



Archives of the Machine Age Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*. *The United States (1885–1915): Recitative*

Abstract: The article examines the ways in which American Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff (1894–1976) rewrites and compiles excerpts from US archival legal records in his epic-like *Testimony. The United States (1885–1915): Recitative* (published from 1965 to 1978) so as to represent the social and economic changes, particularly within the context of industrial accidents and child labor, during the late phase of the Industrial Revolution in America. As is argued, the poet's often uncritically accepted assertion that in his 'recitatives' he engages with depositions of authentic witnesses given in a court of law in an unbiased, objective manner is not confirmed either in close reading or in the juxtaposition of particular fragments of the book with the original documentary material on which they are based.

Keywords: Charles Reznikoff, testimony, witness, archive, recitative, machine, the Industrial Revolution

Charles Reznikoff's poems, at first glance informed by extreme economy of language to the point of making his verse flattened (anti-poetic), are arguably a sophisticated demonstration of the ways in which linguistic codes are conditioned by the various intertextual contexts they grow out from.¹ Initially, in the 1920s and 1930s, Imagism and, later, Objectivism provided him with a method of harboring the language in immediate experience, notably relating to visual perception of the *hic et nunc*. A degree in law and practice as an attorney became instrumental in understanding the functions of legal language, the roles performed by the witness, and the intricacies hidden in oral and written depositions. In particular, the appeal of documents and criminal records resulted in a set publications, called "recitatives," which probe the relationship between law and justice. The title's generic classification of *Testimony* as "recitative" refers not only to the world of operas, oratorios and cantatas, where it is understood as a type of rhythmically free vocal utterance that aims to imitate ordinary speech (thus providing a stark contrast

1. The article, in an altered form, is part of a planned monograph study under the working title *Disarchiving Anguish: Charles Reznikoff and the Modalities of Witnessing*.

to tuneful arias), but to the ancient Greek song of lamentation, a monody, which later gave rise to the development of recitative. In fact, the secondary – and indirect – association seems more appropriate to the whole idea, both as for the language and the subject matter. The suitability of the term that Reznikoff chooses lies both in its proximity to spoken language and its remoteness from the lyrical, thanks to which the recitative mode can more adequately emulate the way of giving testimony by a witness in a court of law. On the other hand, this type of verse enables a convenient division of the original prose sentences into naturally sounding rhythmic groups of words or phrases so as to achieve effects often associated with (albeit not limited to) poetry: the staccato of short, repeated, anaphoric lines, which convey emotions through the very structure and its location within the larger design of a stanza. In short, the recitative form allows for an indirect, controlled expression but without resorting to verbosity and abstract language of affect. *Testimony. The United States (1885–1915): Recitative*, Reznikoff’s life-long project of prodigious length, written over a period of fifty years up to 1976 (in fact, never finished), resonates with two time perspectives: first, it draws mainly on criminal records from the 19th century, the time of the Industrial Revolution; second, its subsequent installments accompany the mid-section of the 20th century, when the United States becomes a world superpower. While suffusing carefully selected archival sources with a late modernist idiom, the poet implicitly problematizes “narratives of national belonging and the apparatus of national constructions.”² However, accepting this assertion as valid and justified in the text of *Testimony*, the present article assumes a more limited and rudimentary perspective, concentrating on the ways Reznikoff constructs narratives based on archival material, drawing on authentic legal cases, so as to extract from them meanings that were not *visible* (or perhaps *absent*) in the forms they were originally recorded for purely legal purposes.

Reznikoff’s intended purpose behind compiling *Testimony* has frequently invited critics to interpret the book as the statement of a poet-witness.³ This is partly implied by the poet himself when, in an interview, he draws an analogy between his poetry of recitative and a deposition given in a court of law.⁴ Michael

2. Ian Davidson, *Radical Spaces in Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 88.

3. See: Paul Auster, “The Decisive Moment,” in: *Charles Reznikoff. Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1984), 158–160; Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena. Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 46–47.

4. “By the term ‘objectivist’ I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law. . . Now suppose in a court of law, you are testifying in a negligence case. You cannot get up on the stand and say, ‘The man was negligent.’ That is a conclusion of fact.

Heller asserts that the testimonial poems are “able to speak for themselves,”⁵ but the corollary of such a line of reasoning would be not only that *Testimony* is merely a factual report couched in the words of an impartial witness, but also that its meaning comes down to communicating the content and nothing more, thus disregarding the possibility that “facts are produced by acts of inquiry.”⁶ In this regard, the poet’s explanation that “the speakers whose words I use are all giving testimony about what they actually lived through” seems a bit naïve and, even more importantly, not confirmed in close reading.⁷ As will be demonstrated, the experience of reading the book is much more demanding as it is a highly structured text, created from excerpts that are deliberately altered to produce particular effects and/or gain additional meanings. If the judicial metaphor of the poet as a witness has any justification, it is different than the one given by Reznikoff himself. The poems are not factual reports, but verbal constructs reaching beyond the threshold of the factual.

Allen Ginsberg remarks that Reznikoff is exceptional in one respect – his interest “in what actually happened,”⁸ displaying as he unwaveringly does an attitude of openness and mindfulness directed at the world outside and not at his own perspective on what has actually taken place in front of his eyes. One of the most legalistic writers, he is arguably least judgmental. Such a stance is reflected both in early and late works, where Reznikoff either records in a photographic manner human experience within industrialized urban landscape; shows in carefully compiled stories the quotidian existence of his anguished parents while they lived in Russia and settled down in New York; sketches bits from American and Jewish history in his styled adaptations; or, last but not least, builds up a criminal history of the USA in his use of court reports and testimonies. This, in practice, means a direct confrontation with the material at hand, be it visual, oral or documentary, so as to strive for a purity of transmission (obviously, a utopian project), unencumbered by the emotional lenses of the one who transmits – the poet, the family chronicler, the historian, the translator, but, ultimately, the witness. In fact, as will be demonstrated, silent observation and appropriation of found testimonies are not always given priority over subjective expression.

What you’d be compelled to say is how the man acted. Did he stop before he crossed the street? Did he look? The judges of whether he is negligent or not are the jury in that case and the judges of what you say as poet are the readers. That is, there is an analogy between testimony in the courts and the testimony of a poet.” See: L. S. Dembo, “[An Interview with] Charles Reznikoff,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1969, 194–195.

5. Michael Heller, “The Modernity of Charles Reznikoff,” in: *Charles Reznikoff. Man and Poet*, 174.

6. Bruce Holsapple, “Poetic Design in Reznikoff’s *Testimony*,” *Sagetrieb*, vol. 13, no. 1&2, 1994, 123.

7. See: Dembo, “[An Interview with] Charles Reznikoff,” 202.

8. Allen Ginsberg, “Reznikoff’s Poetics,” in: *Charles Reznikoff. Man and Poet*, 148.

As the history of the reception of Reznikoff's works shows, from a relatively obscure author of post-Imagistic verse, rather simply written *artless* novels, and ostensibly monotonous recitatives serialized in an often predictable manner, he is now becoming rediscovered as a distinct man of letters, bent on composing texts that are innovative in terms of their highly crafted structure, which in the past often went unnoticed, and the poet's expert ability to manipulate documentary material so as to achieve particular effects in his own, appropriated texts. The label of Objectivist, so far and so long taken for granted, can now be contested as not necessarily required or, at most, optional in scholarly analytical investigations. As Ian Davidson asserts: "The variety of his output in terms of style, form and subject matter would mean that to fit him into any one trajectory of literary history would limit the possible readings of his work."⁹ In order to locate himself in the afore-postulated – liberating – critical perspective, the English critic draws attention to the centrality of one subject matter to which Reznikoff would obsessively return: language. To which, in my opinion, we may add the problems of the translatability of one linguistic code into another, and the addressability of literature, poetry in particular.

Formally, *Testimony* covers four chronological periods in US 'criminal' history, from 1885 to 1915, each of which is considered in geographical (South, North, West) and thematic ("Machine Age," "Negros," "Mining," "Domestic Violence," etc.) categories. The category is an important structural element, comprising as it almost often does an interlocking series of numbered "recitatives," as the author prefers to call each autonomous verse unit. Even if the text as a whole resembles an epic form, there is no identifiable plot development – recitatives are delivered with verbal simplicity and rhetoric flatness. Notably, "Machine Age" sections depict workers who are killed or whose bodies are mutilated in industrial accidents, but while *re*-constructing the events, Reznikoff refrains from commenting on them. Instead, the circumstances of atrocious occurrences are often sketched in a way suggesting only their appalling character or inevitability. This strategy may imply that the reader is offered a simple synopsis of a document, without any visible trace of tampering with its content. However, to claim so would be to "conflate historical events with rhetorical events, even in the case of law reports."¹⁰ The distinction that Reznikoff makes between the facts of the law cases and "conclusions of facts," which are less important for him when it comes to an act of witnessing, should not be ignored.¹¹ The experience of the poet-witness browsing through legal documents is vicarious but, at the same time, he is not positioned entirely

9. Davidson, *Radical Spaces in Poetry*, 94.

10. Holsapple, "Poetic Design in Reznikoff's *Testimony*," 128.

11. Dembo, "[An Interview with] Charles Reznikoff," 195.

outside the context of the given case. “I see something and it moves me and I put it down as I see it” refers here primarily to the act of reading.¹² Bearing in mind the fact that the major compositional and writing strategy in *Testimony* is selection, Reznikoff ceases to be a pursuer of objectivity. What he reports on in particular recitatives is basically his own reaction to the legal cases. Still, the focus on facts and the disregard for conclusions are important vectors for understanding the intricacy of his approach.

Probing the intricacy beneath Reznikoff’s apparently simple language and his poetic style in *Testimony* so as to define their distinct qualities, Joanna Orska points to the presence of two levels of meaningfulness in all legal parlance: the referential and the non-referential. On the first level, the words, phrases and sentences strive for primary meanings; on the second – which is, in fact, jurisprudential meta-language – there is no reference to actual phenomena or things, but, conversely, to other lexemes of legal idiom. In view of this distinction, Reznikoff’s testimonial project “can be understood in terms of the legal notion of ‘intra-semiotic’ translation,”¹³ aiming at purifying criminal records of the excesses of legal *verbiage* to regain the referential meanings of the witnesses’ experience. The notion derives from theories of translation (the one evoked by Orska is by Polish scholar Edward Balcerzan), and may cover various kinds of rendition understood in a structuralist way – for example, numerous forms of intertextuality in literature, a remake movie, or a cover song. “Reznikoff’s ‘making of America,’ Orska convincingly argues, can be seen as an instance of intra-semiotic translation from legal language into legal language – in order to rephrase things and make them precisely understandable.”¹⁴ The postulated alteration of one discursive corpus into another – in other words, enabling the movement from the legal into the legal-poetic – is part of a much more common and broader set of the poet’s preoccupations in the field of language renditions. Preparing concise definitions of technical terms for the encyclopedia *Corpus Juris* in the 1930s was certainly an analogical act of ‘translation’ within legal discourse; and the same could be said for his life-long penchant for reformulating biblical stories or accounts from records of America’s early history into versed summaries. To recognize that the volumes of *Testimony* are “translations of what ‘Others’ had lived through,” however, does not, in my opinion, fully grasp the scope and complexity of Reznikoff’s whole project. The representation of criminal records as short portions of versed text, which are marked by discovered (regained, imposed) melody and rhythm of common

12. Dembo, “[An Interview with] Charles Reznikoff,” 194.

13. Joanna Orska, “Sincerity and Objectification,” in: *Exo(e)rcising Modernism*, ed. Mikołaj Wiśniewski (Warszawa: SWPS, 2014), 65.

14. Orska, “Sincerity and Objectification,” 65.

speech is not only a translation (intra-semiotic) of language and experience, but, significantly, an interpretation. Both processes are not consecutive but simultaneous. Searching for clarity and purity of expression, Reznikoff-witness engages with the experience of other witnesses trying to unveil the core of *their* truth, and this always comes at the cost of a reduction or twist of the original intent – not perceptible in a reading act, but detectable in the intertextual juxtapositions of the recitatives and originary documents they spring from. Put differently, the author of *Testimony* not only translates the selected fragments but yields control over their meaning in a way that is by no means negligible (for example, by seriously decontextualizing them).

The poem below is part of a long series titled “Machine Age,” one of the most frequently recurring thematic strains in *Testimony*:

All revolving shafts are dangerous
but a vertical shaft,
neither boxed nor guarded against,
most dangerous.

The girl’s work for the company was changed
to sweeping the floors:
among other places the floor of a room
where the shaft in a passageway—
between the wall and a machine—
ran from the floor to the ceiling.
In sweeping around it one morning
her apron was caught
and drawn about the shaft
and she was whirled around
striking the wall and machinery.¹⁵

The recitative brings into focus the vulnerability of a human being that – not alert enough in the vicinity of the revolving element of a factory machine – ends up the ‘prey’ of industrial technology, literally being swirled around like an element of a merry-go-round. It is divided into a four-line long warning, which is followed by what appears to be a demonstration of possible consequences in case the rules of required precautions are ignored. The juxtaposition of the notice, a rather obvious one, and a dire finale of insouciance (although we do not learn whether the worker survives the accident), as well as the mention of the “girl” as the victim moves the poem onto another plane of interpretive consideration.

15. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 231.

The person affected is a minor (age not specified), and from the way the whole episode is rendered by Reznikoff one may have the impression that her pitiful end serves an instructive purpose.

The source document that Reznikoff draws on contains a detailed account of a “Negligence of Master” case, in which a certain Jessie Mary Stickling, aged 17, is brought again before the Court of Appeals, after she sued the Baltimore subsidiary of the American Tobacco Co. for being seriously injured as a result of the company’s negligence, and recovered a judgment for \$ 6,000 redress. In a statement of objections to the decision, the appellant (the ATC) files a legal pleading to complain about the matter on appeal (the appeal is, in the end, dismissed). Seen in this light, the recitative seems a bit misleading as the “Negligence of Master” aspect of the incident is not explicitly given to the reader, thus signaling the possibility that what is described is an instance of misfortune. But it is not. Plus, in a roundabout way, it raises at least one important issue – the prevalence of child labor in the US at the turn of the 20th century. One of the judges before whom the case is argued says:

Cases between master and servant have been so numerous in this state, as well as elsewhere, that it is generally difficult to discuss one of that class without simply repeating what has been already said and announced as the law applicable to them. The precise question whether a master can be held liable for leaving unprotected and unguarded a smooth shaft in a place where one inexperienced in machinery and shafting will be called in the line of her duty, without warning to her, has not been before this court; but the principles applicable to it have been frequently stated.¹⁶

In the rapidly expanding industrial cities of the US in the late 19th century, child labor became rife, and minors were hired in numerous fields of industry from meatpacking to textile manufacturing to brick production to mining to chimney sweeping, to name but a few. Many of them came from the families of newly arrived immigrants, as is instanced by Reznikoff; therefore, the main reason for seeking jobs was more than obvious: acute poverty. Even though in general US labor unions tended to oppose employing children in factories, the rationale for it was not grounded in ethics or empathy – children were competitive in the market, permitted to take up work that might otherwise go to adults. Likewise, the moral aspect of the problem is not the issue in the legislative that underpins the court’s decision in the Jessie case. In his outline of the evolution of US child labor policies from the early 19th century to the mid-1970s (the most

16. *The Atlantic Reporter*, “American Tobacco Co. v. Strickling,” vol. 41, 1898, West Publishing CO., 1084.

recent period referring to employment in agriculture), Hugh D. Hindman points to the fact that as late as in 1900, Northern statutes restricting child labor in manufacturing were initially prompted by the right to schooling for minors (which was not compulsory in all areas, but valued nonetheless). The age standards were different in different states, and the laws “were enforced (or not enforced) with varying degrees of vigor.”¹⁷ During the same period, in much of the South, the enactment of progressive child labor law was being delayed. The consideration of legislative restrictions to address the problem came first in 1903, in Alabama and both Carolinas, where statutes banned the work of minors under twelve.

From the early 1890s up to the early years of the 20th century, companies and factories were legally prevented by courts from resorting to the usual lines of defense for industrial mishaps that befell on underage employees. The language of the law concerning young laborers was altered, and, in effect, courts opened a vista “for judicial interpretations of the statutory changes being wrought by reformers in the form of child labor laws.”¹⁸ At the beginning of new century, a number of courts recognized the constitutional character of those ordinances, but even more significantly, a new understanding of the enactments was formulated, namely, that the aim of child labor legislature was to forestall accidents in the workplace. It is almost exactly within the framework of those alterations, from 1892 to 1898, that Reznikoff selects stories and puts them into a meaningful sequence; however, the horrific scenes give the impression of occurring very far from the judicial gaze. The question of whether children or youngsters have or have not been considered as wholly inexperienced in the use of machinery and able to comprehend the perils attendant upon the work is sometimes explicitly addressed in the recitatives, but in certain cases – in Jessie’s accident, for example – omitted.

In the form presented in *Testimony*, the accident of a seventeen-year-old girl becomes meaningful and clearer – also in legal terms as a general problem – in the context of the whole series of recitatives that Reznikoff puts together to demonstrate their thematic mutuality. Jessie’s case is the second out of the eleven relating to analogical occurrences.¹⁹ The links between them are of different kinds: the underage (“a boy of fourteen,” “he was not quite sixteen”); the underage immigrants (“his knowledge of English, to say the least, / [was] imperfect,” “the boys [thirteen and eight, respectively] had just been brought to the country by their parents, / and neither boy spoke any English”); the ‘spinning’ cause of the injury

17. Hugh D. Hindman, “Evolution of US Child Labor Policy,” in: *The World of Child Labor: A Historical and Regional Survey*, ed. Hugh D. Hindman, (Boston: M. E. Shape, 2009), 483.

18. James D. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Origins of Child Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 153.

19. See: Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 230–239.

suffered (“the shaft . . . revolving,” “the revolving shafts,” “the machine consisted of a revolving table”); the mutilation of bodies, and wounds as the finale of every episode (“the boy’s hand . . . crashed under the plunger,” “[the boy] lying at the foot of the stairs / with a pool of blood near his head,” “[the boy’s] three fingers of his left hand were cut off,” “his right eye [...] [was] blinded,” “the hot metal [...] splashing into his eyes and – blinding him”). Instead of exploring the loopholes in the law at the time, Reznikoff communicates the problem indirectly, through the formal arrangement of the scenes by the principle of what may be called *border* analogies.

The absence of any redemptive conclusion to Reznikoff’s *re*-presentation of violent acts and prevalent victimhood in a way that would endow them with significance within the context of national history re-centers the interpretive reading of *Testimony. The United States (1885–1915): Recitative* on the pained or mutilated body as spectacle to be lived through by witnesses. In his critical essay, Justin Parks argues that there exists an identifiable relation between the violence perpetrated in the past and the social fragmentation that Reznikoff saw in the US at the time he composed his collages of excerpts. The link is established “by casting the body – torn, injured,” maimed through machine violence, as well as “dehumanizing labor [...] in a central role.”²⁰ Such a thematic link is best demonstrated in one of the most representative series of recitatives under the title “Machine Age.” The mid-poem, numbered “6,” shows how diverse the causes of industrial accidents can be, and in the end, arguably, puts into question the notion of human negligence as the main factor leading to personal tragedies:

The company that ran the worsted mill began doing its own mending of the belts.
A belt manufacturer would unite the joints by hydraulic pressure,
but the worsted company trimmed the ends
and put them together with cement.
The air in the spinning-room was kept moist
so that the machines might spin the better,
but the moisture was apt to loosen a cemented joint.
Whatever the reason, while a carpenter was on his knees
fixing the floor of the spinning room,
a belt
more than seventy feet in length
and on a pulley revolving ever so many feet a minute
parted
at a joint the company had mended.
One end struck the carpenter:
broke the glasses he was wearing

20. Justin Parks, “Charles Reznikoff’s 1934 *Testimony* and Idiom of Violence,” *Criticism*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2017, 50.

and drove the glass into his eyes,
blinding one eye
and injuring the sight of the other.
So that he could not see beyond a few inches
and would soon lose whatever sight he had.²¹

The recitative opens with a highly technical description of the ‘unfortunate’ changes in the process of making a high-quality type of wool yarn (typically used in the making of tailored garments or carpeting) introduced by the managers of the worsted mill. However, the exact reason for the accident that follows in the production hall is far from obvious. There are at least three explanatory options but, in the end, each of them seems undermined as not certain or direct: (1) the mending of the belt is no longer delegated to an outside, professional company so as to cut down on production costs, as a result of which the belt, poorly maintained, becomes more likely to break up; (2) the high level of moisture in the air is kept to increase the efficiency of spinning, but this causes the loosening of a cement joint; (3) (less overtly implied) the victim did not adhere to the occupational health and safety standards, or, even more probably, had not been given any instructions in this regard at all. “Whatever the reason” in the eighth line annihilates all such speculations. It is the information that “a belt” “parted” that becomes crucial, and this is given further prominence by the fact that the noun and the verb form the shortest lines in the poem. Arguably, what is communicated here is the lack of responsibility and control at the same time. It is worth noting that Reznikoff narrows the focus from the initial, more general part to the specific instance, and this is signaled not only at the level of content, but also by the lexical shift from plural to singular: from “the belts” in the longest line to “a belt” in the shortest. There is a sense that some impending misfortune is detectable almost from the very beginning.

The poem is numbered “6.” in a long section titled “Machine Age,” which suggests that the anonymous carpenter is perhaps more than a singular victim of negligence (his employer’s or his own), but instead one of a large group of people affected by the process of industrialization and changes in American society, which follow in its wake. The tragedy occurs in the mill and, to the best of the reader’s recognition, is caused by machinery – no other definite reason is provided. An analogical sense of fate that inevitability that goes far beyond the notion of negligence (i.e., human error) is reiterated in other elements of the sequence. In recitative “5.” a newly employed immigrant worker, paralyzed by his ignorance and by a foreman who is prone to losing his temper whenever something goes

21. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 375.

wrong, tries to free a clogged cotton-picker by cleaning the space between the rolls. Although the consequences are, as can be easily imagined, disastrous, Reznikoff refrains from describing them in detail, focusing instead on the machine elements, whose beater knives “move rapidly,” thus remaining invisible to the human eye:

Within the beater
were knives
moving rapidly
one could see nothing of them but a blur;
and he reached down into the beater to remove the cotton.²²

The setting in recitative “4.” is a plant converting fat into tallow, where one “Dixon,” walking through narrow passages to deliver a private message – an activity that is outside his work duties – does not see that one of the tanks with hot liquid has had its cover removed (by one of the co-workers skimming fat), plunges into it and is “scalded to death.”²³

The three adjacent recitatives give descriptions of analogical fatal occurrences that are caused by or lead to blindness, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. As a short sequence, the poems look like a tripartite (almost didactic) demonstration of human negligence: the carpenter’s loss of sight could have, theoretically, been avoided by the maintenance of better technology on the production line; similarly, the immigrant employee does not see the revolving knives because he “had never been shown how to free the feed-rolls if clogged,” and Dixon does not spot the lack of a cover on the tank, being busy carrying private correspondence (“to a fireman in the engine-house/ from the fireman’s brother”). The blindness, as an interlocking motif, is either a cause or a consequence of unfortunate happenstance, but it can also be perceived as a factor beyond the instance of human negligence in the “machine” context at the workplace. The sequence as a whole comprises eight recitatives, which overlap not only in terms of the shared subject matter, but are given a further, much broader dimension by being hemmed in within decisively meaningful opening and closing frame narratives.

Apart from numbers, the opening sections to “Machine Age” have also subtitles – not a usual formal element in *Testimony* – that direct the interpretive paths of the reader away from local, concrete specificities of labor accidents to the sphere of generalities. “Life in Town”²⁴ (numbered “2.”) gives a sense of urban space being invaded by an overwhelming, inhuman clangor: “the noise of the iron works – /

22. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 274.

23. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 373.

24. Italics are used in all three subtitles.

of the air drills, hammers, riveting machines [...]”²⁵; in “The Noise of Civilization” (numbered “1.”) the “hum of machinery” and “the noise of wagons on the public highways” are strengthened by the shouts of “the crowd watching a baseball game on a Sunday afternoon, / perhaps as many as two or three thousand”²⁶; the third one, “Life in the Country” moves away from the world of humans, drawing our attention to a view of “about a hundred horses and cows – with maggots and flies – / lying about the rendering factory / to be turned into a fertilizer.”²⁷ The pervasive mechanical noise, the recognition of a rapidly (if almost mechanically) increasing population, along with the bleak vision of rotting animal corpses awaiting to be mechanically processed into compost, all constitute major coordinates for our assessment of the world extracted from archives and *re-presented* in a *processed* literary form. As Bruce Holsapple notes, “[w]ith this mechanical acceleration and increase in productive power, we seem to have gone beyond a human proportion. The machines are running society, and society is accelerating beyond social control.”²⁸ Such an interpretive line allows the reader to treat *Testimony* as a poetically designed social and moral critique of a very specifically demarcated period in American history – the final phase of the Industrial Revolution. The situations and occurrences evoked by Reznikoff in his recitative – regardless of the perspective he assumes, that is, whether he resorts to narrative close-ups or generalizations – parallel the issues and facts known from historical documents of the era.

As early as at the beginning of the 19th century, a number of inventions accelerated the speed of cotton production, for example, rotating-flyer spinning wheels or gins separating seeds from fiber, all of which stimulated demand for it. Until the Industrial Revolution, the majority of business enterprises had been family-based and targeted local and regional markets. With the introduction of then-cutting-edge technologies in agriculture, the 19th century saw an unprecedented increase in productivity, as a result of which small producers did not stand a chance in a competition with big manufacturers. By the 1880s, the surplus of corps and animal meat seriously reduced farmers’ incomes, but their expenses were constantly rising (railroad charges, the cost of seed and fodder, etc.). The abundance of produce went hand in hand with a rise in bankruptcies. But above all, the period is mainly associated with changes in heavy industry – the narrow specification of workers’ tasks on assembly lines and new sources of power (electricity superseding steam engines) that, along with other factors,

25. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 372.

26. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 372.

27. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 372.

28. Holsapple, “Poetic Design in Reznikoff’s *Testimony*,” 140.

gave rise to so-called mass production. This radical technological revolution was accompanied by population growth – a world trend that in the case of the United States assumed an exceptionally large scale due to the virtual flood of immigrants arriving at the turn of the century.²⁹

However, in *Testimony*, a social critique of the historical era, even if implied, does not exhaust a possible interpretation of methodically arranged excerpts from archival material. Arguably, it is also the formal structure of recitatives as arranged into series that may raise the reader's reflection to a different level of understanding. The concluding poem to the "Machine Age" departs from social issues, industrial accidents, and instances of (probable) human negligence leading to the death or mutilation of the body:

The storm came up suddenly
and lightning
struck a telephone pole, splitting it
and sending electricity along the wires.
A quarter of a mile away
a doctor was sitting in his house
quietly reading a book under his telephone –
and was found in his chair
dead, his hair on fire
and red lines along his neck, chest and side.³⁰

The problem that emerges from reading the poem is to establish its thematic link to the preceding parts of the sequence. One may assert that it is the invention of the telephone combined with the development of ways by means of which electricity can be transmitted over long distances, and with lack of proper safety devices in the former that would preclude lightning surges. Accordingly, the doctor should have been more cautious during the storm and not sit next to the telephone. The death that comes "suddenly" is perhaps a result of negligence in the sphere of technology. At the same time, however, the use of "suddenly" semantically rhymes with the idea of rapid changes in all sectors of American society that the whole "Machine Age" conveys. The recognition of this may bring to mind something else – the unpredictable character of the doctor's death, and, more generally, the symptomatic emergence in the late 19th century of a power that is beyond human control. The injuries suffered by the immigrant worker and the carpenter, Dixon's and the doctor's deaths, occur in the ways that appear

29. See: James S. Olson and Shannon L. Kenny, *The Industrial Revolution. Key Themes and Documents* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2015), xiv–xxi.

30. Reznikoff, *Testimony*, 376–376.

inexorable and inescapable – and all this is possible by the choice of language, as well as the poetic form that Reznikoff carefully chooses to structure the stories extracted from original archival documents.

The above brief discussion of Reznikoff's book leads to at least two, not necessarily congruent, conclusive remarks. First, *Testimony*, through its accumulation of gruesome scenes from the past, implies the lasting character of violence that characterized the formation of the United States as a modern nation. Attempting its critical insight into history from the standpoint of the present moment (or perhaps two moments: reading records and altering them into verse, it rejects a teleological hold on national history understood as a process of gradually unveiling, all-pervading progress, as a result of which human anguish would attain its redemptive finale. Accordingly, Michael Davidson underlines Reznikoff's camouflaged preoccupation with the idea of (attainable) national unity – visible best in the choice of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" as the title of the first, magazine installment of the testimonial series – which ultimately becomes compromised: "[He] rejects the idea of a unified national story based on consensus."³¹ Rather than subsuming the particularity of individual experience within the larger framework of shared cultural context and common history, the author of *Testimony* limits his perspective only to "the voices of multiple witnesses as they appear in legal testimony... [and thus implicitly] foregrounds the institutional legal structure within which a national history is written."³² Examined from such a perspective, historical optimism, with its conviction that the nation born out of people's heroism and the democratic foundations they laid must inevitably lead to the present greatness, proves its inadequacy. "The wounds of the past [suffered by concrete individuals] are far from being healed," as Justin Parks notes, and Reznikoff's disarchived trial records bring "an elegiac notion of [American] history."³³

Second, the very title of the book, *Testimony*, is "a conceit, an extended trope,"³⁴ and Reznikoff, with all his manifest devotion to *facts* uncovered in old-dated criminal records, fits his narratives into a consistently sustained rhetorical framework. The poems are, at best, partly objective *re*-presentations of *facts*, and the author is not an invisible and unbiased recorder of the words of others. Notably, his intricate approach consists in dividing original testimonies into fragments that are worth being processed and included in recitatives and those that, for various artistic reasons, are to be omitted; he hides or removes motifs for behaviors, exact causes

31. Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations. Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 169.

32. Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 170.

33. Parks, "Charles Reznikoff's 1934 *Testimony* and Idiom of Violence," 49.

34. Holsapple, "Poetic Design in Reznikoff's *Testimony*," 143.

of accidents, and mitigating circumstances given in a court room. In particular, Reznikoff, as the author of “Machine Age” emerges as highly judgmental, pointing to the atrocious consequences of the Industrial Revolution in the US. Last by not least, the material he draws on is not a verbatim transcription of authentic depositions, but merely a summary of those testimonies that a judge selects for the justification of the verdict.

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