

Rhetoric of Silence in American Studies Retoryka ciszy - perspektywa amerykańistyczna

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Charles Reznikoff and the Rhetoric of Witnessing through Silence Charles Reznikoff i retoryka dawania świadectwa poprzez ciszę

Abstract

The article considers the poetry of Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff as informed by the frequent use of rhetoric of silence. The analysis is two-fold: first, it explains the two theoretical key terms, sincerity and objectification, as distinct features of the Objectivist verse, which are crucial in the thematic framework of the analysis, and, second, it gives examples of the practical use thereof by Reznikoff, who is viewed as the poet-witness.

Artykuł omawia poezję Charlesa Reznikoffa, amerykańskiego obiektywisty, w świetle zastosowania w niej retoryki ciszy. Analiza jest dwutorowa: po pierwsze, objaśnia znaczenie dwóch ujętych teoretycznie elementarnych składników poezji obiektywistycznej – rzetelności i obiektywizacji – jako niezbędnych w kontekście poruszanej problematyki; po drugie, przedstawia kilka analiz wybranych wierszy Reznikoffa, który określany jest jako poeta-świadek.

Key words

rhetoric of silence, Charles Reznikoff, Objectivists, sincerity, objectification, witnessing, silence
retoryka ciszy, Charles Reznikoff, rzetelność, obiektywizacja, bycie świadkiem, cisza

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Charles Reznikoff and the Rhetoric of Witnessing through Silence¹

In the present critical review of the ways in which the rhetoric of witnessing through silence is used in the poetry of American Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), I consider the key terms of reference, witnessing and silence, in three distinct but often overlapping fields of reflection – as the poet’s strategies against received (particularly the 19th-century) logorrhea of “old” poetic discourse, his ethical mindset, and the manifestation of his (if only modest) social stance. Out of a plethora of possible examples that could aptly illustrate Reznikoff’s characteristic preference for employing silence to implicitly convey its semantic and rhetorical potentiality, I select and focus only on his short verse, omitting longer poems of epic proportions, the analysis of which would require a much lengthier discussion. Apart from the socio-historical circumstances that condition Reznikoff’s poetics, I draw on Lisa Block de Behar’s theorizing of the role of silence in literary discourse, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of contemplating the material world without any prior speculative (mainly judgmental) assumptions. As will be demonstrated, the silence that is used as a rhetorical device becomes instrumental in approximating the objective quality of witnessing – the goal that, even if unattainable fully, patronizes Reznikoff’s poetic project.

Mainly associated with the use of the talismanic criteria of “sincerity” and “objectification” – which were first enigmatically theorized by Louis Zukofsky in the early 1930s – Reznikoff entered the American late modernist scene offering the verse informed by reticent diction (in the spirit of the short lasting but influential Imagism of Ezra Pound), understated perception, extreme condensation of language and discipline of a social witness. He often played with the semantic potential – and the ethical ambivalence – of the-not-said, the mutilated phrase, or even the bare single noun. His preferred strategy of verbal erasure and depletion trespasses the boundaries of language matters and experimentation.

1. The article, in an altered form, is part of the planned monograph study on Charles Reznikoff’s prose and poetry *Disarchiving Anguish: Charles Reznikoff and the Modalities of Witnessing* (due to be published in 2021).

Reznikoff's less-than-modest poetic career began in 1918 and was later laboriously sustained for years by self-published (and rarely reviewed) volumes of verse, to terminate abruptly in 1941. This enigmatic poetic hiatus lasted for almost eighteen years. In the 1960s, he re-emerged as a slightly altered author, one who often silenced his own voice completely, giving preference to documentary poetics redacted from public records and court cases (*Testimony. The United States 1885-1890: Recitative*, published in 1965). In a sense, Reznikoff's path resembles the career of another eminent Objectivist, George Oppen, who debuted in 1934 with the volume *Discrete Series*, and became increasingly committed to social and political problems occasioned by the Great Depression. Oppen, unable to reconcile his poetic vocation with the moral urge to fight for social justice, renounced writing literature altogether for twenty-five years (1934-1958). In 1950, afraid of the witch-hunt started by Joseph McCarthy's Senate committee, Oppen left the USA for Mexico, but instead of becoming a liberating experience, the ideological exile turned out to be yet another phase of an existential estrangement. In the end, his detachment from the (literary) world became no more profound than his detachment from himself. As Peter Nicholls notes, in the poems from the late volume *Primitive* (1978), the poet "speaks of himself in the third person, the words 'his/and not his' [...] seeing himself as another who is lost" (2007, 189). If, as Reznikoff wrote in 1927, "silence is legal tender everywhere" (1996, 67) what, we may ask, are the gains and/or losses when poetry is substantially financed with it?

Lisa Block de Behar regards a rhetoric of silence as constitutionally underpinned by a contradiction, which she extensively theorizes – it is the "study of the dialectic speculations of the mind," on the one hand, and the "art of saying and eloquence," on the other (1995, 1). Granted, both are expected to overcome the paradox that in literature silence is necessarily contextualized, which means that it is given significance by a process of its negation – in fact, an instance of a secular apophatic gesture. In my argument, I propose the term that may appear equally antithetical as a formula – witnessing through silence. As will be demonstrated, when the act of witnessing and, later, of giving a poetic deposition on the basis thereof is marked by suspension of the voice, the words unarticulated can nevertheless be palpably present and effectively preform their apophatically persuasive role. In Reznikoff's verse, the apparent mutual exclusion (which today is, in fact, no more than a fallacy) between language and absence of language (i.e. silence) in an act of witnessing is deliberately sustained, and, in the end, conciliating. This confirms Block de Behar's belief in "the efficient persuasion and the power [...] of silence" (1995, 3), which, for example, is the foundation of Ernest Hemingway's poetics rigorously sticking to the famous "iceberg principle" (also known as "theory of omissions"). The ineloquent expression that values gaps constitutes a major

characteristic of the modern (and postmodern) text itself. It is seen in the poetry of the Objectivist poets, such as Reznikoff or Oppen, but also in the writers that come chronologically later (from e.e. cummings to Susan Howe). At the most rudimentary level, this strategy is more often than not an endeavor to find a mid-path between *horror pleni* and *horror vacui*; between textual opulence and textual abstinence.

Susan Sontag, listing numerous uses of silence, gives prominence to the moments of voluntary, brief renunciations of talk or speech, noting that “silence keeps things open,” as a result of which words – sequestered by mute breaks – acquire more weight (significance), becoming “almost palpable” (1969, 20). In an analogical manner, Thomas Gould makes a distinction between the binary pair of “paradigmatic” and “syntagmatic” silences (2018, 3). The former – verbal – denotes all the occurrences where silence is resorted to as a meaningful signal, communicating, e.g., uncertainty, boredom, indifference, or disapproval. The latter – in writing – manifests itself in, e.g., typographical devices or breaches of punctuation rules to make “a pause pregnant with significance” (2018, 3). Silence is both a reaction, message, and an enabling moment. In the domain of politically or socially engaged poetry, the goal is not only to identify the phenomena that can be absorbed and caught in a language network (or, that can initiate the emergence of such a network by language itself), but also to take account of the imponderables, the concealed, the camouflaged – as Adrienne Rich has it, considering “what is missing, *desaparecido*, rendered unspeakable, thus unthinkable” (2002, 150). For the author of *Arts of the Possible*, such an operative act of poetry, focusing on, say, the marginalized, the disempowered, ought to be driven by the ethical motives enabled by silence: “The impulse to create begins – often terribly and fearfully – in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence” (2002, 150).

In George Oppen’s late poem from the 1968 series “Of Being Numerous,” silence is designated as remaining in a deep epistemological relation to “clarity”:

Clarity
 In the sense of *transparence*,
 I don’t mean that much can be explained.
 Clarity in the sense of silence. (2003, 175)

If to take this assertion at its face value, it may be interpreted as a frontal attack on language itself. Language makes things obscure, impedes the moment of illumination (if illumination is indeed the state that the persona in Oppen’s poem is yearning for). The four lines of the fragment build up a triangle link between silence, clarity (transparence), and understanding, but the relation results in a deadlock. If, in epistemological terms, clarity connotes the sharpest phase of

seeing (an equivalent of comprehending in the English language), this is achieved outside the sphere of conception or verbal articulation. Thus, it cannot be communicated. At the same time, the moment of clarity does not offer much; in fact, as the third line openly implies “[not] that much can be explained.” Arguably, the same applies to silence – if it is tantamount to clarity, it prevails over language.

The so-called Objectivist poetics begins with the publication, in 1931, of Zukofsky’s essay titled “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff.” The man whose work clearly gave Zukofsky an inspiration for the two key terms of reference was an almost unknown author with quite an impressive number of nine self-published books. But in the essay Reznikoff is endowed with an exceptional significance on the map of contemporary American poetry as a progressive poet. Deep down, however, Reznikoff’s verse simply provides an opportunity to introduce two critical terms on which Zukofsky’s own text is centered: “sincerity” and “objectification.” The former is a descriptive designation for a postulated attitude of a poet, characterized by an ultimate frankness both toward the facts that are being referred to in the text of a poem and toward the words that constitute the text of a poem:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. (2000, 194)

The preoccupation with the accuracy of detail in writing – which is sincerity – is evident on a large scale in Reznikoff’s narrative verse, perhaps the most neglected contribution to writing in America in the last ten years. (2000, 199)

Thus, according to Zukofsky, writing with sincerity comes down to the (re)presentation, in a possibly undistorted manner, of what has been perceived by the eye of the poet, giving a tangible form to the poet’s way of thinking about the things (re)presented in such a way that the language of the poem unfolds like a melodic sequence.

As regards the poetic language, Zukofsky, postulating the poet’s “preoccupation with the accuracy of detail in writing,” follows in the footsteps of Imagist poets, who, about twenty years earlier, rejected verbosity, rhetorical ornamentation, abstract wording, and traditional meters. In a larger sense, however, sincerity implies a much more fundamental rule, liberating as it does the poet from the necessity of adhering to any presumed or presupposed notions of what a poem should be like. From now on, the poetic form is never obvious in advance; instead, it is constantly correlated with the poet’s perception, his state of mind, and the sounds of language. For Zukofsky, new “sincere” poetry should differ greatly from the logorrheic

verse of the past. Apart from the musical context, he revels in making comparisons between composing poetry and sculpting or painting, stating that “[p]arallels sought for in the other arts call up the perfect line of occasional drawing, the clear beginnings of sculpture not proceeded with” (2000, 194). The appeal that he finds in the unfinished objects of art hints obviously at the poetics of fragmentation, but this, at the time Zukofsky published his manifesto, was not considered novelty anymore, and is an example of his indebtedness to the pioneering ideas of Imagist poets and, say, T. S. Eliot’s collage verse.

The Objectivist method significantly develops the original tenets of Imagism so as to harness them for cognitive purposes. Or, to be more precise, the method is not so much a means of (re)presenting as it is a way of “thinking via the poem” (DuPlessis 2015, 95). This makes an important point when these two developments within modernist poetry are juxtaposed. The cognitive process that the Objectivist verse documents is provoked by the specificity of the material world (a thing, a situation) encountered by the poet, who, reflecting upon the meaning of the experience, takes an exam in “sincerity.” Over twenty years after the publication of Zukofsky’s essay, the term was further clarified by Oppen:

It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet’s perception, the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness. (2007, 31-32)

There is a difference between encountering and finding something: only the latter implies an intentional act, and, therefore, only the former seems valuable from the Objectivist viewpoint. The encounter that Oppen mentions occurs within a concrete historical moment, *hic et nunc*, and its suddenness is not to be tamed by any preconceived and normative ways of recording it by means of language. The encounter may trigger a set of contradictory – if mutually exclusive – reflections, thoughts, emotions that nevertheless ought to cohere into a most adequate poetic structure, often yielding only a fragmentary insight into the “truth” of the experience.

The poet’s stance of sincerity is only the first step of the poetic process and needs to be completed by what Zukofsky refers to as “objectification.” This second term of reference usually resists an unequivocal clarification because its most common dictionary definitions – i.e. “act of giving an objective form to,” “making something concrete,” or simply “externalizing” – are dwindled, if not marginalized. Instead, objectification becomes welded with the acts of both perceiving and comprehending things, or even with the capacity for forming ideas (apprehension). Here Zukofsky attains the peaks of communicative vagueness:

Presented with sincerity, the mind even tends to supply, in further suggestion which does not attain rested totality, the totality not always found in sincerity, and necessary only for perfect rest, complete appreciation. This rested totality may be called objectification – the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. That is: distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such. (2000, 194)

Translating the above proposition into more palpable wording has always posed a critical challenge. Yet, at the same time, it is fascinating to observe how the term has retained its inspirational aura for years to come, even despite the fact of being an example of a secular *arretion ineffabile*.² Arguably, being a larger unit, objectification enables “minor units of sincerity” to become clear and understandable, i.e. it strengthens the process of “the resolving of words and their ideation into structure” (Zukofsky 2000, 194). Therefore, in all probability, objectification designates a poetic form – not in prescriptive, codified terms that are expected from traditional poetic craft, but as a sense of unity occurring in the mind of the reader. Above all else, however, the alleged intention behind the Objectivist poetics is to offer poetry that is not pre-formulated by any – be it formal or ideological – normativity, but widely open to and openly developing along the vectors of self-debating or even self-questioning.

The core idea concerning Zukofsky’s proposed poetics takes shape in a form of a dictionary-like excerpt opening his essay “Program: Objectivists’ 1931,” in which, as perhaps seems most appropriate, he highlights the whole spectrum of possible understandings of the term “objective”:

An Objective: (Optics) – The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use) – That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry) – Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars. (2000, 189)

Starting from the context of visual perception, he moves on to the combative association – which, by the way, may suggest avant-garde aspirations – to finish with an overt reference to a wide scope of poetic aims. An object cannot be seen unless light rays are reflected from it and brought into focus by the “lens,” which Zukofsky treats as a substitute word for both an eyeball or a poem. The second meaning of the word implies an intentionality of perception – an object is seen as a result of a deliberate act of narrowing down the horizon of what the eye

2. Zukofsky was wary of philosophical abstractions and metaphysical poeticizing and wrote to compose rather than to explain. Still, both in his original poetry and in his theoretical writings, his preferred tools of the trade are elision and complex (sentence) structure. And that is probably why the major theoretical terms that he coined (i.e. sincerity and objectification) – often perceived as ambiguous – were easy subjects to a rather liberal interpretation (and, later, became so easily integrated into the poetic thought and practice of Reznikoff, who, by the way, seemed indifferent to theory and theorizing in the academic sense of the word).

(or the mind) wants to see. The third meaning – closely linked to the previous one but extrapolated onto a different plane – bills the intentionality of perception as “desire.” All these three laconic definitions shed light on the way Zukofsky perceives poetry. The poem comes into being as a result of “desire” to see the “historic and contemporary particulars” of the actual (i.e. visible) world. Similarly to Imagist poets about two decades earlier, he also dislikes abstractions, preferring to relate to and affirm the material world as the only truly objective reality available to us. As Burton Hatlen asserts, “[n]ot the mental image but the physical object – this is the starting point for Zukofsky’s poetics” (1999, 39). Thus, the unwillingness to explain things through poetry and the emphasis on the formal composition find their illustration in the image of the objective lens, which is central to the ideas conveyed in the essay. By concentrating the light coming from the object, the lens enables either a microscopic examination of the object or its projection. But even more importantly, thanks to the lens, the object becomes available for use. Zukofsky demands a poetics that values detail and specificity, contemptuously dismissing the idea of poetry which aspires to be the source of universal truth. When he insists on “the detail, not mirage, of seeing,” he declares his urge to represent not the appearance of the material world but the word’s particularity, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and – notably – the conditions within which the world is cognitively accessible to us. That is why Charles Bernstein proposes to think of sincerity and objectification as “a means of grappling with the structures and conditions through which things come into perception and by means of which we come into contact with them and live alongside them” (2000, x). The value of the poem, as Zukofsky wants it to be, does not reside in its effectiveness of conveying the poet’s attitudes and beliefs (and in this sense sincerity does not connote an affect), but in the adequacy of its technique and style. Consequently, the poem is to be treated as an entity in itself, a creation which is separate from its creator.

Though the bulk of Reznikoff’s poetry comprises poetic narratives of various length, even the most elaborate and longest ones are often composed out of micro scenes – stitched together in series – each of which can be considered separately, and each of which adheres, to a greater or lesser degree, to the “photographic precision of language” (1984, 167). Still, there is even more significant rationale behind the proximity of Reznikoff’s preferred poetic stance – particularly his sensitivity to the experience of anguish – to photographic representations of the material world. Susan Sontag underscores the fact that every act of photographing is an appropriation of the object in focus of the camera.³ As a much more rudimentary (and pre-existent) mode of recording things for posterity “print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world” (2005, 2). The written text does

3. The essay, in fact, strongly argues against the belief that the photograph in itself can provide any explanation of what it shows.

not – or at least should not – pretend that what it offers is something more than an interpretation. This virtue of writing – so the argument goes – seriously weakens the power relation between the representing and the represented. In this regard, “parasitic” photographs “deceive” us into the belief that they possess the ability to locate the real world into images without a meaningful deformation. Put differently, photography is what Sontag calls a new “grammar” and “ethics of seeing” (2005, 1). Reznikoff’s poetic project, employing a new grammar and ethics of seeing in the form of a literary-photographic text, aspires to safely navigate round the perils formulated by Sontag. As Mayk-Hai argues, “the camera-eye is more than just a metaphor for his [Reznikoff’s] stylistic and thematic choices – it is an extension of his own ethical vision” (2015, 46).

Roland Barthes’ study *Camera Lucida* assumes that the automaticity of the camera distinguishes photography from traditional media and has significant implications for how photographs are experienced. There are, for Barthes, two kinds of ways of looking at them and reading them; *studium* and *punctum*. Emotionally, *studium* evokes only restrained reactions; intellectually, it is connected with the viewer’s cultural experience, with their received knowledge of the world. We understand what the photographer wants to convey through the photograph, and we, to a greater or lesser degree, share this understanding with other viewers. We comprehend it, we appreciate it, but there is nothing more to our reactions to the image at hand. *Punctum* triggers a very strong emotional response; it is something, say a detail, that draws our whole attention, pushing everything else aside; and nothing else counts anymore. In other words, we are wounded:

A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (1980, 26-27)

Reznikoff is the poet whose eyes operate like a lens. The act of seeing seems originary (constituting a source or cause), yet accompanying the emotion or desire, and constantly expecting some illuminating significance in the world of people and things, which is witnessed but never assumed to be already established, legible, and effortlessly susceptible to language description. Whether the emotion or desire prevails over the act of seeing, as a prior urge, or whether it is the perception that enables the feelings to emerge is an interesting critical issue. The poet himself tends to think of both elements as intrinsically intertwined and occurring in a sequence: “I see something and it moves me and I put it down as I see it”

(1984, 98). Arguably, this is an adequate reasoning to clarify Reznikoff's formula for composing urban poetry, in which he takes hold of the city street life with a steadiness of his gaze, fully aware that even the same route chosen twice can guarantee diverse, unexpected experience, worth remembering and recording. And, admittedly, often nothing remains of Reznikoff's *studium* of New York streets, but instances of *punctum* assume the form of a laconic poem:

The dead man lies in the street.
They spread a sack over his bleeding head.
It drizzles. Gutter and walks are black. (1996, 14)

Such demonstration, however, may be a bit less convincing when instead of observing the material richness of life in New York's parks, squares, alleys, or avenues, the poet dedicates his attentiveness to other manifestations of legible materiality – the archival documents (later in his career).

For Paul Auster, Reznikoff is an example of a contemplative poet for whom the act of meticulous and attentive observation of the materiality of the world always precedes the language (1984, 151-52). Writing does not originate from the emotion but from the eye, and therefore, rather than imposing an order on the experience, it testifies *post factum* to the discovery of it. The poet chooses to be situated in the sphere of a momentous silence, between the things and the words that connote them. It is this moment of suspension and silence – when language is shunted – that enables the things to be perceived in their epistemological novelty and, later, makes it possible to endow them with words. The success of a poem lies in the adequacy with which it names the observed world anew. Reznikoff, as Auster reads his (mainly shorter) poetry, is guided by the formula *esse est precipi*, which makes him one of the most notable Berkeleyans among American poets (but which, of course, does not necessarily revoke his evident adherence to modern realism). The way he perceives things and silently witnesses events is a reminder that the physical world outside is never to be assumed without question. There is no received knowledge that guarantees an unconstrained access to what is seen. The eye, performing the function of the lens (also in the sense Zukofsky attributed to it) only isolates a minute portion from the overwhelming mass of data, whose overall meaning reaches too far to be grasped entirely. This is best illustrated by very short verse that the poet composed at the beginning of his career and toward the end of it:

[Untitled]
The winter afternoon darkens.
The shoemaker bends close to the shoe,
his hammer raps faster.

An old woman waits,
rubbing the cold from her hands. (1996, 21-22)

Epidemic

Streamers of crepe idling before doors. (1996, 23)

[Untitled]

The girls outshout the machines
and she strains for their words, blushing.

Soon she, too, will speak
their speech glibly. (1996, 29)

[Untitled]

The house-wreckers have left the door and a staircase,
now leading to the empty room of night. (1996, 29)

City

The blind man with a white cane
to guard him from walking into a building
or tripping on a curb –
but will it keep him from a pool of rain
on the sidewalk? (1996, 206)

These five short poems, selected from different volumes (*Rhythms II*, 1919; *Poems*, 1920; the last one was recovered from a manuscript and published in 1996), originally were elements of separate numbered groups, but in the rather random sequence suggested above they appear like a series of loosely linked mini-vignettes that nevertheless form a coherent whole, offering scenes from the city life. In each case the field of view is restricted, and the gaze of the silent witness – if we assume, as we should, that all this was really seen by the author – focuses on few essential elements of the verbal snapshot. The absence of a more informative context in each case points to the suddenness of its occurrence. In a manner typical of him, Reznikoff abstains from comment or judgment, leaving the job of speculative and reconstructive thinking to the reader. The poet's attentive perception is of greater value than the language that came to him in the aftermath of the experience. The first poem trims the meeting between a shoe maker and his client to gestures performed by four hands. It is dark, late in the day, and the craftsman – busy, tired or perhaps simply impatient – increases the movement of one hand, accelerating the strikes of his tool, the other one keeping the shoe. The woman is moving her palms backwards and forwards, one over another, pressing firmly. She definitely does so because of the hostile weather, but it is not certain whether other reasons do not matter here as well – irritation or impatience, or happiness at being served at all at this time of the day. Not much is offered to explain things precisely.

In the second verse, which has an informative title, but grammatically is not even a sentence, the reduction in the act of seeing places greater demands on the reader. And this is so not only because of the extremely sketchy character of the visual description, but also because of the austere vocabulary used for the purpose. The mourning crepe ribbons hanging above or over the house door in observance of the funeral custom are referred to as “streamers,” a word commonly meaning rolls of colored paper used for decorating rooms at parties. The ribbons are “idling,” i.e. moving slowly, probably touched by light breeze, but the verb “idle” also connotes doing things for no particular reason because there is nothing better to be done. In the verbal realization of the experience that Reznikoff relates here, bereavement intertwines with festivity and idleness. The line may exemplify the sympathy of the observer passing by the door, or his fleeting fascination with the quivering material object. Or both, of course.

The poem about the girls gives prominence to sounds of two kinds: the din of unspecified machines and unintelligible utterances of the workers, both overwhelming. In visual terms, the description approximates a short footage recorded without proper focus of the objective, thus giving a blurred picture of the scene, and magnifying its ambiguousness. The place may be a sewing factory or workshop (Reznikoff’s mother was a seamstress, his father – a sewing machine operator), where a new female employee is ashamed or embarrassed at not being capable of comprehending conversations or instructions exchanged by others. She is perhaps – and that can be the first line of interpretation – a newly arrived immigrant, still without proper command of English. Let us note how her apparent foreignness shows at one moment through the beginning of the third line: “Soon she, too,” when pronounced as a cluster may sound like a word in an Asian language. But the reader can easily detect something else in the scene – its sexual overtones. After all, “blushing” is also a physical manifestation of jealousy. If the girl “strains for their words,” then at least some of the utterances *are* understood. She may be overhearing recollections of flirts, dates, or sexual initiations delivered with a flippancy typical of young people, but having no analogical experience, she cannot join in the conversation. However, she is certain to be able to share similar, overdone tales with other girls “soon.” And since she “will speak/ their speech glibly,” her own tale will be communicated fluently and easily, but in an insincere or deceptive manner.⁴

In visual terms, the fourth poem presents an image that looks almost surrealistic – a staircase leading to a door, behind which there is a room of darkness. By its

4. The second and the third poem have other, longer versions, which appeared in *By the Well of Living & Seeing. New & Selected Poems 1918-1973*. The former is titled “Pestilence” and has two additional lines: “Now the huge moon/ At the end of the street like a house afire.” The latter opens with the following distich: “Blocking hats with a boy helper/ He tells of the sluts he visits.” In this case, the theme of sexual flippancy is even more detectable (1974, 33-37).

concentration on two specific material objects – the staircase and the door – and by its laconic character, the distich resembles in tone the second poem we have looked at. For the poet-witness, the act of yet unfinished demolition produces – incidentally – a structure of a bizarre kind, yet fascinating in its semantic capacity to invite the reader for ascendance toward a sense – very personal and not imposed hegemonically by the author. As is usual with Reznikoff, the exact explanation what specifically makes the image worth attention and what invites rendition of the visual into the verbal is either vague or as absent as walls, windows, and roof of the building referred to.

“City” is, by the very title it bears, the only unequivocally urban piece verse in the selected sequence. If to treat the title metonymically, it focuses on the cityscape as the precarious space that is explored and coped with by senses other than sight. Even though the observer is undoubtedly driven by a dose of concern mixed with sympathy, pondering on the usability of the walking stick in three different situations, his preoccupation with the blind man does not transform itself into a willingness to come to assistance. The lens of the poet seems to be annulling his empathic apparatus, which would turn the five lines into a banal instruction on how to rescue those in need. Whatever happened later, the poem documents the moment of now, the moment of being transfixed by one image suddenly emerging from a multitude of other ones. Here aesthetics is a (small) step ahead of ethics.

To remain for a while in the context of photographic quality of Reznikoff’s short urban verse, it can be argued that the frame is always deliberately limited. This is an epistemological prerequisite for any subsequent operation of re-coding the silently witnessed experience into language. Even more importantly, the restricted view enabled by the poet’s lens is directly proportional to the short duration of the act of seeing itself. The poem documents what was possible to be plucked up from the overwhelming spatiality and temporality of urban experience. Put differently, it is a poetics of self-restriction controlled by the rhetoric of silence in the broadest understanding of the terms. The poem does not aspire to formulate any universal truths, and it does not approach human experience in a lofty, deeply penetrating jargon of (quasi)philosophical dicta. By its extreme verbal economy and lack of adherence to any codified, sophisticated poetic forms, it does not impress the reader with a technical virtuoso. To recall Zukofsky’s terminology, the point is to achieve sincerity of the silent witness, or, as Reznikoff himself preferred, clarity enabling the communication of what has been seen. The succinct form of the poems is a sign of their modesty, but in fact they smuggle much more than they appear to be doing. Each one is something more than just a sequence of chosen words that encroach on consecutive lines in accordance with, often unique, rhythmic patterns. Paul Auster is right when he stresses the fact that

for Reznikoff the poem “is less a mode of expressing the world than it is a way of being in the world” (1984, 152). It is a nuanced distinction, which reveals not only the not immediately identifiable ethical dimension of the poetic moment in his verse, but also explains what for him writing poetry is all about. To be in the world means to be always ready to move onward and perceive what is given and what evinces itself to the gaze of the poet; and walking around the city offers an excellent opportunity for this. Everything else that follows the epiphany of the tangible, i.e. poetry and the reflection that comes after reading poetry are gifts and side effects of the originary moment of moving onward. To further elucidate the epistemological import of such a strategy, Auster famously aligns Reznikoff’s way of being in the world with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of contemplation (in purely secular terms):

when I contemplate an object with the sole intention of watching it exist and unfold its reaches before my eyes, then it ceases to be an allusion to the general type, and I become aware that each perception, and not merely that of sights which I am discovering for the first time, re-enacts on its own account the birth of intelligence and has some element of creative genius about it: in order that I may recognize the tree as a tree, it is necessary that, beneath this familiar meaning, the momentary arrangement of the visible scene should begin all over again, as on the very first day of the vegetable kingdom, to outline the individual idea of this tree. (2003, 50)

The nature of our perceptual contact with the world, as understood by the French phenomenologist, consists in the recognition that the world always precedes our judgment or verbalized reflection, and therefore any reconstruction of the given experience in terms of its conditions of possibility should be avoided as mistaken. In this view, the so-called phenomenological reduction becomes an existential effort to reveal our pre-reflective relation to the world. The contemplation of the object is tantamount to the simultaneous rejection of all assumptions about it existing in the mind so far. And in the act of attention, which “creates nothing” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 30), what we perceive cannot be assumed to correspond to the objective properties of the source of the stimulus. That is why Merleau-Ponty writes about “the birth of intelligence” and going beyond the illusion of “the general type” to always experience the reaches of the contemplated object for the first time – every single time the contemplation is undertaken. This is the originary moment of perception; this is the originary moment of poetry as understood by the Objectivist poet.

Reznikoff would probably subscribe to Kenneth Burke’s popular definition of a poem as “an act of such a nature that, in surviving as a structure or object, it enables us as readers to reenact it” (2003, 72), but this would not do justice to the significance of silence in the process of composing it. The rhetoric of witnessing through silence in the Objectivist verse is manifested on different levels, making

(this is the assumption) the moment of poetic observation possible, removing (in a formal way) all unnecessary language so as to obtain the “purity” of impersonal (re)presentation, and showing the poet as by definition a non-judgmental witness. And all this to demonstrate that in order to be fully convincing for the reader, sincerity of poetic expression must, inescapably, be valued both for what it offers and hides.

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