which the transports came;
> and there were signs with arrows reading "To the train" or "To Bialystock,"
> a city known for the number of Jews who lived—or rather had lived—there;
> so that those arriving would not know at first where they were:
> it looked like a kind of transit station, a railway junction. (39)

The Nazis use language, literally "signs," to disorient the Jews, and thus the signifying relationship between words and their source objects breaks down, demonstrating Agamben's claim that the language must breakdown in order to bear witness to the Holocaust (39). Similes and metaphors also obscure clarity and concision. The Nazis want the camp station to seem like an ordinary railway stop. But the aside "or rather had lived" indicates the presence of a poetic speaker interpreting the scene and insisting that this is a death station, not an ordinary railway stop. The other prisoners inscribe the actual destination for the Jews in the concentration camps on notes: "the men who had been sent away had said that if they were sent to the woods / they

would send those who were left behind a note [in the truck]— / and they did: / it was in Hebrew and all it read was: 'To death'" (75). The troubled simile and wordiness in the final line, "it looked like a kind of," registers the speaker's hesitancy to employ figurative language and difficulty in verbalizing the experience. The dashes qualify the previous statements; the speaker defines and refines what he means by "all the time." The repetition of "transports" suggests the continuous arrival of the death and transport trains in the stations. The speakers in *Holocaust* fight to express themselves through a language that the Nazis employ to deceive them and even to obliterate their very existence. Indeed, the flowers planted in the station and the falsified signs serve as implied metaphors for the Nazi attempt to hide the extermination of the Jews. Reznikoff's *Holocaust* challenges such attempts to obliterate or silence the testimonies of the witnesses, voices in danger of being forgotten as "individuals who personally survived the Shoah are dying out" (Gubar 1) and its events continue "to recede further from view" (5). One the surface, the poem seems to be a transcription of witness testimony into a long, free-verse poem detailing the horrific experiences in the concentration camps from a distanced, third-person perspective. But an analysis of the poem reveals that this initial assessment is too simplistic. The poem lapses into first-person perspective, conveys irony through repetition and word choice, and creates relationships through the use of sound effects and line breaks. The poem tests the limits of an objective approach to history; it ends up revealing the dangers of objectifying human beings, as the Nazis dehumanized the Jews; as the Nuremberg and Eichmann Trials turned private, individual experiences into objects to be consumed by viewers and readers; and as historical accounts transform people into collections of impersonal facts. *Holocaust* resolutely condemns an impersonal poetics of order and productivity by illustrating the dangers of ideologies based solely on order and efficiency. The ironic use of traditional forms and figures in

Rhythms and *Going* reveals Reznikoff's questioning of the value of those formal features to elegize the casualties of mechanized war and of industrialization. In Reznikoff's Objectivist poetics, the poet takes on the responsibility to find a form capable of bearing witness to events that many claim are unspeakable and unknowable. For Reznikoff, poetic form has a moral dimension. Indeed "in Reznikoff's poetry we see the combination of objectivist poetics with one of the most profound moral sensibilities of any twentieth-century poet" (Shevelow 291). It is this combination of ethics and form that make Reznikoff a particularly important figure in the development of modern and contemporary American poetry. In particular, *Holocaust* stands out as a formally experimental work of art that engages with the complex history and historicity of the Holocaust and fights against forgetting by memorializing the voices of the witnesses.

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