The Banality of the Document: Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* and Ineloquent Empathy

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This essay argues that Charles Reznikoff's Holocaust *is a response to the controversy that broke out among Jewish intellectuals in the wake of the trial of Adolf Eichmann. I demonstrate that Reznikoff's documentary poems, drawn from transcripts of the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials, work to undercut the politicization of survivor testimony in the Israeli prosecution's case against Eichmann. Reznikoff implicitly sides with Hannah Arendt against the sentimental Zionist cause for which his wife Marie Syrkin and Attorney General Gideon Hausner fought. My central claim is that* Holocaust *appropriates survivors' language in order to demonstrate the limits and political dangers of appropriating emotion. As such, Reznikoff's objectivist approach offers an alternative to recent work on historical trauma, models that often call on us to identify with survivors in order to understand the Holocaust.*

Keywords: Charles Reznikoff / Holocaust / Hannah Arendt / Eichmann Trial / trauma studies

> He would come, call out four men — I was always the fifth — and say to us: "You see this finger?" (He pointed to his thumb.) We answered: "Yes." He would ask: "What is this?" "A finger." He would say to us: "No, that is not a finger. If I do this (he pointed his thumb downwards), you lie down; if I do this (he pointed his thumb upwards), you stand." And he moved it this way and that, in either direction, and we lay down and we got up, we lay down, and we raised ourselves up, until we had no more breath left. I always used to watch him, and if I saw that he was not looking, I did not get up. If I saw he was looking in my direction, I lay down. If I saw that he was watching, I began to get up.
>
> — Shim'on Srebrnik, testifying at the Eichmann Trial

Together with other Jewish workers
the lad was made to go through an exercise:
an officer would come on Saturdays
and would take four at a time out of a group of fifty
and say, "You see this finger?
If I move it this way, stand;
and if it moves that way,
lie down." It was up and down and up and down
until they were completely out of breath.
Finally, the officer took out his pistol
and shot those who did not stand up and were still lying down.

—Charles Reznikoff,
Holocaust

On June 6, 1961, after petitioning the court for permission to show a documentary film during a later session, Israeli attorney general Gideon Hausner called Shim'on Srebrnik as a prosecution witness in the case against Adolf Eichmann. It was to be a frame-breaking moment in one of the most sensational trials of the century. Charged with crimes against humanity and "crimes against the Jews with the intent to destroy the people," the defendant watched from a glass booth as Srebrnik testified to having survived his own execution. Of the 400,000 people taken to Chelmno, the first concentration camp in which Jews were exterminated by gas, Srebrnik was one of only a handful alive at the end of the war. He came to Chelmno in 1943, an agile and resourceful thirteen-year-old, and survived long enough to join the "work detail" responsible for dismantling the camp before the Russians arrived. His captors, however, had no intention of leaving anyone behind to report on their crimes, and it was finally a matter of fantastic luck that Srebrnik was able to testify in Jerusalem eighteen years later.

Just days before the Russians would take control of an abandoned camp, Nazi officers gruffly ordered five inmates from Srebrnik's group out of their barracks. They were led to a clearing and told to lie down on their stomachs, side by side; each had no doubt witnessed countless executions and knew to expect a bullet in the nape of the neck. When he heard the first shot, Srebrnik turned his head to see what had happened. The second shot followed shortly. "With the third," he recalled on the stand in Jerusalem, "I was hit by a bullet." Srebrnik remained unconscious for a few minutes—the bullet had passed through his throat, knocking out two teeth but not injuring his brain—and woke to find himself lying among the dead and dying. He soon managed to escape to a nearby farm. "When the Russians arrived," Srebrnik told the court, "I was sitting there looking through a hole in the stable wall. I did not know whether this was a dream or reality" (*TAE* I:1201). Within a few months Srebrnik was en route to Tel Aviv, fully healed, with a group of other Jews who had survived the death camps. Like Srebrnik, many of these traveled to Jerusalem years later to testify against the man who carried out the final solution with bureaucratic efficiency and "genuine zeal" (*TAE* V:2358).

Srebrnik's story first reached a wide audience from the Beth Ha'am (House of the People), the Jerusalem auditorium-turned-courtroom in which Adolf Eichmann was sentenced to death. The trial was broadcast over Israeli radio and covered extensively in the international media. Since then, Srebrnik's survival has had a complex afterlife in film and literature about the Holocaust, in works that define testimony outside the bounds of law. One of these works is a little-known collection by American modernist poet Charles Reznikoff, which incorporates some of Srebrnik's testimony without attribution. Reznikoff's *Holocaust* (1975) might be described as a book of documentary poems; it is a series of discrete narratives based on survivor testimony and courtroom affidavits from the transcripts of the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials. Each of these narratives, wrested from its judiciary context, is reset in the third person and retold in a flat, neutral tone with only minimal changes to the prosaic language of the original transcript. Early readers like Kathryn Shevelow praised *Holocaust*'s sparse documentary aesthetic as evoking "an emotionally-charged historical moment" (303). But more recent critics have either neglected the poem altogether or argued that Reznikoff's objectivism is incapable of doing justice to the subjective experiences of survivors to which trauma studies directs our attention. Susan Gubar, who has published one of the most extended readings of *Holocaust* to date in a comparative study of Holocaust literature, comes to this conclusion. Reading *Holocaust* alongside Denise Levertov's "During the Eichmann Trial" and Michael Hamburger's "In a Cold Season," Gubar writes: "Since the detachment on which Levertov's and Hamburger's Eichmann prided himself had so thoroughly been put into question, recent poets who investigate source materials repudiate the objectivity to which Reznikoff aspired" (164). And James E. Young goes so far as to suggest that it is "debatable" whether Reznikoff can even be read as a Holocaust poet (116).

It is important, however, to look at the historical context in which the poet's source materials are embedded in order to understand the stakes of *Holocaust*'s objectivist aesthetic. In the wake of the Eichmann Trial, an international controversy about the role of emotional survivor testimony in the adjudication of the Holocaust broke out among Jewish intellectuals. The controversy was particularly heated because of Israel's unabashedly political goals for the trial. As Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion openly proclaimed, the trial was intended both to remind the international community that it was obligated to support the only Jewish state on earth and to demonstrate to the younger generation that "Jews are not sheep to be slaughtered, but a people who can hit back" ("The Eichmann Case as Seen by Ben-Gurion"). Survivor testimony played a key role in Ben-Gurion's Zionist agenda. As Mark Osiel writes, survivors' emotional stories were used to rewrite the history of the Holocaust as the history of the Jewish people's "collective victimization, suffering, resistance, resurrection (from the ashes of failed assimilation), and, finally redemption as a powerful nation-state" (62). Srebrnik's terrifying story was a particularly vivid illustration of the allegory of political survival pursued by Attorney General Gideon Hausner, an allegory with which many took issue. Hannah Arendt was one of the earliest critics of Israel's instrumentalization of survivor

emotion, sparking a controversy with the *New Yorker* reports that would become *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Eichmann would have been convicted, Arendt wrote, even if the "hair-raising stories told over and over by witnesses" had not been part of the trial; this, however, "would have destroyed utterly, and without compromise," the Zionist agenda pursued by the prosecution (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 219).

During this controversy, Reznikoff was working as a typesetter for the *Jewish Frontier*, a labor Zionist publication edited by his wife Marie Syrkin, in which much of the debate played out. Syrkin was in fact one of Arendt's staunchest critics, eliciting a direct and aggressive response from the author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the *New York Review of Books*. My essay argues that Reznikoff's poem works to undercut the politicization of Jewish suffering in the Israeli prosecution's case against Eichmann, implicitly siding with Arendt against the sentimental Zionist cause for which both Syrkin and Attorney General Hausner fought. My central claim is that *Holocaust* appropriates language in order to demonstrate the limits of appropriating emotion or experience fundamental to the Eichmann Trial. And in this way Reznikoff's objectivist approach also offers an alternative to recent work on historical trauma, models that at times call on us to identify with survivors in order to understand the Holocaust. Reznikoff's aesthetic, however, is neither plainly documentary nor simply cautious. The often ineloquent phrasing that results from Reznikoff's decision to bracket the subjective dimension of the survivor testimony he quotes actually circles the poem back around to many of the same conclusions reached by trauma theorists such as Shoshana Felman and Giorgio Agamben, radically destabilizing the epistemological project it seems to pursue.

SPINNEFIX ON THE STAND

Reznikoff mines court transcripts for details about life in the camps that might be overlooked by bigger-picture accounts of the Holocaust. Building on the first of Ezra Pound's "rules" for Imagist verse (direct treatment of the thing), he foregrounds historical particulars over subjective expression throughout. It has become, in fact, something of a commonplace to call Reznikoff the most objective of the Objectivists, a group of second-wave modernists working in the Poundian tradition. Louis Zukofsky was the first to make this claim, in an influential outline of Objectivist poetry that made "special reference to the work of Charles Reznikoff." Even more recent (and more mainstream) critics — many of whom find the young Zukofsky's ambitious theorizing of little use — come to similar conclusions. One reviewer of Reznikoff's new collected poems, for example, sums up that volume's objectivism like this: "Things mean themselves so thoroughly it's crude and beautiful" (Clover A11). And while no one would call *Holocaust* beautiful, David Lehman, who is quoted on the back cover of the recent reprint of that volume, emphasizes the same patient simplicity in Reznikoff's treatment of catastrophe: "He lets reality speak for itself."

One might also say that survivors are allowed to speak for themselves, but Reznikoff's editorial process makes this claim somewhat precarious, particularly

when *Holocaust* is compared to other kinds of testimonial literatures. The poet edits out any trace of witnesses' voices when appropriating their language and omits those moments that seem problematic, melodramatic, or unbelievable — moments that recent critics would latch onto as examples of subjective trauma in which survivors belatedly experience their pasts in the act of testifying itself. Reznikoff, on the other hand, seems uninterested in the scene of testimony and edits out the context of the courtroom altogether, translating survivors' statements on the stand into free-floating narratives absolutely divorced from the circumstances of their enunciation. Nor does Reznikoff give us any sense that these stories belong to discrete subjects who experience the world in different ways. Each narrative is recounted in the third person, with little to help us distinguish among the various he's and she's whose experiences we read about.

Read in light of recent theorizing, *Holocaust* appears a work of quiet realism untouched by the epistemological uncertainty at the heart of trauma studies. As articulated by writers like Giorgio Agamben, Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, much of this work begins with the assumption that the historical truth of the Holocaust is irreducible to objective statements of fact. Agamben writes that rigorous studies like Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* have sufficiently clarified the historical and material circumstances in which the Holocaust took place; the aporia of Auschwitz, however, remains: "a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (124). This aporia, for Agamben and others, renders Holocaust testimony performative rather than constative. According to Shoshana Felman, testimony "addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what happens in impact that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations" (Felman and Laub 5). Trauma must be experienced belatedly, in the act of giving testimony, a temporary and ephemeral performance that makes available only in moments of its witnessing a fleeting but sharp pulsation of historical awareness. Testimony, Felman writes elsewhere, is a "narrative performance which no statement (no report and no description) can replace" (58); it is fundamentally nondiscursive.

I want to look more closely at the ways in which Reznikoff's objectivist aesthetic seems incompatible with trauma-studies approaches before returning *Holocaust* to the historical controversy in which the poem's source materials are embedded. It is in fact striking just how dated Reznikoff's poem initially appears. Consider the beginning of the third poem in the "Escapes" section, the poem drawn from Srebrnik's court testimony.

> One Saturday, when he was thirteen,
> he was taking a walk with his father in the ghetto of Lodz;
> they heard shots
> and saw people falling.
> And then his father fell down, too:
> shot and killed. (*H* 96–7)

As elsewhere in *Holocaust*, the tone here is flat and the syntax evenly paced; line-breaks facilitate a narrative composure at odds with the content of the lines themselves. Rather than watch a survivor relive the past, we listen to an omniscient narrator unfold a plainly chronological story. This collapses the temporal gap between the historical event and the subject's belated experience of the event that is the hallmark of trauma studies.

Furthermore, instead of focusing on the scene of testimony, Reznikoff is throughout *Holocaust* drawn to the material details witnesses provide and to reported speech in particular. When the first-person "I" does appear, it is always spoken by a Nazi. Here, for example, is how Reznikoff presents Srebrnik's testimony about how inmates provided entertainment for prison guards.

> Together with other Jewish workers
> the lad was made to go through an exercise:
> an officer would come on Saturdays
> and would take four at a time out of a group of fifty
> and say, "You see this finger?
> If I move it this way, stand;
> and if it moves that way,
> lie down." It was up and down and up and down
> until they were completely out of breath.
> Finally, the officer took out his pistol
> and shot those who did not stand up and were still lying down. (*H* 98–9)

The episode ends here, and the stanza-break emphasizes the Nazi officer's tyrannous control of the situation by giving him the last word. We cannot even be sure that Srebrnik survives this game until Reznikoff again speaks of "the lad" further down the page.

One could, of course, argue that Reznikoff's formal constraints foreground the power dynamic of the camps, giving voice and stage-time to the Nazis while marginalizing the Jews. But when one compares this moment in Reznikoff's poem to the original court transcript, *Holocaust*'s objectivist aesthetic seems rather heavy-handed. This is how Srebrnik describes the jumping game in Jerusalem:

> On Sabbath days, he would come whenever he was in the mood for a little fun. He would come, call out four men — I was always the fifth — and say to us: "You see this finger?" (He pointed to his thumb.) We answered: "Yes." He would ask: "What is this?" "A finger." He would say to us: "No, that is not a finger. If I do this (he pointed his thumb downwards), you lie down; if I do this (he pointed his thumb upwards), you stand." And he moved it this way and that, in either direction, and we lay down and we got up, we lay down, and we raised ourselves up, until we had no more breath left. I always used to watch him, and if I saw that he was not looking, I did not get up. If I saw he was looking in my direction, I lay down. If I saw that he was watching, I began to get up. The others were getting up and lying down all the time. Once he told them to get up, and they were no longer able to do so, they had no breath left. He said to

> them: "You cannot get up?" They were not even able to speak. He asked me: "Spinnefix" (that is what he called me) "you, too, cannot stand up?" I answered, "Yes I can," and I got up, for I had not done all these exercises. He pulled out his revolver, went up to them and killed them. (*TAE* III:1199)

While Reznikoff gets Srebrnik's tone right, mixing gallows humor with detached matter-of-factness, he overlooks the parenthetical bid for agency hidden among the particulars of the witness's description. "I was always the fifth," Srebrnik claims proudly. Neither is the poet interested in the tactics that save Srebrnik's life once his number is finally up, focusing instead on the official rules of the game established and enforced by the Nazi officer. Known to this officer as "Spinnefix," an endearing nickname that means something like "skinny rascal," Srebrnik understands these rules and still has the presence of mind to use them to his advantage when it counts most. Readers of *Holocaust*, however, learn nothing of Srebrnik's wit; it seems but a matter of dumb luck that "the lad" reappears from one stanza to the next.

Furthermore, in editing out the retrospective element altogether—we have no sense that "the lad" is sitting across from Adolf Eichmann, narrating his own story—Reznikoff also overlooks the unsettling similarity between the jumping game at Chelmno and the performance required of Holocaust survivor-witnesses in Jerusalem. Some sixteen years after liberation, Srebrnik is again faced with an impossible task and again he responds, "Yes I can," this time to the jurists who ask if he can make his experience in the camps relevant in court. He takes the stand as Spinnefix, once more bending the rules in order to do what is asked of him.

> *Q.* Please describe [the jumping game].
> *A.* He used to do it specially . . .
> *Q.* Who was "he"?
> *A.* Obersturmbannführer Hans Bothmann, he did it on the Sabbath . . .
> *Presiding Judge.* Obersturmbannführer or Obersturmführer?
> *Witness Srebrnik.* Obersturmbannführer.
> *Presiding Judge.* That is a very high rank
> *Attorney General.* Are you sure of his rank?
> *Witness Srebrnik.* I once heard him speaking on the telephone, and he answered, "Obersturmbannführer."
> *Q.* Is that how you know?
> *A.* Yes.
> *Q.* Actually, he was of a much lower rank, as far as is known to us. Please continue. (*TAE* III:1199)

This exchange demonstrates one of the central conflicts of the trial, as the judges deflect the potentially overwhelming emotion of the survivor's testimony with factual questions. Srebrnik, however, is able to switch gears—certainly no small task considering the story he has prepared himself to deliver before the court (and before the international media). And he remains sure of himself even as it

becomes clear that the judges are testing him. He seems to understand the rules of the judicial game, eager to show that he can contribute to the court's findings.

The judges are most interested in learning the number of people exterminated at Chelmno during Srebrnik's internment. They will later cite Srebrnik in their written decision, using his testimony to corroborate claims that "victims were still being killed in gas vans" when Eichmann visited Chelmno (*TAE* V:2148).

Presiding Judge. Did they put 1,200 people to death every single day?

Witness Srebrnik. That was more or less every day. Sometimes they would have a break of one day, in order to grind the bones.

Q. From this it follows that they exterminated many tens of thousands there?

A. Yes, they exterminated many.

Q. One of the witnesses who preceded you gave much lower figures. Are you sure of your facts?

A. Yes.

Presiding Judge. Thank you, Mr. Srebrnik, you have concluded your testimony. (*TAE* III:1201)

When they ask, "Are you sure of your facts?", the judges bring to mind Bothmann's challenge: "you, too, cannot stand up?" The odds are certainly against Srebrnik being able to remember details as specific as the number of inmates exterminated per day, or against his ever having known this figure to begin with. And although he claims to be "sure of his facts," Srebrnik actually performs a sleight of hand here. He qualifies the statistics the presiding judge proposes ("more or less") and, in agreeing with the final sum, challenges the very idea that such things can be quantified. Many tens of thousands of deaths become simply "many." "Yes," Srebrnik says, "they exterminated many." The judge accepts his answer nonetheless, even comparing it to the "much lower figures" given by another witness, and dismisses Srebrnik from the stand after thanking him for his testimony.

I am not equating judicial procedure with the camps, but rather suggesting that Srebrnik relives or acts out his traumatic experience belatedly on the stand. He bears witness not only to life at Chelmno and the miraculous circumstances of his survival, but also to the meaning of the Holocaust for survivors forced to make their experiences legible to others. This is an example of the performative or belatedly traumatic dimension of survivor testimony that Reznikoff's *Holocaust* is ultimately unable to account for. The poem gives us no sense of the circumstances in which Srebrnik testifies, concentrating on what the survivor says rather than on how or where he says it. It is important to recognize, however, that Reznikoff's editorial practice here works to undercut the heroic element of Srebrnik's story, an element important to the triumphant narrative of Zionist survival into which his story was woven by the Israeli prosecution. While the rich performative dimension of Srebrnik's testimony is lost in Reznikoff's objectivist treatment, *Holocaust* counters the emotional appropriation on which Attorney General Hausner's case is built. I now turn to that context to flesh out the very different stakes of Reznikoff's aesthetics.

ADJUDICATING THE HOLOCAUST

The controversy raised by the Eichmann Trial was unprecedented because survivors had never before played a substantial role in the prosecution of Nazi crimes. In the Trial of the Major War Criminals at Nuremberg in 1945–46, an international military tribunal attempted for the first time to submit Nazi atrocities to the rule of law, struggling to find an idiom appropriate for judging unparalleled human rights violations. But instead of placing the Holocaust's victims at the center of the trial, the prosecution focused on Nazi "war crimes," only one of which involved the extermination of the Jews. As a consequence, specifically Jewish suffering was pushed to the margins, as were survivors themselves. The real achievement of the Nuremberg Trials was the enormous amount of documentary evidence that went into making the prosecution's case. Allied attorneys sifted through hundreds of thousands of Nazi records and photographs to compile "the first comprehensive definition and documentation to a non-Jewish audience of the persecution and massacre of the European Jewry during World War II" (Marrus 5).

It was not until Adolf Eichmann was brought before the District Court of Jerusalem that survivors would take center stage in the adjudication of the Holocaust. International politics, however, had changed significantly in the years between 1945 and 1961. While Europe was busy with the project of reconstruction, Israel had fought a war of independence and absorbed several waves of immigration. The Holocaust had receded into the background in the heterogeneous Jewish state, unfamiliar to non-European immigrants and a source of shame for younger Israelis. Although silenced by stigma, survivors remained precariously visible, reminders of a disturbing past that was neither well understood nor often discussed.[1] This was the context in which Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion announced that Eichmann had been kidnapped in Argentina and would be brought to Jerusalem to answer for his role in the Holocaust. The trial offered an historic opportunity for Israeli unity and national pedagogy, one on which Ben-Gurion intended to capitalize.

Working closely with Ben-Gurion, Attorney General Hausner developed a strategy for the trial that would do more to "touch the hearts of men" than the "efficient and simple" documentary approach used by the Nuremberg prosecution. While archival evidence would have sufficed to convict Eichmann "ten times over," Hausner felt that Israel "needed more than a conviction; we needed a living record of gigantic human and national disaster" (Hausner 291). He thus orchestrated a "procession of witnesses" who would give testimony before the court, calling on more than one hundred survivors in all. Most of these were selected not because they could provide specific evidence against Eichmann (though a handful had dealt with him directly), but because their stories would demonstrate the horrifying variety of Nazi atrocities. Hausner, as one recent critic has remarked, in this way reversed the conventional logic of the criminal trial. Rather than draw on witness testimony for his case against the defendant, the attorney general conceived of the trial itself as a forum for public testimony (Douglas 106). It would then be his

job, once these survivor-witnesses left the stand, to integrate their testimony into Ben-Gurion's heroic nationalist narrative.

Of the many critics who charged Israel with a lack of objectivity in the handling of the trial, Hannah Arendt's voice was perhaps the loudest and her criticism the most controversial. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she accused Hausner and Ben-Gurion, "the invisible stage manager of these proceedings," of pushing a political agenda so monumental that it eclipsed the real significance of the trial. While there could be no doubt that Eichmann was guilty, Arendt believed, there were serious questions to be asked about the nature of his guilt. Her provocative thesis about "the banality of evil" was intended to illustrate how standard criminal law was not equipped to deal with "administrative massacres" organized by the state. The prosecution, she charged, glossed over these issues by putting History in the dock and ignoring the mid-level bureaucrat in the glass booth. "In the eyes of the Jews, thinking exclusively in terms of their own history, the catastrophe that had befallen them under Hitler, in which a third of their people perished, appeared not as the most recent of crimes, the unprecedented crime of genocide, but on the contrary, as the oldest crime they could remember" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 267). Arendt felt that the prosecution's political narrative also obscured the collaborative role that Jewish Councils (*judenräte*) had played in the Holocaust. This was perhaps the single most controversial moment of the book (and the context in which Arendt infamously referred to Leo Baeck, the Chief Rabbi of Berlin, as "the Jewish Führer" and to Eichmann as a "recent convert to Zionism," linking Nazi deportation with Jewish nationalism).[2]

Arendt was particularly relentless toward the survivor-witnesses who testified before the court, saving some of her most acidic sarcasm for Hausner's "tragic multitude." But while her tone, which friend Gershom Scholem called "sneering" and often "malicious," is at times difficult to read, Arendt's disregard for survivors is actually a matter of legal philosophy (*jew as Pariah* 241). Survivors, she believed, had every right to be heard, but their stories did not belong in the courtroom. "The purpose of a trial," she wrote, "is to render justice, and nothing else; even the noblest of ulterior purposes . . . can only detract from the law's main business: to weigh the charges brought against the accused, to render judgment, and to mete out due punishment" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 253). It goes without saying that Arendt did not consider Ben-Gurion's nationalism a "noble purpose." But neither could the emotional testimony given by survivors do anything but get in the way of the "law's main business." Not only was such emotion easily appropriated, quickly becoming instrumental rather than expressive; it also obscured the facts at hand. "None of the participants in the trial," Arendt wrote, "ever arrived at a clear understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 263). Stunned by incommunicable emotion, they instead fell prey to the prosecution's reductive sentimental narrative.[3] Implicit in Arendt's criticism is the question that Reznikoff's method in *Holocaust* poses: if not in the courtroom, where do these stories belong?

An international backlash followed the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and Marie Syrkin, Reznikoff's wife, led the charge in the Jewish press. She

claimed that Arendt's work can only "pretend to be objective scholarship rather than tendentious exposition" and wondered this about Arendt's tone: "*If this be irony, at whom is it directed?* One does not have to be a Zionist to be shocked, or to 'misunderstand' the author's intent" ("The Clothes of the Empress" 346). In an article published in *Jewish Frontier*, the Labor Zionist journal for which both she and Reznikoff worked, Syrkin also accused Arendt of allowing an ethical deficit to become a methodological problem. According to Syrkin, Arendt's lack of sympathy with the members of the *Judenräte* was at the root of her book's many historical errors. Had Arendt been able to identify with the Jewish leadership, something made impossible by her opposition to Zionism, she would neither have distorted the facts nor dragged her argument beyond the "limits to which [even] polemical vulgarity should not descend" ("Miss Arendt Surveys the Holocaust" 8). "Whatever the heavy sins of the Jewish Councils," Syrkin writes, "let those certain that they would have first chosen death for themselves and their families judge them." Proximity to the suffering of others, Syrkin implies, inevitably produces proximity to historical truth. Arendt's "Olympian detachment," on the other hand, was at once a moral and an intellectual flaw.

Three years later, Hannah Arendt responded to these claims in *The New York Review of Books*, maintaining the terms of Syrkin's accusation but reversing its logic. She argues that the politics of sympathy promoted by Syrkin and "the Jewish establishment" is actually an "organized propaganda campaign to manipulate public opinion" ("The Jewish Establishment"). Rather than reflect the public's "true feelings," media outlets like the *Jewish Frontier* train readers to dismiss difficult intellectual criticism as "scandalous" or outrageously unfeeling. Arendt believes this propaganda machine responsible for her own book's reception, an example of readers' emotions being exploited for political ends.

> [Syrkin] asserts that the surprising similarity of the "replies" is caused by the "outrageous" quality of my book to which people reacted with "predictably" similar hostility. This is untrue because these replies concerned fabrications and not the book I had written. If Miss Syrkin wants to know the difference between a perhaps "predictable," spontaneous hostility and the repetition of propaganda-lies in a manipulated public opinion, to which then even the readers of my book fell prey, she has only to compare her own first article against my book in *Jewish Frontier*—hostile, emotional, mistaken in my opinion, but doubtless expressing her own unmanipulated reaction—with her later hysterical and fanciful outbursts.

Arendt's criticism of Syrkin is not altogether unlike her criticism of the survivor-witnesses in the Eichmann Trial. This is not to say that Arendt equates Syrkin's "hysterical outbursts" with the emotional testimony given by survivors. But just as the latter is out of place in court, the former does not belong in the media. Syrkin's "own unmanipulated reaction" to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt believes, cannot be argued with; but when circulated in the media, this emotional response is overpowering and prevents other readers from recognizing the intellectual challenge of Arendt's text.

Although there is little to suggest that Charles Reznikoff was an active participant in these debates, it is certain that he had a working knowledge of the controversy. Neither would this have been Reznikoff's first exposure to Arendt's work or intellectual milieu. In a 1944 letter to Albert Lewin, who arranged Reznikoff's brief and unsuccessful career as a Hollywood screenwriter during the 1930s, Reznikoff praised a review of Stefan Zweig's autobiography that Arendt had written for the *Menorah* journal. He also not only read Arendt's *Menorah* review of Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, but even borrowed her copy of the book via Harry Hurwitz, the journal's editor (Omer-Sherman 300). Far more significant, however, were Reznikoff's editorial responsibilities at the *Jewish Frontier*. There, as a typesetter, he must have been exposed to the controversy brought about by the Eichmann Trial and brought to a head by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Equally important is the fact that Reznikoff was married to Marie Syrkin. Reznikoff never identified with Syrkin's Zionist views, a difference of opinion that caused considerable stress in their marriage. The poet was never directly involved in politics and was far too dedicated to the culture of urban Jewish America to have much interest in his wife's Zionist affairs. When Syrkin asked Reznikoff to accompany her to Israel, he assured her, "in all gravity, that he was too busy; he had not yet explored Central Park to the full" ("Charles" 44).

Looking at Reznikoff's source materials suggests that comments like these may not have been as offhand as they seem. In fact, Reznikoff's editorial process in *Holocaust* actively counters or subverts the very different quotational logic behind the case that Attorney General Hausner presented in Jerusalem. As Arendt was among the first to see, Hausner sought to subordinate survivor testimony to a restrictive political narrative, one with which Reznikoff's wife emphatically agreed. Hausner's interrogation of survivor Rivka Yoselewska is a case in point. The attorney general concludes his questioning with a bold rhetorical gesture that rewrites the victim's story of horrendous loss as one of epic survival and ultimate redemption. Yoselewska saw her entire family executed by the S.S., including a small child torn from her arms, before she too was shot in the back of the head. Like Srebrnik, she was not fatally wounded and managed to escape. Later, however, once the Germans had gone, she sought to return to her family in a scene to which Reznikoff was drawn as well.

> When I saw [the Germans] were gone I dragged myself over to the grave and wanted to jump in. I thought the grave would open up and let me fall inside alive. I envied everyone for whom it was already over, while I was still alive. Where should I go? What should I do? Blood was spouting. Nowadays, when I pass a water fountain I can still see the blood spouting from the grave. The earth rose and heaved. I sat there on the grave and tried to dig my way in with my hands. I continued digging as hard as I could. The earth didn't open up. I shouted to Mother and Father, why was I left alive? What did I do to deserve this? Where shall I go? To whom can I turn? I have nobody. I saw everything; I saw everybody killed. No one answered. I remained sprawled on the grave three days and three nights. (*TAE* I:517–18)

Rather than focus on Yoselewska's pathos, however, Hausner wraps her story up in quick order, leading his witness from past to present:

> *Q.* And then a peasant passed by and took pity on you?
> *A.* I remained not far from the grave. A peasant saw me. I had been wandering around there for several weeks. He saw me.
> *Q.* He took pity on you and gave you food, and then you joined a group of Jews in the forest and stayed with them till the Soviets came?
> *A.* Till the end I stayed with them.
> *Q.* And now you are married and have two children?
> *A.* Yes. (*TAE* I:518)

Hausner's gloss caricatures Yoselewska's biography as a clean jump from mass grave to new marriage, a political allegory to which he would return in his closing statement. There he tells the court that Yoselewska "symbolizes the entire Jewish people," equating the founding of a new family with the founding of a new state.[4] Such a redemptive reading, however, presupposes a clear purchase on the past that Yoselewska does not appear to have. Her testimony wavers between past and present ("Nowadays, when I pass a water fountain I can still see the blood spouting"), suggesting that she is still "sprawled on the grave" in some intangible way, in spite of having survived (and in spite of having remarried).

Reznikoff, on the other hand, does not press Yoselewska's story into the service of a larger narrative. This difference is on one level structural: because we do not see Yoselewska testify, we cannot know what becomes of her later in life. But Reznikoff also undermines the sure-footedness of Hauser's politics on a more local level. He arranges the details of Yoselewska's testimony in a manner that forces us to rethink the terms of her survival.

> She was there all night.
> Suddenly she saw Germans on horseback
> and sat down in a field
> and heard them order all the corpses heaped together;
> and the bodies — many who had been shot but were still alive —
> were heaped together with shovels.
>
> Children were running about.
> The Germans caught the children
> and shot them, too;
> but did not come near her. And left again
> and with them the peasants from around the place —
> who had to help —
> and the machine-guns and trucks were taken away.
>
> She remained in the field, stretched out.
> Shepherds began driving their flocks into the field;

and threw stones at her,
thinking her dead or mad.
Afterwards, a passing farmer saw her,
fed her
and helped her join Jews in the forest nearby. (*H* 37–8)

Whereas Hausner hurries through the specifics of the survivor's testimony, Reznikoff dwells on them; the details become heavy and burdensome. Yoselewska's liberation is itself narrated only in passing, at the very end of the poem, and her earlier experiences weigh significantly on the final three lines. There is no suggestion that the farmer's help or the community Yoselewska finds in the forest can do anything to redeem all that she has been through. Reznikoff implies that they cannot, setting up a subtle comparison between the pile of bodies described at the end of the first stanza quoted above and the Jews Yoselewska meets in the woods. Far from a redemptive remnant, these latter few constitute a pile of "corpses heaped together" by cruel luck. Many of them no doubt share Yoselewska's desire to return to those who did not "survive."

Holocaust's ending relies even more explicitly on formal juxtaposition to undercut the narrative closure that allows Hausner to construct the basis for Israeli citizens to identify completely with the experiences of survivors. Although the final poem describes how a group of Jews escapes to Sweden, this is a moment of what Benjamin calls "weak messianism" and not the *Aufhebung* of Jewish suffering that the attorney general presents to the court.

Fishing boats, excursion boats, and any kind of boat
were mustered at the ports;
and the Jews were escorted to the coast by the Danes—
many of them students—
and ferried to safety in Sweden:
about six thousand Danish Jews were rescued
and only a few hundred captured by the Germans. (*H* 111)

Positioned at the end of an account of the German Judeocide, the number of lives saved here, six thousand, seems overshadowed by a much larger number, the six million that were not. The footnote at the bottom of the page, however, unquestionably extinguishes the redemptive spark of this small triumph. The last word is given to Nazi General Stroop (without naming him), who commanded the brigade responsible for putting down the Warsaw Revolt of 1943. "[D]espite the burden on every S.S. man or German officer during these actions to drive out the Jews from Warsaw," Stroop writes, the spirits of these men remained "extraordinarily good and praiseworthy from the first day to the very last" (*H* 111). This document of narrative closure, the infamous Stroop Report, closed the book on the Jewish resistance; here it interrupts what might otherwise feel like a note of optimism or redemptive hope at the end of Reznikoff's poem.

TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSFERENCE

One of the most salient critiques of trauma studies has been mounted by scholars whose work investigates how the rhetoric of trauma and social pain has shaped contemporary U.S. political culture. In an extended argument with identity politics, Wendy Brown has suggested that foregrounding subjective pain severely limits the scope and aims of politics. Where the focus is on the eradication of subjective pain, Brown argues, deeper-seated structural inequalities go unaddressed (27–28). Lauren Berlant finds a similar downsizing of the political at work in what she calls "the affective public sphere." Established by the circulation of emotive images in the mass media, this "visceral, visual version of U.S. politics" reduces political participation to private acts of identification with other people's pain (52). For both Brown and Berlant, the political centrality of pain and the trumping logic of trauma discourses presuppose the emotional transparency of suffering and obscure significant differences between specific instances of social injury. This often has the effect of shoring up political formations and identities from which those whose pain is being publicized may actually be excluded. As Berlant writes, there is a right way to feel when confronted with images of suffering, and doing so authorizes one morally within a normative culture of national belonging (51).

Although the critique of trauma discourses within American Studies takes as its object contemporary U.S. cultural politics and not the German Judeocide, the concerns shared by scholars such as Brown and Berlant also resonate in Reznikoff's *Holocaust*. The poet's editorial practice demonstrates how Hausner encourages his audience, the Jewish people gathered in the Jerusalem courtroom and listening to the trial on live radio, to identify with survivors. Such identification was meant to unify and strengthen the state of Israel during an especially shaky moment in its short history, equating individual survival of the Holocaust with the continued survival of the Jewish state. This same kind of identification is also the end toward which some recent work in trauma studies has tended. Where testimony is understood to be purely performative and to possess no real constative value, we are left with only one mode of historical knowledge. We can only know the Holocaust by reliving the experiences of survivors. There are, of course, considerable and important differences between these two discourses. But the intervention that *Holocaust* makes in the debates brought about by the Eichmann Trial might also serve as an important anticipation of the difficulties now facing trauma studies, after its critique of epistemology has become widely accepted.

We can bring *Holocaust*'s contribution into focus by comparing two very different scenes of pedagogy, one presided over by Shoshana Felman and the other by Reznikoff. In "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," Felman advocates a pedagogy of crisis, using a class she taught on testimonial literature as a case-study. After discussing works by authors like Camus, Dostoevsky, Freud and Celan, the class screened testimonies made by two Holocaust survivors for Yale's Fortunoff Project. Students reacted strongly to these two final testimonies, which is of course not surprising. What is surprising, however, and ultimately hard

to swallow, is the language with which Felman describes her students' experiences. In a set of notes she read to the class after the screening, Felman subtly erases any distinction between the students' responses to the Holocaust testimony and the experiences of survivors like Celan.

> I will suggest that the significance of the event of your viewing of the first Holocaust tape was, not unlike Celan's own Holocaust experience, something akin to *a loss of language*; and even though you came out of it with a deep need to talk about it and to talk it out, you also felt that language was somehow incommensurate with it. What you felt as a "*disconnection*" with the class was, precisely, an experience of *suspension*: a *suspension*, that is, *of the knowledge* that had been acquired in the class: you feel that you have lost it. But you are going to find it again. I will suggest it is this *loss* Celan precisely talks about, this loss that we have all been made somehow to live. You can now, perhaps, relate to this loss more immediately, more viscerally . . . (52)

Felman's students were undoubtedly flattered to hear their experiences summed up so eloquently. But some might also have wondered whether it is possible, after watching taped testimony in New Haven, to relate "immediately" or "viscerally" to the losses of a Holocaust survivor.

Felman nonetheless finds evidence for this immediacy in her students' final writing projects, which she says comprised "an amazingly articulate, reflective, and profound statement of the trauma they had gone through and of the significance of their assuming the position of the witness." The position of the witness, however, often seems like the position of the victim. This is the excerpt from a student paper with which she concludes:

> Literature has become for me the site of my own stammering. Literature, as that which can sensitively bear witness to the Holocaust, gives me a voice, a right, and a necessity to survive. Yet, I cannot discount the literature which in the dark awakens the screams, which opens the wounds, and which makes me want to fall silent. Caught by two contradictory wishes at once, to speak or not to speak, I can only stammer. Literature, for me, in these moments, has had a performative value: my life has suffered a burden, undergone a transference of pain. If I am to continue reading, I must, like David Copperfield, read *as if for life*. (58)

Rather than problematize this student's transferential relation to and rather startling appropriation of someone else's suffering, Felman actually emphasizes his distance from the Holocaust. The student, Felman tells us, is not Jewish, as if this were simply one more hurdle overcome in the process of bearing witness. By the time the last hurdle is taken, though, we have no sense of the specificity of the survivor's experience. Survival becomes a reading practice, and literature, "which in the dark awakens the screams" and "opens the wounds," becomes a stand-in for lived historical experience.

An altogether different sense of pedagogy is implicit in *Holocaust*, a pedagogy Reznikoff describes in an unpublished "Preface to the Reading from the Holocaust." This document seems to have been an introduction to a public performance of his poem on Yom Kippur in 1974.

> In telling about a minor incident or a great catastrophe—like the Holocaust in which six million Jews lost their lives—how is it to be told? In conclusions of the facts? The way many histories—generally out of necessity because of the absence of details—are written? Or in detailing the facts themselves? As, for example, the way law cases are tried in court. A witness in court, for example, cannot say a man was negligent in crossing a street: he must testify instead how the man acted: the facts instead of a conclusion of fact. So, in reading or listening to the facts themselves, instead of merely to conclusions of what happened in the life of a person or to a people, the reader or listener may not only draw his own conclusions but is more apt to feel actually what happened *as if he or she were—fortunately—only a spectator*. ("Preface to the Reading")[5]

This may be familiar ground to readers of Reznikoff's poetry; he often used legal metaphors when describing his work, most famously in the well-known interview with L.S. Dembo. But here Reznikoff pushes the metaphor one step further. While he does suggest that the poem should act like a court witness or draw on similarly authentic sources, he does not suppose that doing so will make either the "minor incident" or the "great catastrophe" available to readers in any unmediated sense. The reader or listener, he writes, is able "to feel actually what happened" when concrete particulars take precedence over historical generalizations, but only as a spectator. This is something of a warning to readers of *Holocaust* at the Yom Kippur performance. The participants, Reznikoff seems to be saying, should not try to identify with the Holocaust's victims. To dissolve all barriers between "spectators" and victims is to be guilty of an altogether different kind of negligence.

Without wanting to equate one with the other, I think it reasonable to suggest that both Hausner's case against Eichmann and Felman's notion of witnessing invite us to identify with victims of historical trauma. In the courtroom and in the classroom, two otherwise radically different spaces, historical understanding seems a matter of unmediated proximity, calling on us to live vicariously through the other. But if Reznikoff, as I have suggested, undermines what is most problematic here—editing Hausner's nationalistic rhetoric out of the court transcripts and refusing the subjective, belated temporality on which Felman bases her claims—this was not an easy accomplishment. The initial drafts of *Holocaust*, in fact, were actually begun in the first-person. And although Reznikoff later changed each "I" to "he" or "she" (or to "the lad" or "the man from Luxembourg," etc), the first-person occasionally returns, as if by accident or oversight, in subsequent revisions. Such a return occurs in a draft of what would become the second poem in *Holocaust*'s "Massacres" section, based on Yoselewska's testimony at the Eichmann Trial. Reznikoff begins this draft in the third person, with the same description of Yoselewska's father that opens the final version: "Her father had a shop for selling leather / and was one of the notables in the Jewish community." The poem continues in the third-person, describing how Yoselewska and her family escaped a pogrom by hiding in the woods; the first-person reappears suddenly, however, later in the poem:

When the young woman reached the place where the truck was headed for,
all who had been on the truck were already down and undressed—
all lined up. The rest of her family was among them.
There was a small hill there and at the foot of the hill a dugout.
The Jews were ordered to stand on the top of the hill
and four S.S. men shot them—each separately.
When she reached the top of the hill and looked down
she saw three or four rows of the dead on the ground.
Some of the young people tried to run
but they were caught at once
and shot right there.
Children were taking leave of their parents
and parents of their elder people.
And my daughter said to me,
as we stood near the dug-out, near the grave,
"Mother, why are we waiting?
Let us run!" ("Holocaust")[6]

At the end of this passage, transcription becomes transference: Reznikoff is overcome and identifies with Yoselewska at the moment when she and her family reach the front of the line. He hears his own daughter suggest that they make what certainly would have been a failed escape. "Then it was my turn," he writes. "I fell to the ground into the pit / among the bodies."

In later drafts Reznikoff corrects slip-ups like these, and with each revision the language becomes tighter and the details more dense, as if the poem's form were designed to prevent or at least trouble the kind of unqualified identification by which even an American Jew would come to appropriate the losses of a Holocaust survivor. The poem in which Reznikoff reworks Srebrnik's testimony from the Eichmann trial is a particularly good example of the poet's unwillingness to compare his station in life with the survivor's. Reznikoff proceeds selectively through the court transcript, drawn to concrete details and reported speech. He often reproduces the survivor's language word for word. We are told, for example, that the chain between Srebrnik's leg was fifteen inches long, that inmates to be gassed were "given a cake of soap and a towel / and told they were going to take a shower," and that of the eighty Jews left when the camp was to be disbanded "forty were to be taken to / another camp," where "they would be much better off than in Chelmno" (*H* 99). Reznikoff draws particular attention to the language of the camp, often quoting Nazi euphemisms. In Srebrnik's anecdote about the forty inmates transferred to "better accommodations," he focuses on the note Srebrnik later finds in the truck that took them away. The stanza ends with this line: "it was in Hebrew and all it read was: 'To death'" (*H* 100).

What Reznikoff does not tell us—and this should surprise anyone familiar with the poet's biography or with the questions of Jewish identity that his work addresses—is that Srebrnik could not read the note.

> The truck returned to the Hauskommando. I was sent to the *Tankstelle* (filling station) to look for a note in the truck. I walked around, I boarded the truck, and I found a note. I could not read it—I did not understand Hebrew. It said: "To death." I gave it to my colleagues. Then we knew already that they had been taken to the forest and put to death. (*TAE* III:1200)

Reznikoff wrote frequently about his own uneasy relationship to the Hebrew language. A Jewish poet who worked in English and could read Hebrew only with great difficulty, he often felt anxious about his intercultural identity. In "The Early History of a Writer," for example, Reznikoff describes not being able to understand the simple prayers his grandfather spoke to him as a young teenager, something that brought tears to the old man's eyes. In other poems Hebrew is both foreign and comforting, as this meditation from 1927 suggests:

> How difficult for me is Hebrew:
> even the Hebrew for *mother*, for *bread*, for *sun*
> is foreign. How far have I been exiled, Zion. (*P* 58)

This sense of ambivalence is also present in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934):

> 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. (*P* 93)

Srebrnik's experience at the *Tankstelle* must have been accompanied by similar feelings of alienation, though with precisely the opposite outcome. Whereas Reznikoff finds some glint of almost messianic salvation in the sacred language he cannot understand, the Hebrew note Srebrnik recovers from the truck encodes a death sentence. He and the other remaining inmates were to share the fate of those who had already been taken to the woods to be executed. That Reznikoff omits this important detail, the alienation from Hebrew he shares with Srebrnik, indicates the poet's unwillingness to equate his experiences with those of the Holocaust survivor. He is unwilling, that is, to conflate his metaphoric exile with Srebrnik's acute suffering.

INELOQUENT EMPATHY

Reznikoff's unwillingness to step into the position of the survivor is not without consequences for his objectivist aesthetic. As was the case with his editing of Yoselewska's testimony, Reznikoff is often forced in *Holocaust* to use awkward syntax or clunky formulations in order to avoid naming names or projecting a unified

first-person perspective with which we could too easily identify. Lines like these, for example, lack the clarity for which Reznikoff is known:

> After the Jew who had recognized the man from his home town
> had been working in the woods for some time,
> other Jews from his home town were among the dead. (*H* 80)

Reznikoff's crisp precision is replaced by a grammatical obstacle course; the poet's challenge is to paraphrase the survivor's testimony as effectively as possible without resorting to the first-person. Here is another example of this troubled syntax, which is found nowhere else in Reznikoff's work and which he certainly would have reformulated had *Holocaust*'s poetic form allowed him.

> Then he asked the man who sat beside the man from Luxembourg,
> "Who opened the window?" (*H* 102)

The "man beside the man" returns suddenly three pages later, at which point another wordy passage describes him as cleverer than the "man from Luxembourg":

> During the evening they were peeling potatoes for the following day
> and the man from Luxembourg and the man next to him
> made up their minds to hide some for themselves;
> but, coming out, they were searched.
> The man who had been next to the man from Luxembourg had six
> or seven potatoes in his pocket;
> but the man from Luxembourg was not that clever and had only one. (*H* 106)

There is more at stake in moments like these than bad style necessitated by poetic constraint. Such ineloquence, certainly, speaks both to the anonymity of the camps on the one hand and to the difficulty or even impossibility of narrating these experiences on the other. Felman describes this as the loss of language at the heart of traumatic experience. But Reznikoff's clunkiness is actually a proliferation of language, a proliferation that prevents anyone — reader, narrator, or protagonist — from taking possession of the story completely. This ineloquence demonstrates how *Holocaust* actually complicates and even questions the epistemological project it seems to pursue, refiguring documentary objectivity as the space in between what appear to be discrete subject-positions.

Following the arc of any given narrative in *Holocaust* forces the reader to negotiate a series of subject-positions from which the story may have been told. This process becomes particularly complicated in those passages in which pronouns disappear altogether; when they return, the effect is often jarring, compelling us to reassess our own relation to the narrative. This passage, for example, appears two pages into the third poem of *Holocaust*'s "Work Camps" section, a poem that begins by tracing out the personal history of a boy "living in Lodz with his mother" when the Second World War begins. The narrative quickly loses sight of this young man in the camps, returning to him only after we are confronted with the possibility that he may very well have been one of those taken to the gas chambers.

> In about half an hour most of the men who had come in that
> transport
> had been taken to the gas chambers
> and only about a hundred and fifty were left to work;
> the young man who had fled from Warsaw to the Lublin area
> among them (*H* 57)

The suddenness of this "among them," emphasized by the left-margin indent, represents a radical recentering of the narrative around the "young man." We again take up a point of view that had begun to seem lost entirely. This clarity of perspective, however, is gone by the very next stanza, where we lose sight of the "young man" altogether. Reznikoff deliberately deepens this same sense of uncertainty in this poem from "Escapes," where we cannot be sure whether the narrative simply exchanges one perspective for another or whether the person whose perspective we had implicitly been following is now dead.

> The lieutenant took those Jews who had stayed behind,
> one after the other,
> put the head of each into the pot—
> and fired a bullet into the nape of the man's neck.
> He kept doing this
> until another officer came into the room
> and whispered something to him. Then he stopped.
> There were only eleven left
> of the two hundred. The bodies of those who were killed
> were taken by others in the labor camp
> to the holes dug the day before.
>
> But the eleven, the young man among them, were taken to a cellar
> and there were frozen potatoes
> and they ate them. (*H* 96)

The space between these two stanzas is wide indeed, certainly not one filled by the phrase "the young man among them" that Reznikoff puts into an appositive clause.

Not knowing whose story we are reading or whether that person has exited the narrative by his or her own choosing also has important consequences for how we identify with survivors in *Holocaust*. Reznikoff gives readers nowhere to hang their hats. By going back to the poet's source materials, as I have here, one can with some effort determine who is being quoted where. But the challenge of Reznikoff's *Holocaust* is precisely that this basis of personal identification, which is at the same time the narrative anchor of each testimony, is both available and not; it is taken away from us and given back arbitrarily. And as often, we cannot be sure whether any perspectival shift has happened at all, as in this poem from "Work Camps," which begins like this: "He was then twenty years old and was taken with his mother / from the factory where both worked." We soon lose this "young man" among the other "young men."

> Some of the young men who were left of the transport
> had to throw corpses into the dugout—
> those killed on the railroad platform,
> as well as those who had fainted but were still alive.
> The young man who had come with his mother
> had to help sort out the belongings of those taken to the gas chambers:
> clothing, shoes, tools, medicines, and children's toys—
> everything piled high in the courtyard. (*H* 55)

The poem's ending leaves unclear both whether "the young man" survives or whether this story been someone else's all along; it is therefore all but impossible for us to make this story our own. "The young man" may or may not be one of the "young men" whose deaths we read about, and we can never be sure of just whom, if anyone, we are to identify with:

> Some of the young men working in the camp tried to escape
> but most were caught;
> hanged by their feet
> and S.S. men and Ukrainians would come and whip them;
> and finally an S.S. man shot them dead. (*H* 55)

HOLOCAUST'S SONG

The story of Shim'on Srebrnik's survival at Chelmno, first recorded in the transcripts of the Eichmann Trial on which Reznikoff draws in *Holocaust*, also figures prominently in Claude Lanzmann's acclaimed film *Shoah* (1985). *Shoah* famously opens with a shot of Srebrnik on the Narew River, a middle-aged man returning to the concentration camp in which he was executed as a boy. The camera holds his face between two trees as his boat floats slowly out of the frame; he is singing one of the Polish folksongs he used to perform for the guards with whom he rowed to the alfalfa fields at the edge of the village. Shoshana Felman has proposed this song as an illustration of the kind of historical understanding that survivor testimony makes available. Srebrnik's song, she writes, "speaks to us beyond its words," asking us "to listen, and hear, not just the meaning of the words but the complex significance of their return, and the clashing echoes of their melody and of their context" (Felman 139). But what does it mean to listen to Srebrnik's song if that song has no discursive content? Is listening itself a performance, one by which we identify with survivors as they relive the very impossibility of their experiences?

Working in an altogether different context, the judges in the Eichmann Trial also call on aesthetic metaphors to describe their misgivings about making sense of the Holocaust in any substantive way. Commenting on testimony given by Moshe Beisky, whom the Nazis forced to watch the hanging of a young boy, the judges come to this conclusion: "If these be the sufferings of the individual, then the sum total of the suffering of the millions—about a third of the Jewish people, tortured and slaughtered—is certainly beyond human understanding, and who are we to

try to give it adequate expression? This is a task for the great writers and poets." Writers and poets, the judges suggest, might help us to understand "the sum total of the suffering of the millions" in ways that the law, which must concern itself with the facts at hand, cannot. Literature is here a transcendent discourse; like Srebrnik's song in Felman's reading, it moves us "beyond" the discursive content of survivor testimony.

Holocaust is a much different kind of "song," a series of poems that never move beyond the words spoken by survivors or recorded in the documents brought before the courts in Jerusalem and Nuremberg. The ineloquence of this poetry, a result of Reznikoff's decision to bracket the subjective dimension of the testimony he quotes, demands both that we listen without being absorbed and that we acknowledge the impossibility of transcendence. This is not to say that *Holocaust* does not contain moments of striking clarity or tortured beauty; these abound even where Reznikoff's poetic lines seem most like prose. It is rather to say that *Holocaust* offers an alternative to the binary between narrowly empirical accounts of the Holocaust like that pursued by the Eichmann judges and the work of trauma theorists, for whom the events of the German Judeocide remain fundamentally unknowable. Dominick LaCapra has called this alternative "empathic unsettlement," a mode of identifying with the other without "taking the place of—or speaking—for the other or becoming a surrogate victim" (135). In Reznikoff's book of poems, this kind of unsettlement is a function of narrative form. *Holocaust* works by way of identification *and* disidentification, jolting us back to our own subject-positions without warning as we proceed through the book. Reznikoff reminds us of the space between the audience and the witness on the stand, just when that space begins to seem insignificant. *Holocaust* remains at the level of the word, demonstrating the danger and ultimately impossibility of moving beyond to emotion.

Acknowledgements

This project was supported by a Goldfein Research Award from the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania and a Predissertation Fellowship for International Collaboration from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC).

Abbreviations

TAE	*Trial of Adolf Eichmann*
P	*The Poems of Charles Reznikoff*
H	*Holocaust*

Notes

1. Israeli social worker Ilana David describes the situation as particularly confusing for the country's youth:

> Every child has at some time queried the meaning of the blue numbers tattooed on the arms of some housewife or worker in the neighborhood. In our village, the sight of a mother and her son, strangely and diabolically scarred in exactly the same manner—the result of Dr. Mengele's notorious genetic experiments—never fails to cause ripples of disturbance amongst the children. To complicate the muddled and fearful conceptions formed by these encounters and fed by stories picked up from newspaper and radio, there are also puzzling tales of another nature. Every now and then a former "kapo" is brought to trial in Israel. To many a *sabra*-born youth these reports of Jews who were as bad as the torturers of their own people give them an uneasy feeling that there must have been something very wrong with the Jews of Europe. (7)

2. As Seyla Benhabib writes, "It seemed as if Arendt was accusing her own people and their leaders of being complicitous in the Holocaust, whereas she was exculpating Eichmann and other Germans through naming their deeds 'banal'" (176).

3. Deborah Nelson writes that, while not indifferent to the suffering of others, Arendt was convinced that turbulent, uncontrollable emotion "shift[s] emphasis from an event to feelings about an event" (226).

4. See Douglas, 170–173. In fact, the melodramatic closure that Hausner brings to Yoselewska's testimony seems not unlike the redemptive narrative that Miriam Hansen finds in *Schindler's List*. In Spielberg's film, "the resolution of larger-order problems tends to hinge upon the formation of a couple or family and on the restoration of familial forms of subjectivity" (298). Oskar Schindler must renounce his promiscuity and return to marriage in order to accomplish his historic mission. Similarly, Hausner implies that Yoselewska must remarry and have Israeli children in order for the historic importance of the Holocaust to become legible.

5. Emphasis added.

6. I have followed the typewritten text here, not making Reznikoff's handwritten corrections.

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