from

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Reznikoff's Nearness

1. Charles Reznikoff was born in Brooklyn in 1894. The date is interesting because Reznikoff is somewhat older than the poets of the “second wave” of radical modernism, with whom he is often associated. Zukofsky, for example, was born in 1904, Oppen in 1908, Bunting in 1900, Riding in 1901, Hughes in 1902, while Toomer was born in the same year as Reznikoff. Sterling Brown, with whom Reznikoff shared the great project of using the American historical record of injustice and social barbarism as a primary subject, was born seven years after him.

2. Reznikoff is a bridge figure between Williams, the poet he most resembles, and a decade older than he, and the poets born at the turn of the century, a decade after him. Like Williams, he came from a family in which English was not a native tongue. His parents (like my own grandparents) came from Russia, sometime after 1881; his paternal grandparents joined the family somewhat later.

His mother’s father, Ezekiel, never made it to the New World, having died before Reznikoff was born. Ezekiel, a cattle and wheat broker, had written Hebrew verse on his travels. Just after he died his wife destroyed all trace of his writings, fearing his manuscripts might contain material that would create trouble for the family if discovered by the Tzarist authorities. The destruction of his grandfather’s poetry is an emblematic story for Reznikoff and he comes back to it in two poems, the first opening By the Well of Living and Seeing:

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.¹


[97]
The poetic or psychic economy suggested here helps to explain Reznikoff's resolve to continue with his work in the face of intense waves of indifference, indeed his resolve to ensure that his own verse would not disappear entirely: "I would leave no writing of mine, / if I could help it, / to the mercy of those who loved me". Reznikoff's work echoes this subtext in a number of ways: the poems are an act of recovery—where recovery becomes a project of immense proportion far beyond this initial point of focus. A few times, the poems register the difficulty of this recovery in terms of the poet's loss, or exile from, Hebrew, a language he does not really know (Reznikoff's parents would have spoken Yiddish and increasingly English), but which seems part of his identity.

Reznikoff tells the tale of his parent's life in Russia and of their painfully difficult work in the New York rag trade in scrupulous and informative detail in two remarkable autobiographical works, "Early History of a Seamstress" and "Early History of Sewing Machine Operator", as well as in his own continuation of their story in "Needle Trade".

3. Reznikoff attended Boys' High School in Brooklyn and from 1910 to 1911 went to the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. During the following year, he worked as a salesman for his parents' millinery business. But in 1912, remembering that Heine (the reference may at first seem peculiar but begins to make sense) had gone to law school, he enrolled at NYU. Reznikoff graduated law school in 1916 and was admitted to the bar the same year.

4. Legal studies provided Reznikoff a sharp contrast to the poetics of metaphysical and Symbolic overtone, of fashionable literary conceits and static ornamentation. Indeed, legal argument provided an analogue for the poetic principles he did find interesting, such as the "brand new verse" of Pound and H.D., which he read in Poetry when he was 21 and studying law. It was at this time that he first formulated a poetics that emphasized

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3. These three works were brought together as *Family Chronicle*—a masterpiece of historical autobiography (a genre more commonly presented today as oral history). First published in England under this title by Norman Bailey & Co., it was published by Universe Books, New York, in 1971, with a perfunctory introduction by the Jewish chronicler and humorist Harry Golden.
“the pithy, the necessary, the clear, and plain” [17, 2:172], principles that, like most of his statements of poetics, stressed what he was breaking away from (the influence of Pound is unmistakable) more than the new poetic space he was inventing.

Remembering his years at law school, Reznikoff writes:

I found it delightful
to climb those green heights,
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:

... I had been bothered by a secret weariness
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.

... The brand new verse some Americans were beginning to write—
after the French “free verse” perhaps

... seemed to me, when I first read it,
right:
not cut to patterns, however cleverly,
nor poured into ready molds5

5. After a very brief attempt to start a law practice, Reznikoff returned to millinery sales, saying his “mind was free” as he waited for hours to see the buyers at Macy’s.

Reznikoff claims to have been very good at selling ladies’ hats, although his wife Marie Syrkin, in her marvelous memoir, demurs on this point.6

In 1918, Rhythms, Reznikoff’s first book, was privately printed and distributed—just one year after Pound’s first Cantos. Reznikoff kept in mind the fate of his grandfather’s poetry in choosing to arrange for the printing on his own. He also showed an independence from literary fashion and career that would mark his entire life.

Two years later, in 1920, Samuel Roth published his Poems in an edition of 250.

6. In 1927, Reznikoff bought his own press, setting the type and printing *Five Groups of Verse* in an edition of 375 copies, and later *Nine Plays* in an edition of 400 copies. During this time, he was able to stop working entirely, living on a very modest income of $25 per week from his parents.

7. Reznikoff seemed to accept the fact that there was, and would be, little interest in his poetry. But by the late 1920s he had met Zukofsky and George and Mary Oppen; they formed not a school but a small circle of support and mutual interest in each other's work—there was, for a while, a pool of light in a world of poetic darkness:

    against the darkness:
    a quadrangle of light

8. In 1927 and 1928, Ezra Pound had included in his magazine *The Exile* poems by Williams and Zukofsky, McAlmon and Rakosi, as well as Reznikoff. In '28, Pound wrote Zukofsky that he ought to bring together a group of younger poets. In February 1931, Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* published a special issue edited by Zukofsky that began with a short statement, "Program 'Objectivists' 1931" immediately followed by an essay entitled "Sincerity and Objectification with Special Reference to Charles Reznikoff". As compared to the far longer manuscript version, the published essay cut references to Reznikoff's neglect and to his plays, altogether eliminating about half the original citations to Reznikoff's work; this process of elimination was radically accelerated in the intervening years so that in Zukofsky's collected essays, *Prepositions* (1977), all references to Reznikoff are removed for the final, citationless, distillation of Zukofsky's thought, now titled simply "An Objective". Reznikoff was not alone in his obsession to cut and keep cutting.

    From 1931 to 1932, the Oppens published three books (Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky's *An "Objectivists" Anthology*) under the imprint, To Publishers, with Zukofsky as the press editor.

    In 1934, Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and the Oppens founded the Objectivist Press, with the advice of Williams and Pound. That first year they published Williams's *Collected Poems*, edited by Zukofsky with an introduction by Stevens, in an edition of 500 copies. Williams put up $250 of which $150 was refunded. Reznikoff was much surprised to find their first book

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reviewed by The New York Times, it sold better than expected. In 1934, the Objectivist Press also published Oppen's Discrete Series; after that, Oppen stopped writing for 20 years. Finally, in the same year, the press published the initial installment of Reznikoff's Testimony, with an introduction by Kenneth Burke, in an edition of 200 copies.

Three years later, in 1937, New Directions was founded, and began publishing Pound, Williams, and others.

9. Reznikoff met Marie Syrkin in 1929 and they were married the next year.¹¹

At around this time (Hindus says 1928, but Syrkin says 1930), Reznikoff's parents' businesses went bad and, like many other small businesses during the Depression, they went into debt. Not only had he lost his meager income, but also Reznikoff was now obliged to help out his family. Reluctantly, he took a job at Corpus Juris, a legal encyclopedia, as a copywriter. Eventually, he was fired from Corpus Juris. Syrkin recalls the editor telling him, "When I hire a carpenter I don't want a cabinetmaker."¹²

10. From 1938 to 1939 Reznikoff went to Hollywood for a $75-a-week job as a quite peripheral writer for a movie studio where an old friend worked. This period is described in his posthumously published novel, The Manner Music, a book that includes prose adaptations—less musical, less shapely—of at least nine of his late poems. The novel ends with the protagonist—an unrecognized, perhaps unrecognizable, artist—burning all of his work, again bringing to mind the destruction by fire of Reznikoff's grandfather's verse: "He tore up everything, everything he has ever written and burnt it. They found the heap of ashes next to him when they took him to the hospital."¹³

When Reznikoff returned to New York, he worked at a number of odd editorial and research jobs, including writing a history of the Jewish community of Charleston and editing the papers of Louis Marshall.

11. Between 1941 and 1959 Reznikoff did not publish any books, although he continued to work on his poems and his anti-epic, Testimony.

12. In 1948, Reznikoff received a letter from Williams: "A confession and

¹¹ Syrkin had first read Reznikoff in 1920, while a college student at Cornell. "My particular friend at Cornell was Laura Reichenthal, later Laura Riding, and I had already been exposed to strains of modernist verse. But the culture had not taken. My first reaction to Charles's verse was negative" (Syrkin, "Charles", p. 37). The Reznikoff-Riding connection, albeit oblique, is fascinating.

¹² Ibid., p. 45. See also Milton Hindus, "Introduction", in Man and Poet.

an acknowledgment! In all these years that I have owned a book of yours, nineteen years a book you gave me in 1929 I never so much opened it—except to look at it cursorily. And now, during an illness, I have read it and I am thrilled with it."14

13. In the 1950s, while Syrkin was teaching at Brandeis, Reznikoff became managing editor, at $100 a week, of Jewish Frontier, a labor Zionist monthly with which Syrkin was involved. "With no aptitude for journalism," Syrkin recalls, "he despised the facile generalizations of the craft and the superficial editorials . . . in response to a current crisis . . . I had to contain his natural inclination to reduce pages to paragraphs and paragraphs to sentences."

The printers, however, appreciated his incredible meticulousness. "That he was a 'poet,' a designation privately equated with schlemiel, explained any failure to fit into a familiar mold."15

14. When he turned 68, in 1962, New Direction published a selection of his poems, By the Waters of Manhattan, with an introduction by C. P. Snow, and subsequently published the first volume of Testimony. In 1968, however, the publisher turned down the second volume of Testimony and Reznikoff arranged to have it printed privately in an edition of 200.

15. In 1975, Black Sparrow published Holocaust, based, as Testimony, not on firsthand reports but exclusively on court records, here from the Nuremberg and the Eichmann trials.

16. In 1976, with the first volume of his Complete Poems in press from Black Sparrow, Charles Reznikoff died.

II

The Abbaye de Royaumont, not far from Paris, was a center of Christendom in the 13th century, when it was built. During the Revolution, it sustained heavy damages and the abbey has never been fully reconstructed. In recent years Royaumont has been used as a literary, music, and business conference center.

In the fall of 1989, Royaumont was site for a conference on the American "Objectivist" Poets, a group more prominent in the French map of American poetry than in many of our homemade maps. The library of Royaumont, with its 40-foot ceilings and walls lined with ancient books, was an extraordinary setting for an occasion honoring four relatively obscure American poets, whose parents had come from Europe from Jewish shtetels to settle into the New World. Even more extraordinary, the conference began at sunset on the Friday night upon which fell Rosh Hashonah, the Jewish New Year.

At the invitation of Emmanuel Hocquard, who has translated Reznikoff's The Man-

14. Quoted by Hindus in Man and Poet, pp. 31–32.
ner Music into French, Michael Palmer, Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian, David Bromige, and I had come from America to speak on one or another of the "Objectivists", while Carl Rakosi gave a reading and commented on many of the talks presented.

I had brought along a tape of Reznikoff reading in 1974 at the Poetry Center of San Francisco State, along with a transcript of the 46 poems, and fragments of poems, he had selected for that reading, which I had cut and pasted together, as he must have done in constructing this sequence, from almost every section and period of his poetry. The following remarks are based on that talk.

1. How does a poem, these poems, enter the world?

2.—Measured and scaled, particular and necessary: that would be one answer. Reznikoff's gives his own "platform as a writer of verse", as he wryly puts it in an introduction to the reading, given when was 80, at the Poetry Center of San Francisco State:

> Salmon and red wine and a cake fat with raisins and nuts: no diet for a writer of verse who must learn to fast and drink water by measure. 16

Reznikoff's selection, at the Poetry Center reading, of work from over 60 years of writing is a masterful weave—"mastermix"—creating not "the intricate medallions the Persians know" 17 but a discrete series of poetic encounters that marks his work from beginning to end, without end or beginning.

3. Rhythms, in 1918, marks the invention of literary cubo-serialism. By cubo-seriality, I mean to identify the more discreet development that characterizes Reznikoff's work from that point in 1918 on—the permutation of briefly etched, identifiable details that don't quite stand on their own and that are separated by a gap, or interval, that requires a full stop. The prefix suggests rhetorically consonant permutations of angles of view on related (or linked) subjects.

4. From his 1927 collection *Five Groups of Verse* (which included *Rhythms*), Reznikoff numbered each of his often quite tiny poems and ran them together on the page, rather than isolating each poem on its own page (as he had up to this point) or separating the poems in some other way. This very explicit, even intrusive, numbering expresses Reznikoff's radical commitment to the poetic sequence, or series, as details open to reordering.

16. *Inscriptions: 1944–1956*, #23 (excerpt), 2:76. This poem is also quoted below in section 8. In the Poetry Center reading, Reznikoff called this poem, and #21, discussed below, his "platform".

17. Ibid., #21 (excerpt), 2:75.
In Reznikoff, the process of composition is as much a matter of the shaping of sequences as of the creation of particular elements 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.

Reading Reznikoff formally means attending to the relation of the part to the whole (and the whole to the part) in his work, along lines that also suggest the relation of the shot to the sequence (in film and photography), surface to depth (in painting but also in rhetoric), the fragment to the total (in philosophy but also in Kabbalah).

To create the text of his 1974 reading, Reznikoff stitched together 46 individual bits and pieces. As with any work of disjunctive collage, each frame or unit recontextualizes the subsequent frame or unit. Reznikoff's "groups" (as he sometimes called them) are not governed by a principle external to the compositional process—his series are not ordered narratively, or chronologically, or historically; there is no necessarily logical or causal connection between the links of the chain. Rather, Reznikoff employs a variety of thematic and tonal shifts to create an overall "musical" arrangement, to use his own phrase for the process. What Reznikoff calls, right from the first book, "Rhythms":

"The ceaseless weaving of the uneven water."18

5. There is no poet more dedicated to foregrounding the detail and the particular than Reznikoff and no poet more averse to blending these details into a consuming or totalizing form. The numbers that obtrude into the visual field of almost every page of Reznikoff's verse represent both this commitment and aversion. This is not to deny that the individual sections add up to a larger form, but to affirm that the particularity and integrity of each detail is not diminished by the newly forming whole. While this structural allegory of polis echoes through the work of several of his contemporaries, notably Williams, Oppen, and Zukofsky, it is Reznikoff's tenacity combined with an uncanny lack of didacticism that especially characterizes his approach.

Reznikoff rejected the "depth" of field simulated by various realist and mimetic self-centering procedures in which each detail is subordinated to an overall image or theme or meaning. By constantly intercutting, or jump cutting, between and among and within material, the poem's surface of

local particularities gains primacy, in contrast to the rhetorical depth of narrative closure that is aimed for in such "epic" montage formats as *The Waste Land* and certain of the *Cantos* (not to mention more conventional poetry). Reznikoff's network of stoppages is anti-epic. It enacts an economy of perambulation and coincidence, of loss rather than accumulation (a general rather than a restricted economy in Bataille's terms).

Scrap of paper
blown about the street,
you would like to be cherished, I suppose,
like a bank-note.¹⁹

Pound's disinterest in Reznikoff is foundational.

6. Parataxis is a manner of transition. Elements are threaded together like links on a chain, periodically rather than hierarchically ordered and without the subordination of part to whole. The *OED* defines parataxis as "the placing of propositions or clauses one after another, without indicating by connecting words the relation (of coordination or subordination) between them."

Parataxis is a grammatical state of adjacency, of being next to or side by side. Besideness. As the mind lies next to its object, or one finds oneself a neighbor in conversation, or in reflection one thought follows the next. A nonlinear network of interconnections.

7. As a term of art, adjacency is distinguished from adjoining or abutting, as land that is adjacent to a common square, but nowhere touches.

Reznikoff's is an art of adjacency, each frame carefully articulated and set beside the next.

8. Reznikoff's cubo-seriality is modular and multidirectional, marking a series of sites available to rearrangement in ever new constellations of occurrence. (Reznikoff's own refiguring of his lifework at the 1974 Poetry Center reading is a model for this potential for reconfiguration.) Resembling the long walks through the city he took every morning, Reznikoff's poems move from site to site without destination, each site inscribing an inhabitation, every dwelling temporary—contingent but sufficient.

Those of us without house and ground
who leave tomorrow
must keep our baggage light:
a psalm, perhaps a dialogue . . . ²⁰

¹⁹. *Inscriptions*, #24, 2.76.
²⁰. Ibid., #23. The final stanza of this three-stanza poem is quoted immediately below.
—so Reznikoff continues his "platform". "Without house and ground" hints of the wandering of exile and the absence of foundations, but this nomadic poetry refuses exile in its insistence that grounds are only and always where one sleeps, a view suggested by the poem's epigraph from the 
Mishnah (Aboth 6:4): "and on the ground shalt thou sleep and thou shalt live a life of trouble". Exile suggests expulsion from a native land, but in Reznikoff's verse the native is what lies at one's feet, ground for walking on: so no loss of prior foundations, no absent center, as in Edmond Jabès, but "finding as founding" to use Stanley Cavell's Emersonian phrase from This New yet Unapproachable America.

Perhaps there are those who possess house and land, who can afford to live higher off the ground, imagining possession as a prophylactic for loss. Damage is given, not chosen. The nomad, neither uprooted or uprooting, roots around, reroutes. Reznikoff's new world is not one of absence, but neither is it one of plenty.

Like a tree in December
after the winds have stripped it
leaving only trunk and limbs
to ride and outlast
the winter's blast.

The "writer of verse", like the nomad, "must learn to fast / and drink water by measure". Reznikoff's baggage is, literally, the light that emanates from conversation and song (dialogue and psalm), exactly the measures of his verse. This is a poetry not of dislocation or banishment but of the "blind- ing" intensities of location as relocation, relocalization.

9. A typology of Reznikoff's parataxis would begin by distinguishing his non-developmental seriality from sequential seriality, to use Joseph Conte's terms in Unending Design, a distinction that is in some ways similar to that between analytic and synthetic cubism.

Certainly, the modulation of disjunctiveness between poems in a Reznikoff "group of verse" is one of the poetry's most distinctive features. As Burton Hatlen has argued, reading Reznikoff means reading each of his groups as a series, not as autonomous poems. Such readings will need to take account of the fact that Reznikoff reordered the sequences of his groups in ways that underscore the modular, permutable, status of each discrete poem.

Reznikoff's groups are composed by varying the degree of continuity

and discontinuity among the sections. The most typical relation between sections is one of simultaneity of occurrences, as if each poem were preceded by an implied "meanwhile". However, some of the modules of a series do share thematic interconnections, with subject clusters connected by family resemblances, commonly involving a permutation of tangentially related motifs, with shifts among themes varying from slight to abrupt. Reznikoff's "Similes" (#45, 2:103) demonstrates this principle within a single poem, presenting four images each of which seem teasingly related to the others but which share no single stateable topic. Sometimes small thematic clusters are placed within larger nonthematic series. These may be given an overtittle—a sequence within a series—as "Winter Holidays" or "Early History of a Writer", or the cluster may simply share the same subject, as the motifs of the subway, birds, rain, and the moon identified by Hatlen in his reading of Jerusalem the Golden. Moreover, some of Reznikoff's works are framed by a single theme or subject, such as the biblical studies of "Editing and Glosses" in By the Waters of Manhattan: An Annual (1929), or, most prominently, his books, Testimony and Holocaust, which, while thematically linked, are nonetheless serial rather than sequential.

10. Seriality encompasses a vast array of modernist and contemporary poetry, much of it better known for its nonsequentiality than Reznikoff's verse. The usefulness of the term depends on the degree to which the different types of serialism are distinguished. The early modernist history of seriality could easily start with Stein's Tender Buttons (1912), the most original rethinking of poetic form in the period. One might also think of the serial ordering of long individual poems in Pound's Cantos or Zukofsky's "A". Conte identifies Williams's Spring and All (1923) as the prototype for serial form, noting the 27 numbered, untitled poems that are interpreted with prose improvisations. But consider also Jean Toomer's Cane (1923), with its interspersing of loosely associated poems and prose.

22. What makes the poems disjunctive is that they are not, in fact, threaded together by the use of such—in effect—conjunctions as "meanwhile" and "at the same time", which smooth over the synaptic break between units, and do not allow for the syncopation of cubo-seriality. The use of such hinges as "meanwhile" is particularly favored by John Ashbery, a device that apparently makes the marvelous incongruities of his work appealing to some readers who dislike the more textually disruptive practices described here. Note also that biblical and Homeric parataxis employs frequent conjunctions to link elements, a feature that distinguishes this older form of parataxis from modernist collage and montage. A fuller discussion of this issue would need to account for the structurally related use of parallelism in analphabetic poetries.

23. Joseph M. Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 20. Conte defines the form of the serial poem as "both discontinuous and capable of recombination." He notes that the discontinuity of the elements of the serial poem—or their resistance to a determinate order—distinguishes the series from thematic continuity, nar-
A pre-(modern) history of the serial poem would have much to account for, including, famously, Buchner's Woyzeck, but equally Dickinson's fascicles—the most radical serial poems of 19th-century America. (I return again to Dickinson's lines "This world is not conclusion. / A sequel stands beyond / Invisible as Music— / But positive, as Sound—", where sequel is a possible variant for Species. In Emily Dickinson's Open Folios, Marta Werner makes a convincing case that what we now know as Dickinson's letters or prose, are, to a surprisingly large extent, better classified as serial fragments. The relation of fragments to seriality leads to a further deepening of both categories, Hölderlin's late fragments would be particularly relevant to consider in this regard.

During the period following the Second World War, the most influential conception of the serial poem came from Jack Spicer, who contrasted the "one night stand" of the individual poems to a composition by book in which the order of the poems, like each individual poem, is determined by "dictation". Both Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser were comrades with Spicer in this project.

Zukofsky's great cut-up collage, "Poem Beginning 'The'"—composed of 330 numbered lines, prefaced by a list of several dozen sources for the work—was written in 1926. As in much of Zukofsky's poetry, the poem's lines flow from one to next, working in counterpoint to the disjunctive nature of the sources and the numerical framing. The process of running-in such disparate material by the use of intricate syntactic, syllabic, and thematic patterning, which characterizes much of Zukofsky's "A", is a formal practice quite distinct from Reznikoff's cubo-seriality. Many of Zukofsky's shorter poems are, like Reznikoff's, presented in numbered sequences. But unlike Reznikoff's splinters, Zukofsky's individual poems in All are longer and stand up by themselves as autonomous works. Zukofsky's short poetry, less dependent on the series, makes less of it.

ative progression, or meditative insistence that often characterizes the sequence . . . The series demands neither summation nor exclusion. It is instead a combinative form whose arrangements admit a variegated set of materials." In contrast, the sequence relies on "mechanic or imposed organization", for example the temporal progression of the seasons (p. 21).


26. In *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Peter Quartermain links the paratactic prosody of Zukofsky with Bunting and Pound and back to Whitman. See especially pp. 127–33. Conte makes the distinction between seriality and proceduralism: "Serial works are characterized by the discontinuity of their elements and the centrifugal force identified with an 'open' aesthetic. Procedural works, on the other hand, are typified by the recurrence of elements and a centripetal force that promises a self-sustaining momentum" (p. 42).
More directly akin to Reznikoff's cubo-seriality is George Oppen's *Discrete Series* (1932–34); the work of Lorine Niedecker, whose discrete seriality is explicitly shown only in the most comprehensive (though flawed) collection of her work, *From This Condensary*, edited by Robert Bertholf; the "Love Songs" (1915–17) of Mina Loy; and Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951).

More recent work that continues a poetics of adjacency, in which elements are discrete, incomplete, and recombinatory, would include—among *many* others—George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous", Robert Creeley's *Words, Pieces* and "In London"; Ron Silliman's "new", e.g., permutable, sentences; Lyn Hejinian's *The Cell*, Ted Pearson's *Evidence*, Tom Raworth's *A Serial Biography*, Ted Berrigan's "Tambourine Life", and John Ashbery's "Europe".

One criterion that usefully differentiates paratactic forms is the degree to which the parts are mobile or recombinable. On one end of the spectrum there is nonserial parataxis, bound to narrative or chronology, such as in the Homeric epics and the Bible. (There is another way of reading the Torah that suggests its nonsequential undertow: the Kabbalistic practice of gematria, as developed by Abraham Abulafia in the 13th century, which involves the recombination of numerically equivalent words and in some ways resembles anagrammatic and aleatoric methods of recombination.)

A second category, in which the arrangement of the elements is intrinsic to the meaning, covers most serial poems. Further recombination is, by definition, possible without compromising the prosodic structure of the work; nonetheless the meaning of the series is dependent, to a greater or lesser extent, on the particular array or temporal ordering that has been made or the procedure that has been used. By temporal ordering, I mean works that foreground the process of composition (elements are ordered as they were written); by array—nontemporal and nonsystematic configurations of modular elements; by procedure—external or explicit principles of design used to order elements of a series.

A third category consists of modular poems that have not yet been serialized: poems in which the arrangement of elements is extrinsic. In the strictest sense, few works fit into this category since the format of books binds an order onto even the most discontinuous set of leaves. In a broader sense, there are a number of serial works that are not intended to be read only or principally in the order in which they are printed. (Serial *reading* opens all works to recombination. My favorite image of readerly seriality is David Bowie, in Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, watching a bank of TVs all of which were rotating their channels.) Robert Grenier's *Sentences*—500 discrete articulations each on a separate index card and
housed in a blue Chinese box—is the best example I know of extrinsic seriality, though two other boxes of cards also come to mind: Jerome Rothenberg and Harris Lenowitz's *Gematria* 27 (27 recombinable numeric word equivalences) and Thomas McEvilley's cubo-serial 4 (44 four-line poems). In principle, hypertext is an ideal format for this mode of composition since it allows a completely nonlinear movement from link to link: no path need be specified and each reading of the data base creates an alternative series. What's remarkable is that this structure is already a potential in Reznikoff's first book in 1918.27

I have in mind two other criteria for differentiating serial poems (though what good all this classification will do I can't say; not likely much): the degree of congruity or incongruity among elements of the series (this might be called coefficient of weirdness, with cubo-seriality, for example, having a low coefficient) and the extent of found or pre-existing material used in the poem.

11. In Reznikoff's cubo-seriality, it's a matter of the cut: as in the cut of a dress or of a fabric. Also a double cutting: the shapeliness of the lines as units inside each poem (the cut of each poem, Reznikoff as miniaturist), and the rhythm between the poems (the intercutting). The numbered poem as unit, but also the line as unit: isolating/emphasizing discrete words or word pairs, half-puns and off rhymes and echoes and repetitions; modulating—pushing against—too easy a rhythm, too quick a reading:

> Her work was to count linings—
> the day's seconds in dozens.28

12. 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, artless,

27. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and *Zettel* exemplify the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic order. *Zettel* is made up of over 700 slips found together in a file box. These slips were mostly cut from extensive typescripts of Wittgenstein's and many of the fragments were subsequently reworked. In addition, it appears that some of the remarks were written originally as part of this series. The editors remark that "now we know that his method of composition was in part to make an arrangement of such short, almost independent, pieces". For our investigation here, it is striking that some of the sections of *Zettel* were cut out of "one or two total rearrangements of Investigations and other material"; the fact that Wittgenstein made such recombinations underscores the serial nature of his major philosophical work. See the "Editor's Preface" of *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). —Serial forms are particularly valuable for both philosophy and criticism, despite the fact that they are almost never employed.

and unassuming; or as being without rhetorical affect or "modernist discontinuity". Indeed, the early negative reviews of Reznikoff's works reveal a difficulty with his poetry that suggests his radical approach better than many of the more positive subsequent assessments: "a fragmentary style that annoys and bewilders", "cumulative effect . . . is promising shavings"; "He is unable to focus . . . apparent incoherence" (Malcolm Cowley); "half-baked, [showing] a lack of development".  

13. Subject matter is literally beside the point of this formal innovation, which would be possible with different subject matter and even without explicit subject matter (as in Stein). As Reznikoff notes, "Half the meaning [of poetry] is the music." Milton Hindus, apparently reporting on a conversation with Reznikoff, remarks: "Literature was capable of making something out of nothing (indeed, it was Flaubert's dream to write a work about 'nothing at all'); it was capable of making interesting (by the quality of its style, by its emphasis, by the purity and freshness of its language, by the depth of its feeling or thought) the most commonplace and the least exciting or unusual occurrences . . . " The comparison between Reznikoff and Flaubert seems particularly apt on the question of style; it's incredible that the exquisite stylizations of Reznikoff's poems have been lost in the tendency to call him, virtually, styleless.  

14. Reznikoff does speak of poetry as the communication of feeling—but he is explicit that this feeling, in an "objective" poem, is not expressed as the direct personal statement of the author. Reznikoff's manner, or method, as he calls it: the feeling comes indirectly as a result of the selection of objects and the "music" that composes the object. It is a matter of the cut and the cutting.  

29. Linda Simon provides these quotes in a useful synopsis of the responses to Reznikoff in her "Annotated Bibliography of Works about Charles Reznikoff", in Man and Poet, pp. 411-40. Milton Hindus's laudatory review of Family Chronicles is representative of the "giving up the baby with bathwater" or "weak" response to Reznikoff's detractors, even though Hindus is not here talking about the poems (Man and Poet, p. 426): The work is difficult, Hindus argues, not because of the presence of avant-garde defamiliarizing devices "but because of its seemingly absolute and artless and primitive simplicity . . . He studiously and purposefully flattens . . . every incident . . . Reznikoff consistently subdues all the highlights in his pictures and produces a monochromatic effect which demands the utmost effort and attention from the reader." One wants to immediately add here what Jerome Rothenberg wrote of tribal primitivism: primitive means complex. Still, it's the picture of Reznikoff as "artless and unassuming", as Carl Rakosi describes him (Man and Poet, p. 429), that underplays how very artful and assuming this work is.  


31. Man and Poet, p. 22.  

32. "First, There Is the Need", p. 2.
15. Jewish forms (not just themes): the idea of Jewish holiness (blessedness): in the detail, the everyday: every activity, every moment, holy: "How brilliant a green the grass is, / how blinding white the snow."33

In Jewish thought, the holiness of the ordinary can be traced to the 18th-century founder of Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov, as well as further back to earlier Jewish mystics.34 In orthodox Judaism, as in other orthodox religions, the holy is external; graspable, if at all, only through law and ritual; it is an "object of dogmatic knowledge" as Gershom Scholem puts it (10). In Jewish mysticism, holiness is present in everyday—"low"—activities and not separated out to particular sites, such as the synagogue, or to particular times, such as the High Holy Days.—Just as we might say, following Reznikoff (or Duchamp), that the aesthetic is not confined to the "beauty" of traditional forms, but is fully present in the quotidian. Kabballism is anti-dualistic, seeking to break down the distinction between God in Itself (God on high, set apart) and God in its appearance, in its immanence (in the low, a part). There is no separation: for holiness is found in the most common deeds and language, the most base and vulgar acts: the holiness of walking, the holiness of drinking, the holiness of sitting, the holiness of talking, the holiness of looking, the holiness of touching, the holiness of witness:

Not because of victories
I sing
having none,
but for the common sunshine,
the breeze,
the largess of the spring . . .
not for a seat upon the dais
but at the common table.35

Allen Ginsberg's litany of "holy"s in "Footnote to Howl" invokes the holiness of the common—"The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy! / Everything is holy! everybody's holy!

33. Inscriptions, #21 (excerpt), 2:75. As previously noted, Reznikoff calls this poem, and #23, his "platform as a writer of verse"; #21 is also cited in sections 2 and 29.
34. Gershom Scholem, in Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), notes that "the doctrine of God's immanence in all things" has earlier roots "among the great Jewish mystics and Kabballists. To me, not the doctrine seems new, but rather the primitive enthusiasm with which it was expounded and the truly pantheistic exhilaration evoked by the belief that God surrounds everything and pervades everything" (pp. 347-48). Subsequently referred to in the text.
35. "Te Deum" (excerpt), in Inscriptions, #22, 2:75.
everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity . . . The bum's as holy as the seraphim!"; indeed, I would suggest that Ginsberg's poetics derive equally from Blake, Whitman, and Reznikoff—an interesting trio (even if this extravagance conflates Williams with Reznikoff).

16. Gershom Scholem points out that a positive attitude toward language distinguishes Kabbalism from other mystical traditions:

Kabbalists who differ in almost everything else are at one in regarding language as something more precious than an inadequate instrument for contact between human beings. To them, Hebrew, the holy tongue, is not simply a means of expressing certain thoughts, born out of a certain convention and having a purely conventional character . . . Language in its purest form, that is, Hebrew . . . reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world . . . Man’s common language . . . reflects the creative language of God. (17)

17. It comes to this question: what is the status of the detail, the particular in this work? Why is it so important? For Reznikoff, as for Williams, the detail is not a “luminous particular” in Pound’s sense—not extraordinary but exactly ordinary, even if indeed luminous. So, then, why this particular detail, and then that one?

Metonymy: the fragment as substitute for, hinting at, something else, something that only it can stand for, is an instance of—a manifestation or emanation. The part for the (w)holy.

Witness of the detail understood as metonymic.

Scholem, again, is a useful guide. Kabbalism rejects the allegorical for the symbolic, where allegory—“the representation of an expressible something by another expressible something”—is akin to the literary conceits and Symbolism that Reznikoff rejected. In contrast, “the mystical symbol is an expressible sensation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression . . . Every living thing is endlessly correlated with the whole of creation . . . everything mirrors everything else” (27).

Reznikoff, a secular poet refreshed by ”the clear waters of reason”, committed “to use words for their daylight meaning” is no mystic, if mysticism is understood as elevating his work above “the common table”, as he puts it in a poem entitled “Te Deum”. Reznikoff is not a poet of the ecstatic, directed to the beyond, but a poet of the near, the close at hand: of a returning to oneself as to the world.

18. Fragment as shard—of a broken or cracked totality that cannot be rep-

resented in its totality (the taboo against graven images) but only as splinters (of light), details. ... but the cracked glass held in the frame.”

19. The ordinary, the everyday, the common, the neglected, the disregarded/unacknowledged as the site of Paradise (there is no other—only recover): Arts de faire, the art of doing, as in, The Practice of Everyday Life.

As I was wondering with my unhappy thoughts,
I looked and saw
that I had come into a sunny place
familiar and yet strange.

“Where am I?” I asked a stranger. “Paradise.”
“Can this be Paradise?” I asked surprised,
for there were motor-cars and factories.

“It is,” he answered. “This is the sun that shone on Adam once;
the very wind that blew upon him too.”

Looked and saw: it is this twofold action that the poems constantly replay; looking is never enough, for it shows only what can be seen by using light; in contrast, the world may be beheld, beheld—held, cradled, rocked. The very wind.

20. First-generation immigrant to America not as exile (as it was for Jabès coming to France: Europe already “inhabited”) but as founder—one who finds/inhabits and one who makes new a language (a new world). It is Reznikoff’s mother who says, “We are a lost generation ... It is for our children to do what they can.” For Reznikoff, finding as founding means finding as foundering (to fall to the ground, to come to grief).

21. The recovery of the ordinary: then was it lost?

22. Not flatness or absence of rhetoric but ... a nearness to the world not seen as “nature” but as social (urban). Materials of the world at hand, as found: words as materials.

Not, that is, reports of things seen (narrow definition of the “objectivist” as ocular or transparent imagism) but bearing witness to things not seen, overlooked. Entering into the word as a descent, not (Idealized) ascent, to borrow Simone Weil’s terms.

38. Inscriptions, #20, 2:75. This is the sense of paradise I hear in Ron Silliman’s Paradise and Lyn Hejinian’s The Guard.
39. These are the last words in Sarah Reznikoff’s “Early History of a Seamstress”, in Family Chronicle, p. 99.
23.

Hanukkah

In a world where each man must be of use
and each thing useful, the rebellious Jews
light not one light but eight—
not to see by but to look at. 40

Delight. Finding the light in. "Not to see by but to look at" in multiple, serial array. Not sight but display. A Festival of lights.

24. "In Testimony," Reznikoff tells an interviewer, "the speakers whose words I use are all giving testimony about what they actually lived through. The testimony is that of a witness in court—not a statement of what he felt but of what he heard or saw." 41 In "First, There Is the Need", Reznikoff writes:

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 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 man crossed... The conclusions of fact are for the jury and let us add, in our case, for the reader. (8)

Philosophically, however, description is always an epistemological question: the act of describing constitutes what is described; this act is never neutral. Witnessing is less a matter of "sight" than of action, not static but dynamic. In Reznikoff, witnessing opposes the predawn, preprocessed conclusion: it unfolds.

25. Witness versus distance versus assimilation versus exile.

26. Nearness as attitude of address: not isolated, deanimated "images" of distantiated ocular evidence. The intimacy of address, the fondling/comment/intrusion into the "material" is a nearing toward a dwelling, making an habitation:

Rails in the subway,  
what did you know of happiness,  
when you were ore in the earth;  
now the electric lights shine upon you.\textsuperscript{42}

In the Dembo interview (110), Reznikoff reports that a Japanese listener had questioned the last line of one of his poems, presumably because it violated the ideal of Haiku—a violation that is just the point of his practice of comment on, or interference into, the scene:

What are you doing in our street among the automobiles,  
horse?  
How are your cousins, the centaur and the unicorn?\textsuperscript{43}

Just as the absence of the first-person pronoun in this poem marks its break from traditional expressive poetry, so the use of the second-person pronoun marks its break from an ocular imagism.

27. The poetics of adjacency are aversive of the detachment and irony associated with the “high” modernism of Eliot, or, more accurately, the tradition of Eliot. Are you apart from the language or a part of it?—What we do is to take back language from symbolical allusions and metaphysical contraptions. Yet this swings back to the question of exile, as Reznikoff laments his exile from Hebrew in his most Jabèsian moment:

How difficult for me is Hebrew:  
even the Hebrew for \textit{mother}, for \textit{bread}, for \textit{sun}  
is foreign. How far have I been exiled, Zion.\textsuperscript{44}

To be exiled from one’s language is to be lost as a son or daughter, to be a foreigner in one’s own tongue, as Jabès says the writer, as Jew, is exiled even in her own language. Since the Jewish tradition imparts to the word a fundamental spiritual nature, this exile from a language that one has never learned suggests the deepest sense of spiritual disconnectedness. Yet the poem also touches on the idea, fundamental to anti-semitism, that all Jews, even monolingual native speakers of English or German or French, have a “hidden language” to which they owe fundamental allegiance—a belief that, if internalized by the Jew, incites self-hatred, as Sander Gilman discusses in \textit{Jewish Self-Hatred}.

Like many of his contemporaries, Reznikoff was a second-language speaker of English and it was no doubt his newness to English that con-

\textsuperscript{42} Jerusalem the Golden (1934), \#17, 1:111.  
\textsuperscript{43} Jerusalem the Golden, \#39, 1:115.  
\textsuperscript{44} Five Groups of Verse (1927), \#14, 1:72.
tributed to the newness of his approach to founding an American poetry broken off from Island English, forged by syntax and music previously unheard in the language. Reznikoff's poetics of location as relocalization is not a poetry of exile. Yet loss rips through this poetry, like hot water spurting from a frozen geyser.

The Hebrew of your poets, Zion,
is like oil 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.45

28. The social engagement of the Jewish secular left meant not assuming the "social" as an abstract, static entity but as something to be located, particularized.

In the poetics of nearness, others exist prior to oneself; you do not look out onto other people as if through a preexisting subjectivity, but find whomever you may be as person, as poet, in relation to them, by virtue of your acknowledgment of their suffering, which is to say their circumstance or bearing in the world. This is the ethical grounding of Reznikoff's work.

29. Vividness not as design but texture:

I have neither the time nor the weaving skills, perhaps,
for the intricate medallions the Persians know;
my rugs are the barbaric fire-worshipper's:
how blue the waters flow,
how red the fiery sun,
how brilliant a green the grass is,
how blinding white the snow.46

30. Witness as care / in-volved / as care-taken, caretaker, care in the language, for the world. Language is caretaker of the world.

45. Jerusalem the Golden, #1, 1:107. In the Dembo interview, Reznikoff responds to a question about "a personal sense of isolation or exile" in this poem: "I don't think 'isolation' is the word. I don't feel isolated in English it's just that I'm missing a lot not knowing Hebrew. Incidentally, Havelock Ellis, in one of his books, as I remember it, points out the tendency in a writer to use characteristics of the speech of his ancestors, even a speech he no longer knows" (p. 104).

46. Inscriptions, #21, 2:75. Reznikoff's "platform".
31. Witness/testimony as "self-cancellation" so that the language/event speaks of/for itself (modernist autonomy), as Reznikoff remarks in "First, There Is the Need", quoting an article on Zen that discusses the "forgetfulness of self" (3). Compare Testimony: The structure of event: constellation of particulars: picture is produced by this method, not presumed.47

32. Nearness/unfolding of event breaks down the subject-object split. Subject/object, observer/observed, the paranoia of the objective depersonalized gaze, "apart and alone, / beside an open window / and behind a closed door."48

Here these dualities collapse onto one another, the distanciation/irony is collapsed, the observer enters into the observed through a process of participatory mourning: "The room is growing dark, / but the brass knob of the closed door shines— / ready for use."49

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.50

33. "The infinite shines through the finite and makes it more real" (Scholem, 28). Dickinson's "finite infinity":

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself—
Finite Infinity.51

47. In "On Reznikoff and 'Talking Hebrew'" (Sagetrieb 7, no. 2 [1988]), John Martone writes that "central to Reznikoff's objectivism is the poet's subordination of the self to the material at hand. The poetic subject and not the poet as subject is the center of the work. The sincerity, Zukofsky said about Reznikoff's work, is in the details. And all Reznikoff's books . . . direct our attention not so much to an experiencing authorial self as to a detailed, profoundly historical world of experience. Reznikoff is the first American poet to 'decenter' the subject on so massive a scale . . . Revolutionary in the context of American poetry, [this decentering] is a basic feature of the Talmud and a given in traditional Jewish hermeneutics" (p. 72).


50. #XXIV, immediately following the adjacent poem, italics added.

51. The Poems of Emily Dickinson, #1695, 3:1149.
34. It's a question of the poem's attitude toward its materials: condescension, sentimentality, impersonality, identification, misidentification, detachment, erasure, appropriation, approbation, condescension, deafness, blindness, scorn, ecstasy, depression, anxiety, hypocrisy, reflection, management, control, possession, flirtatious, annihilating.

35. Serial composition, one detail adjacent to the next, one perspective permuted with another, refuses the binary. Oppen:

There are things
We live among 'and to see them
Is to know ourselves'.

Occurrence, a part
Of an infinite series

36. My aim not to explain the poems but to make them more opaque.

37. The sensation of not understanding, comprehending (say in Zukofsky or Stein): poems charged with the intractability, the ineffability, of the world.

I like this secret walking
in the fog;
unseen, unheard,
among the bushes
thick with drops;
the solid path invisible
a rod away---
and only the narrow present is alive.

Reznikoff's very extreme attitude toward elision and condensation has the supplemental effect of producing density in exact proportion to its desire for clarity. This is not the clarity of conventional poetic or expository discourse because its poetic space has been transformed into a gravitational field in which every word matters in the sense of having matter, musical or notional weight.

In "Early History of a Writer", Reznikoff recounts how a friend had applied Kittredge's method of microanalysis to some of his early poems:

he read my verse as I had never read verse before,
scrutinizing it, phrase by phrase
and word by word, thought and image, thought and sound . . .


Reznikoff immediately realizes that this method was similar to what he had at law school—

prying sentences open to look for 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 and listen, as well, for the tones and overtones, leaving only the pithy, the necessary, the clear and plain.54

Reznikoff asks that we pry his words open, listening for the tones and overtones—a way of reading that intensifies the conflict between “the clear and plain” and “the necessary”, between the accessible and the ineffable: for when words are weighed and measured for their undertones as well as their piths, the empty shells that fall away, like scales falling from “unseeing eyes,” leave only the “narrow present” of the fog.

38. “A poet’s words can pierce us. And that is of course causally connected with the use that they have in our life. And it is also connected with the way in which, conformably to this use, we let our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings of the words.”55

39. William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein are the paradigmatic modernist poets of the ordinary. Just as Williams found the poetic in the back-lot “cinders // in which shine // the broken // pieces of a green / bottle”, so Stein found the poetic in the materials of the poem, “actual word stuff, not thoughts for thoughts”, to use Williams’s formulation.56

For Reznikoff, a poetry of the everyday is a poetry of the city. As he remarks in his introduction to the Poetry Center reading, his pervasive urbanism marks a decisive break with the nature poetry of the verse tradition. Moreover, Reznikoff’s is a poetry of the found, a disposition appar-

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54. “Early History of a Writer”, #17, 2: 172. Reznikoff mentions this anecdote, identifying Kittredge’s Shakespeare course at Harvard, which is not mentioned in the poem, in the Dembo interview, Man and Poet, p. 103.
55. Wittgenstein, Zettel, #155, p. 28c.
56. “Between Walls”, in The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), p. 453: what shines in this poem is “the broken”: that which is damaged or destroyed & that which has been cast aside, but, at the same time, the fragment, the shard of ineffable worth. “Actual Word Stuff, Not Thoughts for Thoughts” is the title of Quartermain’s essay on Williams and Zukofsky in Disjunctive Poetics, the quote is from a 1928 letter from Williams to Zukofsky. —One might imagine Stein’s project as a radical extension of seriality to the level of syntax, so that not only sentences or phrases or details, but also individual words, are permuted.
ent in the found details of the everyday that people his poems, but never more evident that in the found material of Testimony, Reznikoff’s testament to the foundering of America and to the possibility of its founding in fondling, call it care in, the everyday.

40. I’ve been told that Reznikoff disliked obscurity and would certainly not have wanted his work to be characterized as obscure. Yet Reznikoff, from the beginning, seemed to expect that obscurity was the likely outcome for his poetic work and seemed to accept that with remarkable equanimity. Perhaps he understood the nature, the social structure, of obscurity better than his contemporaries. Neglect, disregard — the socially obscure, the forgotten and repressed, the overlooked — this was his subject.

Hiding in plain sight you may never be found: if sight is not to “see by but to look at”, not to use but behold.

41. Reznikoff’s investigations have something of the sublimity that Wittgenstein assigns to logic, but which might be assigned equally to poetry:

... it is rather of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it ... as if by this end we had to hunt down new facts ... We want to understand something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand ...

Something we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something we need to remind ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason is it difficult to remind oneself.)

Reznikoff’s poetry reminds of very general facts that we already knew — are in plain view — but which we have difficulty accounting for. Above all, we have difficulty accounting for the fact that the poetry is difficult, because it doesn’t seem, at first, to be difficult at all, but patent; as if the difficulty of such patency isn’t the first thing we might wish to deny (repress).

42. Reznikoff in an interview ten days before his death:

Whatever the difficulties, your business is to write what you think you should. You owe that much to yourself and to other humans, too.

43. The perspective here is extreme only if it’s extreme to read a poem’s forms as an inextricable part of its content. Nor does it stretch the point to insist, against all odds, that Reznikoff’s formal innovations are essential

for understanding what his work is "about" and that to neglect these features is to repress what he has labored to say.

I've often heard Reznikoff damned with the faint praise of his accessibility, as if he is a kind of Jewish, urban Frost, or the Norman Rockwell of poetry—aschcan snapshots of city life. Ironically, it's this very surface of accessibility that has tended to dissipate interest in his work. In the absence of recognition of the formal and phenomenological intensities, even opacities, of this work, it can seem as his detractors charge—without literary interest, pointless. If Reznikoff is accessible, it is an accessibility so fragile as to make him, for many readers, more difficult to read seriously and thoroughly than his apparently less accessible, but more often accessed, contemporaries. The history of Reznikoff's reception suggests that his work could not, except for a few initiates, be understood in its own time, or if it was understood, beyond his few serious readers, it was understood in such a way as to allow it to be discounted as superficial.

The paradox is that the difficulty of his work—which is related to its understatement and subtlety, its iconoclasm and darkness, and the freshness and originality of his music—is of a different order than the more famous "obscurities" of Pound or Eliot or Joyce, difficulties that our present habits of reading tend to valorize more than they do the kind of difficulty the poems of Charles Reznikoff surely present.

The paradox is that Reznikoff's apparent accessibility stands in the way of a recognition of the significance of his poetic achievement: if he's liked for being "easy" then he's at the same time disregarded for being insignificant. But both these approaches seem not so much to read Reznikoff as to read through him.

44. In Reading in Detail Naomi Schor argues that working in detail has a history of being stigmatized as feminine, which is to say, of peripheral value. Unlike the "heroic" sweep and "grandeur" of hypotactic order, detail is marginalized as ornament, blemish, weakness, deficiency, simplicity, easy—ultimately as disregardable as the "lost" women and men that Reznikoff refuses to thematize or caricature or stereotype. Reznikoff never states his

59. Pointlessness is a typical charge made against radical modernist discontinuity and fragmentation. Thus, Reznikoff's poems are "essentially insignificant" and "incidental and decorative" according to a 1934 review, while Hayden Carruth, reviewing Testimony, speaks of Reznikoff's "cold, neutral language" as "uninteresting" and "lifeless" and Robert Alter refers to the "seeming impassivity . . . flatness, and numbing pointlessness" of different Reznikoff works. See Linda Simon's "Annotated Bibliography" in Man and Poet. In contrast, John Martone, in "On Reznikoff and 'Talking Hebrew'", is right when he calls Testimony "the most difficult of the modernist long poems . . . No grandioso mythopoetic vision distracts us from the commonplace, from the [often brutal] circumstances of everyday life" (p. 79).
themes in generalized, abstract terms but leaves it for his particulars, so
ordered, to speak for themselves.

45. To be sure, Reznikoff's stated intentions are for "clarity" of "communi-
cation" against the "cryptic"—but his insistence is on—above all else—
"intensity" produced by "compression" and "rhythm" (cut and shapeliness)
that is "passionate" and "musical" and not—in his words—"flat".60 Opacity,
in this sense, is the refusal of the flatness of ocular or idealist imagism: it
is the opacity of the object, of objectification, just as opacity is also the
antithesis of the cryptic, with its "cloying music / the hints of what the
poets meant / and did not quite say",61 the symbolical assertion of a puz-
zel to be deciphered: words not ciphers but things of the world to be
thickened, weighted, condensed, so that they may be heard and felt.

46. Then how to understand Reznikoff's choice of recurrent, dark subject
matter in his work . . . or how to understand why so much violence, so
much darkness in the world?

47. "When you least expect it the lights go out. & when you least expect
it, too, the lights come back on again." —Reznikoff, during the Poetry
Center reading.

48. Yet flesh is opaque: when you catch it (comprehend it), it's dead.

49. Testimony is perhaps the darkest, and certainly most unrelenting, of
modernist long poems. Reznikoff spent years in various libraries pouring
over trial records from the 1890s and 1900s, selecting a few cases out of
each hundred he surveyed and then styling them so as to allow the event
itself to speak, as if without interference, without teller. A chronicle of
industrial accidents, domestic violence, racism, Testimony tells the story of
America's forgotten, those who suffer without redress, without name,
without hope; yet the soul of these States is found in books like this; the
acknowledgment of these peripheral stories turns a waste land into holy
ground.62

Reznikoff worked on Testimony through the 1930s and 1940s, at a time

60. In "First, There Is the Need", Reznikoff writes, "Clarity, precision, order, but the answer
is intensity. with intensity we have compression, rhythm, maybe rhyme, maybe alliteration. The
words move out of prose into verse as the speech becomes passionate and musical instead of flat"
(p. 5). Reznikoff also talks about prose not having the "intensity that I wanted" in #17 of "Early
History of a Writer" (2:171).


62. My own reading of Reznikoff began with Testimony, which for some time overshadowed
my reading of his other poems. I see these remarks as a commentary on how to approach, how
to interpret, Reznikoff's great anti-epic. The best account of the composition of Testimony is
Katherine Shevelow's "History and Objectification in Charles Reznikoff's Documentary Poems,
Testimony and Holocaust", in Sagetrieb 1, no. 2 (1982).
when both Oppen and Carl Rakosi had stopped writing, in part because of the conflict they felt between their left political commitments and their poetic commitments. Perhaps Testimony can be seen as a labor-intensive counterpart to the lacuna in these poets' work.

Reznikoff's work is preoccupied with those left out of society, people whose lives were destroyed by things (machines, circumstances, an economy) out of their control: again, the neglected, the overlooked. His one reference to Marx is placed strikingly as the last of four poems in a series about prophecy called "Jerusalem the Golden", which is itself the final series of his book of the same title, published, significantly, in 1934 (#79, 1:127-29). "Jerusalem the Golden" begins with "The Lion of Judah"—a poem in which the prophet Nathan denies the right to permanent foundation even, or already, to the Jews ("you shall not build the Lord's house / because your hands have shed much blood"). This poem, considered in the light of the first poem of Jerusalem the Golden ("The Hebrew of your poets, Zion / is like oil upon a burn / . . . I have married . . . the speech of strangers") suggests the intractability of the Jewish diaspora (understood, however, not as exile but a series of displacements/replacements). In the second poem, "The Shield of David", the prophets locate "all the lights of heaven" in "the darkness of the grave", abjuring the emptiness of ritual as shells for "unseeing eyes", eyes that look but do not see: looked and saw the Light in the Darkness:

worship Me in righteousness,
worship me in kindness to the poor and weak,
in justice to the orphan, the widow, the stranger among you,
and in justice to him who takes hire in your hand

The third poem, a brief evocation of pantheism, is entitled "Spinoza", after the prototypical Jewish "excommunicate" or "non-Jewish Jew", in Isaac Deutscher's phrase, whose pantheism and determinism significantly prefigure historical materialism (both Marx and Spinoza are crucial sources for Zukofsky's "A".9). In the last of the series, "Karl Marx", Reznikoff writes:

We shall arise while the stars are still shining . . .
to begin the work we delight in,
and no one shall tell us, Go . . .
to the shop or office you work in
to waste your life for a living . . .
there shall be bread and no one hunger for bread . . .
we shall call nothing mine—nothing for ourselves only . . .

50. Darkness and light; or dusk, when dark and light can no longer be separated—
Suddenly we noticed that we were in darkness; so we went into the house and lit the lamp.

51. Thrown into the world through EVENT as TESTIMONY / TESTIMONY as EVENT, the poem merges the objective and subjective so that no polarizing can occur.

"Event" emerges as the world/word materializing process takes place.

52. Testimony: to found America means to find it—which means to acknowledge its roots in violence, to tell the lost stories because unless you find what is lost you can found nothing.

Against the indifference of the juridical gaze (paradigm of detachment), founding means giving witness to what is denied at the expense of the possibility of America.

In and about the house darkness lay, a black fog; and each on his bed spoke to himself alone, making no sound.

To speak out against the Dark is to make Light: this is the Poetic alchemy, call it economy, that Reznikoff enacts over and again: to recover the lost, make sound in the presence of silence, behold the Light—

53. Testimony as memorial: an act of grief/grieving, of mourning. The cost of life, the cost of lives lost, is poetic/psychic economy, of which this an account/accounting. "No one to witness and adjust"—cept here.

"Calling the lapsed Soul . . . / O Earth O Earth return".

54. "Shipwreck of the singular": mourning/grief as part of the celebration of the New Year (Yom Kippur), as prerequisite for new world / new word. "America" not so much a "place" but an attitude toward language.

55. Ignored, like Stein, partly because he does not use symbological allusion or historical reference (Pound/Eliot) that require you to look elsewhere than to what is happening, Reznikoff makes the reader (not himself) into the witness of language, where events are enacted in words and we don't so much judge them as come near to them.

56. The observer and the observed meet at dusk in the midst of shadows. How can we tell the seeing from the seen, the see-er from the seer?

63. Poems (1920), #22 (excerpt), 1:35. The citation in the section following the next is the last stanza of this poem.
64. Williams's Spring and All, #XVII ("To Elsie"), in Collected Poems, p. 217; and Blake's introduction to his indelible series, "Songs of Experience".
57. Reznikoff's Rosh Hashonah poem ends this way:

You have given us the strength
to serve You,
but we may serve or not
as we please;
not for peace nor for prosperity,
not even for length of life, have we merited
remembrance; remember us
as the servants
You have inherited. 66

Jewishness not as "chosen" but inherited: can't get rid of. Jewishness in the sense of an inhering possibility for poetry and its testimony as engaged witness that changes—intervenes in—what it witnesses by its care in & for the world/word.

III

January 1, 1990

Dear Jean-Paul Auxemery, 67

At a party last night, for the Christian New Year, a guest brought our host, a Czechoslovakian-Jewish émigré, a piece of the Berlin Wall. A piece of rubble, to be sure, but packaged in a brightly designed box assuring, with a red stamp, that papers attesting to the "authenticity" of the contents had been enclosed by the importers, a New Jersey firm. A small label on the top indicated that the item had been purchased at Bloomingdale's. Here, indeed, was the essence of late, or multinational, capitalism: a commodity created, by the alchemy of packaging, from that which is intrinsically worthless. It's the sort of "symbolism" that is diametrically opposed by what you usefully call Charles Reznikoff's "ethics of style", which has as its method acknowledging the details of intrinsic value that this same culture has discarded, as by the reverse alchemy of turning things of substance into rubble by disregard.

I won't ever forget the first night, and first morning, of this year's Jewish New Year, where we celebrated the work of Reznikoff in a former Christian abbey at Royaumont, near Paris. I won't forget that our Reznikoff

66. "New Year's", #1 in "Meditations on the Fall and Winter Holidays", in Inscriptions, #13, 2:66.
67. This letter was originally published, in a translation by Jean-Paul Auxemery, in a.b.s.: Poètes à Royaumont, no. 3 (1990), along with Auxemery's original letter to me.
panel ended with your overwhelming reading of Holocaust—your French translation of a work barely known in its native land. My own intervention had focussed not only on Reznikoff's Testimony, as you note, but also more particularly on his Complete Poems. What I remember thinking was that Holocaust had never sounded so necessary, so appropriate (in your sense that Reznikoff always found the most "apropos" words). Yes, I have had my difficulties with Holocaust—the most unrelentingly painful to read of Reznikoff's work, about an unmitigated horror of our common, "modern" history. I think I must have said this work was about a problem specifically European, I could not have meant that it was "solely" European, however, since the destruction of the European Jews is of the most urgent relevance to all Americans, to all Jews, indeed to all humans. I think I must have suggested that Holocaust is necessarily 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 acknowledgment; so that Holocaust stands apart and beyond the achievement of Reznikoff's Poems and Testimony.

I say specifically European for a very practical, literal, reason that you, with your remarkable involvement with Olson, would certainly appreciate the implications of: Reznikoff's work, apart from Holocaust, and his biblical poems and Talmudic "collages", has been a profound investigation of "American" materials: it is work immersed in the local and particular details of this place that he found himself in, first generation in his family, and also of a language, English, that was an intrinsic part of that emplacement. One of my favorite Reznikoff remarks is one he made to Marie Syrkin, his wife, in explaining why he would not go to Palestine with her in 1933; he told her "he had not yet explored Central Park to the full". Indeed Reznikoff never left North America or English (an "American" English of course) in real life or in his poems—with the primary exception of Holocaust, which not only involved a European site or place (lieu) but also for the first time working with documentary materials not originally in English. For me, what was so striking about your reading of Holocaust in French was that one could imagine those incidents happening near the place, even Royaumont; we were close by the scene.

Reznikoff's Complete Poems and Testimony explore the tragedy and violence that is the grounding of this Republic, call it United States. It is not a story that Americans are familiar with or, even now, ready to acknowledge. Each poem of Reznikoff, always placed in series, shocks by its recognition of something otherwise unstated or unsaid: say, unacknowledged or repressed or denied or suppressed. Testimony, while a litany of sorrows, finds new avenues to locate the transgression of dominance against the human spirit.
By contrast, the violence, the repulsiveness, of the incidents in *Holocaust* are always and already known, hence preclude the insinuating subtlety of *Testimony*. (An exception being the section entitled "children".) And, for Americans, always and already projected outward to the German, to the Nazi, to a European story. If it does not hit home, it is because the story of World War II has been the greatest source for American self-congratulation: we defeated the Nazi monsters. Not: the Nazi monsters in us, which go on, largely on the loose. This is like saying, North American has not had a 20th-century war on its soil. Reznikoff shows otherwise. The Complete Poems and *Testimony* testify to a system of domination and disregard that has won, *Holocaust* to a system of explicit violence that, at least on the face, lost.

Poetry is always technical, an order of words, at least in the first instance. If I put aside, yes even disregard, the sentiment of "la raison d'un coeur noble" to reiterate these technical questions it is not without an appreciation of the integrity of the whole of Reznikoff's oeuvre or of the noble gesture of your bringing into French, into France, Reznikoff's final testament, a testament that, to be sure, does go beyond his concern for any one nation or language, a work that we can only wish he had never had to write.

With all best wishes,