

Jacek Partyka, 2021.
Disarchiving Anguish: Charles Reznikoff and the
Modalities of Witnessing
(Berlin: Peter Lang)
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Jacek Partyka's monograph offers a long-overdue, comprehensive analysis of the work of Charles Reznikoff, a 20th-century American writer who has received very little critical and scholarly attention, especially during his lifetime. Partyka's book, which spans the six decades of Reznikoff's artistic activity, is a large step towards rectifying this state of affairs. Indeed, the monograph makes a very convincing case for Reznikoff's merit as a poet by revealing the textual and intellectual richness hidden behind the ostensible simplicity of his work.

Although he also wrote prose, Reznikoff is known mostly as a poet and primarily associated with a poetic movement of late Modernism known as Objectivism. This rather tenuous and short-lived alliance of several poets originated on the occasion of the publication, in February 1931, of an issue of *Poetry* entitled "'Objectivists' 1931" (Twitchell-Waas 2015). Apparently, Ezra Pound had persuaded the editor of the magazine to devote an entire issue to the work of a young poet whom Pound mentored, Louis Zukofsky, as well as some other innovative young poets whom Zukofsky thought were promising (Perloff 1995). Zukofsky was encouraged to present the selected poems as illustrative of a new trend, as this was likely to generate more interest in the issue and give it more impact. Zukofsky christened the group "Objectivists" and included in the issue not only a poem by Reznikoff, but also an essay that presented Reznikoff's work as central to the movement and as an illustration of the two main (if somewhat vague) principles of Objectivism: "objectivization" and "sincerity" (Zukofsky 1931). While the bulk of scholarly work on Reznikoff focuses on his contribution to this movement (see, e.g., Hatlen 1999), Partyka argues that the label of an Objectivist has actually limited the critical reception of Reznikoff's work to just this one aspect, and may have thus contributed to the relative lack of scholarly attention to his writing. Speculating about other reasons for Reznikoff's relative obscurity, Partyka mentions the deceptive

simplicity of his poetic style, as well as the fact that Reznikoff himself did not help his case by being entirely indifferent to the pursuit of recognition or commercial success. (Throughout his life, he insisted on self-publishing his works rather than conforming in any way to the tastes and commercial interests of potential publishers.)

The title of the monograph introduces terms that are of key importance to Partyka's analysis of Reznikoff's works. "Disarchiving" is a term coined by the author to refer to the complex process of using authentic materials as sources. This process, which encompasses the selection, modification and – potentially – manipulation or appropriation of the original materials, inevitably involves ethical issues. "Anguish" is a well-chosen term to capture the issue at the heart of Reznikoff's work: the documentation of suffering, social injustice, and deprivation. Whether he writes about the lives of first-generation Jewish immigrants in the USA, children working in textile factories, or victims of the Holocaust, his focus is always on the oppressed and the marginalized and their misery. "Witnessing" is an apt description of Reznikoff's main mode of writing about events from the past, which is based on providing matter-of-fact, concise accounts of facts, bare of any stylistic ornamentation and seemingly emotionless.

The first chapter introduces some concepts which are key to the understanding of Reznikoff's poetry: the Objectivists' loosely defined poetics, its connection to Imagism, the key notions of the archive, the witness and the author, as well as the concepts of experience and testimony. These terms are briefly discussed and defined; the author then moves on to examine the two main theoretical developments he sees as the most relevant to an analysis of Reznikoff's work. The first one is Marjorie Perloff's (2010) well-known study *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, in which she argues that some prominent modernist texts served as preparatory ground for the "unoriginality" of contemporary art. The chapter also contains an extensive discussion of another important source which shaped Partyka's analysis of Reznikoff's work, namely Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History."

The main premise of Partyka's study, consistently supported throughout the monograph, is that Reznikoff's work can be seen as alternating between various "modalities" of the act of being a witness. This premise also affects the book's structure, as Reznikoff's writings are presented in a chronological order, which enables the author to trace the development of the poet's unique

method of composition over time. Reznikoff's early New York poems, analysed in Chapter 2, present the poet as a *flâneur*, an observer of the city, and – to some extent – an outsider. Reznikoff was born in New York and lived there all his life, but as the son of Jews who had emigrated from Eastern Europe, he was brought up speaking Yiddish, his childhood was shaped by the experience of poverty and discrimination, and he retained a sense of ethnic and cultural otherness. Included in the same chapter is the analysis of *Family Chronicle*, an unusual text, co-written by the poet and his parents, which recounts the history of the family's settling in America. The author at this point provides abundant background information on Jewish immigration to America from Eastern Europe and the history of the textile industry in New York at the end of the 19th century, painting a compelling historical background. The detailed account of the family efforts to establish a millinery business allows the author of the monograph to point out the striking analogy between the production of textiles and the composition of poetry as instances of the creation of carefully manufactured artefacts. We are also introduced to a recurring and very important theme of Reznikoff's writing, namely legal systems. Reznikoff studied law; even though he abandoned the profession, he retained a fascination with the subject. As a young man, because of his family's legal struggles, he became acutely aware of the imperfections of the American legal system, which he had good reasons to consider biased and discriminatory, an issue that is explored in depth in the final parts of Chapter 2.

Reznikoff's lifelong obsession with law is manifest in his interest in legal documents and the archiving of legal cases, which gradually became a cornerstone of his literary experiments and led to the publication of the first version of an extensive project entitled *Testimony* (1934), which is the topic of the third chapter in the monograph (along with a posthumously published sequel, entitled *Testimony. The United States (1885-1915): Recitative*). For this project, Reznikoff developed an innovative method of composition based on the use of archival witness statements from criminal trials. He went through dozens of volumes from the archives of the National Reporter System and selected excerpts from testimonies, modified them stylistically, and fashioned them into his own text, which straddles the distinction between poetry and prose. Partyka emphasises the innovative character of this method: "the poetics of reported speech is by no means unprecedented; however, it is exceptional in its sheer radicalism. While, for instance, Pound in *The Cantos* incorporates historical documents, thus

blurring generic boundaries in his verse, Reznikoff goes further, to the extreme of turning ancillary texts into the exclusive discourse of the work" (p.135).

Partyka's incisive analysis of the way Reznikoff uses the various modes of witnessing, and of the control he exerts over the aesthetic aspects of the text, show how *Testimony* is carefully crafted despite an illusion of simplicity. Some consideration is also given to pertinent theoretical issues, such as the boundaries between giving literary testimony and appropriating someone else's voice or text, as well as the multi-layered character of testimony (the poet processes and modifies the testimonies of the eyewitnesses of real events, which had already been processed during the trial by a court clerk at the recording stage).

In *Holocaust*, written in verse and published in 1975, Reznikoff's unique method of composition, originally used in *Testimony*, arguably reached its full potential. This time, the poet turns to testimonies from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials for source material. The carefully selected excerpts are anonymised and narrated in the third person. The poems depict a series of events, often focussing on specific scenes, in a language that conveys only the bare facts, and makes no reference to emotion of any kind. In the face of unspeakable atrocities, the poems offer the directness of a witness statement as a replacement for any attempt at an authorial commentary. However, as Partyka argues in Chapter 4 of the monograph, there is much more to the text than at first meets the eye. He shows how the merit of *Holocaust* goes far beyond providing the reader with direct access to well-selected materials from primary sources, arguing that the striking effect of the poems is achieved through all kinds of careful authorial decisions concerning the arrangement of the material, the heterogeneity of particular narratives in terms of their length, and the amount of detail they present.

Partyka conducts a careful examination of the source materials – the actual testimonies – and compares them to Reznikoff's text. His analysis confirms Reznikoff's basic principle of fidelity to his sources, while revealing all kinds of minor adjustments and discussing their role in an incisive and thoughtful way. Showing the sophisticated ways in which Reznikoff ensures the high literary merit of *Holocaust* despite its ostensible lack of authorial intervention in the presentation of authentic materials, Partyka makes a convincing case for *Holocaust's* "exceptional position" in American literature.

The monograph closes with an informative chapter which provides an overview of works representing different types of art which bear similarity to Reznikoff's writing, as they are, in Perloff's terms, "unoriginal." This

overview includes works directly based on Reznikoff's texts, such as Divya Victor's *Hellocasts*. Even though selective and far from exhaustive, this chapter firmly asserts Reznikoff's major contribution to the recent trend in literature and visual arts of creating work based on authentic testimony.

In conclusion, Partyka's monograph makes a significant and original contribution to the existing body of research on Charles Reznikoff. The study represents rigorous scholarship and careful, attentive readings of the source text. Drawing on work from various disciplines, and touching upon a variety of pertinent theoretical issues, Partyka provides a comprehensive, holistic account of Reznikoff's evolution as a writer that is informative and insightful as well as engagingly written.

Works cited:

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