

第十六届“上译”杯翻译竞赛原文（英语组）

Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* (excerpt)

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Charles Reznikoff may be the most elusive poet in American poetry and his book-length *Testimony* the most elusive long poem of modernism. He is remembered as a kind of New York saint, an urban Emily Dickinson: the Unknown Poet, walking the city streets, writing intense, seemingly matter-of-fact lyrics of things he saw and heard. And then, in the last decades of his life, devoting himself to two obsessional projects of narrative vignettes: the more than five hundred pages of *Testimony*, drawn from turn-of-the-century American court cases, and the hundred pages of *Holocaust*, taken from the transcripts of the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials. Certainly the outlines of both the poet's life and the poems' processes are plain enough, but the rest tends to be filled in with negatives: all the things the poet did not do and all the things the poems aren't.

Reznikoff, born in New York in 1894, graduated NYU law school in 1916, passed the bar, but only briefly practiced, preferring to become a salesman for his father's hat business. (He much later said that law was too much work for a poet, whereas he could write his poems in the hours spent waiting in Macy's for the buyer to show up.) After that business collapsed, he held random jobs throughout his life: writer of entries for a legal encyclopedia, *Corpus Juris*; managing editor of *The Jewish Frontier*; editor of the papers of the lawyer and civil rights activist Louis Marshall; co-author of a history of the Jews of Charleston and an unfinished history of the Jews of Cleveland. His one extended stay outside of New York City—he never left the U. S. — was the three years he spent in the 1930s in Hollywood as an assistant to his old friend, the producer Albert Lewin. Given a huge office at Paramount Pictures, he had little to do and wrote poems about watching the flies on his desk.

In the late 1920s he met two younger poets, Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen. The

three, all Jewish New Yorkers, shared an admiration for Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams and the belief, along with Williams, that American modernism should be relocated from Paris and London to the U. S. Asked to edit an issue of *Poetry* in 1931, Zukofsky put them together, along with Williams, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting, Kenneth Rexroth, and a stylistically random collection of others (including the young Whittaker Chambers), under the rubric of “Objectivists.” His manifesto in the issue was called “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff.” (Typical of Reznikoff’s fate and Zukofsky’s personality, when the essay was reprinted decades later, Zukofsky omitted Reznikoff entirely.) In 1934, the three poets pooled their resources to create the Objectivist Press in order to publish themselves and Williams. The press didn’t last long, but the label stuck, although the actual poetry of the three had little in common. Reznikoff may have been the only one to take the name seriously. Nearly forty years later, when asked to describe his poetry for the reference book *Contemporary Poets*, he wrote (in its entirety):

“Objectivist”; images clear but the meaning not stated but suggested by the objective details and the music of the verse; words pithy and plain; without the artifice of regular meters; themes, chiefly Jewish, American, urban.

Until his mid-sixties, he published nearly all his books himself, setting the type for many of them on a printing press in his parents’ basement. For eighteen of those years, there were no books of poetry at all. He received few reviews, most of them terrible. His first review said that he “annoys and bewilders”; his second called the poems “sordid, with an emphasis on the *sore*.” The third, by Malcolm Cowley, said that he was “astigmatic,” “an ecstatic with a defect in his voice, who stammers at the moment of greatest feeling.” A line in Cowley’s review—— “He is unable to focus, and lines of splendid verse are lost to sight among heaps of rubbish”—— may have led to one of Reznikoff’s best-known short poems:

Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies
a girder, still itself among the rubbish.

It was a poem that Oppen often said ran through his mind over and over as he was trapped in a foxhole among dead and wounded comrades in the Second World War. Oppen, tellingly, always misquoted the last word as “rubble.”

In 1962, New Directions, in collaboration with the *San Francisco Review* (run by Oppen’s sister, June Degnan) published *By the Waters of Manhattan: Selected Verse*. Reznikoff’s first visible book of poetry, it had an odd introduction by C. P. Snow, then famous as a social critic, who, “as far as a Gentile can judge”, found the work had “overtones of extraordinary unfamiliarity”. Three years later, the two publishers brought out the first volume of *Testimony*. In *Poetry*, Hayden Carruth—who had praised *By the Waters*—wrote: “I don’t see the point in it.” Surprisingly jingoistic, he claimed that the “material—all ugly, brutal, and inhumane……is one of relentless, absorbing, cold, bitter contempt: contempt for the society in question.” Both books sold poorly; the ND-SFR collaboration ended; Reznikoff went back to printing his own books.

But in the 1960s the “Objectivists” emerged from their decades of near-total obscurity, like a council of Wise Elders suddenly among us. Oppen and Rakosi returned after their long silences; Zukofsky was published by major presses; Bunting in the U.K. produced his masterpiece, *Briggflatts*; in Wisconsin, the reclusive Lorine Niedecker was writing her best work. And Reznikoff was with them. There were readings, interviews, a prize or two. In 1974, the Black Sparrow Press began a program of bringing all of Reznikoff’s poetry back into print. He died in 1976, at eighty-one, having just revised the proofs of a two-volume *Collected Poems*.

There was the legend of Charles Reznikoff, the invisible poet, walking twenty miles a day in New York City, writing down his observations in a little notebook, meeting cronies who never knew he was a writer at the Automat, publishing his own books of perfect poems for over fifty years. A sweet, elderly man who was maddeningly self-deprecating. George and Mary Oppen told me about a reading in Michigan, at the end of which the audience was on its feet, wildly cheering. Rezi, as they called him, was heard to mumble: “I hope I haven’t taken up too much of your time.”

