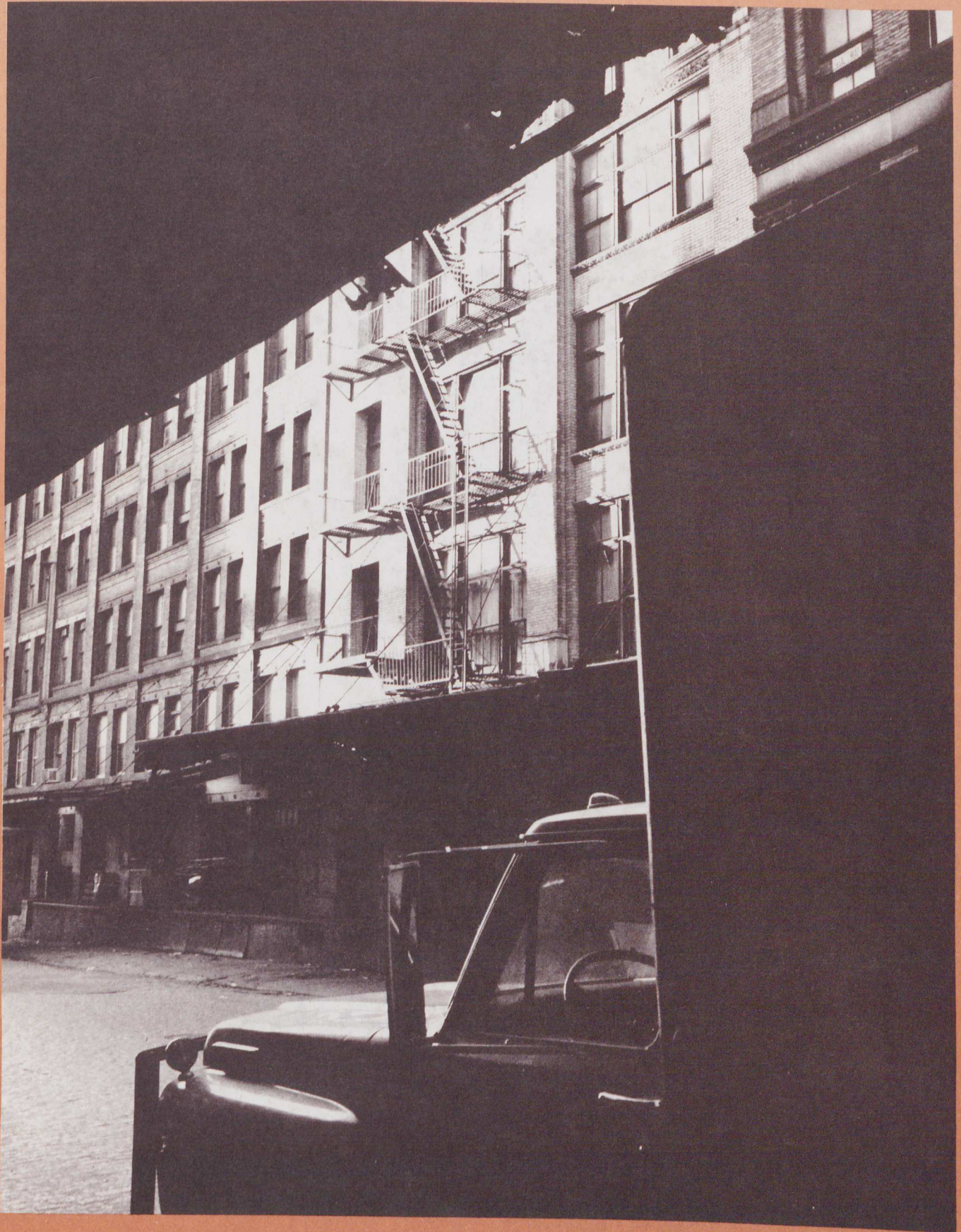


# The Downtown Review

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Volume One, Number Two

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## Table of Contents

- 1 Number Two
- 2 The Poetry of Charles Reznikoff. . . . . John Pruitt
- 6 Mekas in Mid-Passage. . . . . Raymond Foery  
*film*
- 8 *Commentary*. . . . . Wendy Dozoretz
- 9 Brakhage's *Sincerity*. . . . . John Pruitt
- 11 *The Cycle*. . . . . Leger Grindon
- 13 Gottheim's *Four Shadows*. . . . . Raymond Foery  
*art*
- 14 Andy Warhol at Heiner Freidrich. . . . . Tracy Farrell  
*video*
- 15 *Commentary*. . . . . Raymond Foery  
*dance*
- 16 Bill T. Jones. . . . . Judith Ren-Lay  
*theater*
- 17 Cricot 2: *The Dead Class*. . . . . Bruce Coughlin  
*music*
- 19 Leroy Jenkins. . . . . Michael Martin
- 20 Clark Terry's Big B-A-D Band. . . . . Warren Leight
- 21 The Art Ensemble of Chicago. . . . . Michael Martin
- 22 Rhys Chatham's *Guitar Trio*  
and Robert Longo's *Pictures for Music*. . . . . Joe Hannan
- 23 *Commentary*. . . . . Michael Martin  
*books*
- 24 *Talking Poetics from Naropa Institute*  
and *Hello, La Jolla* by Ed Dorn. . . . . James Hydock
- 26 *Muthologos* by Charles Olson. . . . . Tom Ropelewski
- 28 Letters. . . . . Anne Pitrone  
Ruth Perlmutter

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"the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not"  
Oscar Wilde



New York Skyline from 270 Bowery

Thomas Ames

## Number Two

It was a long winter and we're not quite sure that Spring is truly here. But the second issue of *The Downtown Review* is here, and we are sure of a certain continuity. We are only slightly behind schedule. We expected the second issue by the end of March (the mention of the end of February in the introduction to Number One was an error that escaped into the mechanism that sets the type), so we are a few weeks behind. But we are getting better and fully expect to be on a monthly schedule as planned.

One of the reasons for the delay is the amount of copy in this issue. We are indeed gratified by the increase in the number of articles over the first issue, but just a little disappointed that we have to sacrifice some of those vintage drawings and photographs of Lower Manhattan. The next issue, though, will be a double issue, so we hope to have a little more room for images as well as words.

Ironically, despite the increase in the number of articles, there were still many events that took place in the time since our last issue that we were not able to cover. A listing of some of them would only underscore our frustration. But we remain determined to do more, to respond to more, to write about more. Another reason for a double issue next time.

**Correction** (we've decided to print our corrections on page one): It was P. Adams Sitney, and not Jonas Mekas as stated in Anne Friedberg's article, who brought the New American Film tour to Europe in 1964-5.

R4E



# The Poetry of Charles Reznikoff

*Holocaust*, 1975,  
*The Complete Poems, Vols. I and II*, 1976, 1977,  
*Testimony, Vol. I*, 1978  
(Vol. II projected for 1979),  
Black Sparrow Press

## I

Over the last three years, Black Sparrow Press has been engaged in the admirable task of re-publishing the bulk of Charles Reznikoff's writings. When the second volume of *Testimony*, the poet's long "recitative" on American life, appears this spring, all of Reznikoff's verse will be in print. The entire series (except *Holocaust*) has been edited with apparent thoroughness and devotion by Seamus Cooney.

In an important essay, "The Sorrows of American Jewish Poetry" which appeared a few years ago in *Commentary*, Harold Bloom acknowledged the writer's gifts but confessed his disappointment when confronting Reznikoff's work as a whole. Bloom's strong doubts stem from his penetrating criticism of what he calls the "equivocal" achievements of those poets in the Pound-Williams school. He simply doesn't find Reznikoff's imaginative pre-disposition compatible with the Poundian "objectivist" doctrines which the writer embraced. Bloom is chilled by one of Reznikoff's own verses which bears witness to the poet's eschewal of the higher and more difficult calling (to Bloom) of the great American prophetic strain of Whitman, Stevens and Crane. Reznikoff should have clung to the Hebraic tone of the transcendental Emerson rather than to the mechanical pragmatism of the two "strangers," Pound and Williams:

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.

But Bloom's insight should perhaps be taken as a polemic against what he feels is the too readily accepted dogmatic creed that to speak of poetry in this century is to speak of "The Pound Era." In the heat of

his argument, Bloom never gets around to talking significantly about what the poet's gifts actually are. Reznikoff's work, although it is not major poetry, has real value and deserves a lasting, if somewhat diminished place beside his fellow "objectivists" and friends, Louis Zukovsky and George Oppen. One has to face the fact that his poetry is modest, perhaps disarmingly so; it treats everyday objects in an everyday world, drawn without metaphors, without what Reznikoff himself considered ornamental or artificial language and form. At least this is Reznikoff *in theory*, as the poet saw himself. There is a quite self-conscious (possibly self-deceiving) attempt to avoid the visionary heritage of Romanticism, to cast off the robes of the self-appointed poet/priest:

Not because of victories  
I sing,  
having none,  
but for the common sunshine,  
the breeze,  
the largess of the spring.

Not for victory,  
but for the day's work done  
as well as I was able;  
not for a seat upon the dais  
but at the common table.

Although the glory of the noble conquerer is disdained, the poetic voice is still forceful and enduring, akin to the common working man who steadily plows on while kingdoms rise and fall. In a memorial tribute to Reznikoff, who died in 1976, George Oppen wrote, "This is / heroic this is / the poem / to write / in the great / world small."

Setting aside the obvious and admitted influence of Pound and Eliot, Reznikoff's temperament as a writer was significantly molded by two major factors of his early life: his childhood in the impoverished Jewish ghettos of New York City at the turn of the century, and his training as a lawyer. The former, which he evoked so movingly in a series of short poems, "Jews," written in the '20's, displayed Reznikoff's pessimistic insight into the material forces (money, food, clothing, social status) and the baser emotions (jealousy, greed, lust, prejudice) which are an eternal portion of the human lot. His training in law enabled him to put into poetic practice a language which strived for clarity and absolute precision, as opposed to what Reznikoff felt was the vague toying with connotation of the majority of poets. The ideal of the law, with its concern for facts and objectivity, and its avoidance of moralizing and forming pre-conclusions, is one Reznikoff held on to from quite early in his writing career. And he never forgot the "meanness" of his beginnings, the petty day-to-day affairs in which he felt there still lurked a humanity. One finds,

then, a bit of the priest in Reznikoff after all. In the persona of Samuel, the poet speaks what are perhaps his most celebrated lines, lines which are ironically uncharacteristic in that Reznikoff has adopted conventional meter and rhyme:

Whatever unfriendly stars and comets do,  
whatever stormy heavens are unfurled,  
my spirit be like fire in this, too,  
that all the straws and rubbish of the world  
only feed its flame.

The seasons change.  
That is change enough.  
Chance planted me beside a stream of water;  
content, I serve the land,  
whoever lives here and whoever passes

As in "Samuel," my favorite Reznikoff poems are those in which he re-works either Biblical themes or historical treatises on the ancient Jews. In depicting an age long lost, his language achieves a richness and sensuousness, both in terms of vocabulary and rhythm, which it often lacks.

"King David" is a re-telling of the noted legend, a slight modification of existing records because Reznikoff has imaginatively enlarged the role of Michal, Saul's daughter and one of David's wives. Through her eyes we get a picture of the King which is quite different from the official version the ruler's own scribes recorded (Michal, incidentally, doesn't miss the irony of "in-house" chronicling). She lays more emphasis on the tragedy of Saul and portrays David as a ruthless opportunist whose sense of God's benediction upon him becomes a license for cold calculation under the flag of righteousness. As he frequently does, Reznikoff deflates the myth of a "golden age." There is no reason, of course, why we should even take Michal at her word, though her rhetoric convinces. The poem ends on a great irony underscored by repetition as Michal speaks:

Your scribes will write you down a great king,  
and of me—if they say anything at all—  
but I belong to that doomed house of Saul  
not even Jonathan could save.  
I shall not weep before you again;  
these tears are the last:  
now I have wept them all away.  
And I can speak of all my dead  
without a tear.  
Your scribes will write me down a cold,  
proud woman,  
wandering about the garden of the king,  
and you a glorious king, a glorious king.

Based on the historical writings of Josephus, "The Fifth Book of the Maccabees," is a poignant and quite subtle study of the last days of the great Jewish state. Since it refers to the *Apochrypha*, the title is mildly ironic; the poet is adding a chapter to the works of doubtful authenticity, another imaginative delving into the "facts." In a characteristically indirect and elliptical manner, Reznikoff describes the bloody rivalry between Alexander Jannai and the Pharisees and the eventual conquest of Palestine by Pompey. One can't read this poet lazily, for like many writers who employ similar means of indirection, if casually perused, they come off as flat. The narrative events are so organized in "Maccabees," the reader must skillfully dig for Reznikoff's true subject: the reasons for the spiritual decay and collapse of the old Jewish culture. Two internal causes, political and intellectual, are intimated: one, the decadence of the ruling family which, ignoring ancient religious strictures, glorified power and riches in an attempt to emulate and ultimately compete with Rome; and the other, the apparent vulnerability of the oral law tradition which appeared impractical and clumsy in the light of the eloquent and rational "moderns," Aristotle and Plato. The final blow which shatters the world of the Jews is delivered in the midst of the pagans' drive eastward as the Roman army sacks Jerusalem and violates the sacred shrines. In the closing section, Reznikoff creates pathos through true objectivist means, merely giving the reader a two-page descriptive catalogue of the various appurtenances of the typical Roman mercenary on the march, a fragment of which reads:

Their leather coats, heavy with bands of iron and brass  
over sleeveless woolen shirts;  
a greave of bronze on the right leg—  
the forward leg in battle—  
and feet in heavy sandals;  
a heavy square shield of wood plated with iron  
hung at each man's left. The badge of his cohort,  
a bright wreath or a thunderbolt, perhaps, painted  
about the boss,  
but now, on the march, under a leather cover.

In this sustained single image, the objects speak for themselves; the overwhelming technological and material forces in their naked immediacy assert their control over the course of events. Reznikoff then shifts modes abruptly with a short epilogue taken from the "Song of Deborah." It is a wonderful juxtaposition:

"The river Kishon swept them away,  
the ancient river, the river Kishon.  
O my soul,  
you have trodden down strength!"



## II

Most of Reznikoff's poems have an American setting, including three autobiographical sequences, but the wide and impassive Biblical historical view is always evinced, even when the writer stays close to home as in his numerous New York poems. Though lost in a vast, choking Babylon, the farsighted Reznikoff could nevertheless mock his brethren's nostalgia for the Russian steppes:

This noise in the subway will sound no louder than  
the wind in trees;  
you, too, will be used to it. After a while you will  
forget to care  
whether you ride in subways or on horses.

Here, as so often, the poet's particular achievement lies in the fact that his tone hovers between accepting wisdom and shrouded bitterness. Although he at times appears brutally stoic, I think only a naive reader would overlook the insistent protest in the writer's voice. Reznikoff's strong moral sense is ever present, yet his poems abide to the line he took from *Ephesians* and used as a motto for *Testimony*: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and railing, be put away from you, with all malice."

*Testimony* is the writer's most ambitious work, a "recitative" (that is, it falls somewhere between poetry and prose—the author's own distinction) on life in the United States from 1885 to 1915, which is over 400 pages in length. However, it is far from certain that this opus contains Reznikoff's most memorable passages. The technique employed is fairly simple to delineate. Using actual court cases as a documentary base on which to build the work, each poem in the long sequence is a short sketch or narrative told in the strictly denotative tones of a lawyer. Almost any example is characteristic of the whole:

The conductor asked her where she was going.  
"Knoxville City."  
He said: "You ought to have changed at Knoxville  
Junction."  
"Why didn't you tell me when we were there?"  
He told her to get off  
but she wanted to stay on until the next station.

The train was stopped  
and the conductor asked her if she was getting off.  
He said if she didn't  
he would kick her off  
and that he was tired of "damn niggers."  
He threw her bundle on the ground,  
and put her baby beside it.  
She followed and the train left her standing there.

Although the subject matter provides rife occasions, Reznikoff never overtly moralizes or gives the slightest trace of commentary. Even an overall premeditated design is avoided, the poems having been arranged in a merely logical and obviously arbitrary manner according to decade, region, and generic subheading such as "children," "domestic scenes," "negroes," and so forth. In one sense, these poems make for fascinating reading because they stand as concrete examples of the everyday foibles, mistakes and minor tragedies of our ancestors. The perhaps too pervading theme is that the times simply do not change. A prototype of the longer work bore the rather heavy-handed title, "The Good Old Days." One can still smile here however, if one remembers the wonderful Reznikoff distinction of holding Aristotle and Plato as "moderns." It is also not the least admirable side of ourselves which can consider an ameliorator to be just one of the grotesquely uninformed.

But I do have my reservations. Various American poets of this century (Pound, Williams, Zukovsky, and Olson) have attempted to integrate documentary material into their long serial works and, with the single exception of Reznikoff, they have used the moments of apparent objectivity to counterpoint those more introspective and lyrical. Hypothetical objective and subjective points of view "speak" to one another, often in a quite elliptical fashion, i.e. there is a studied lack of bridgework. In *Testimony*, Reznikoff has opted for monody and it is for this reason that the work falls short of its possibilities. It simply presents one scrap of evidence after another in a long court proceeding and as interesting as the facts of the case may be in an initial reading, ultimately one's imagination is not provoked for repeated encounters with the work as it is in, say, *Paterson*. When we read Williams, we seek an understanding of the form of the whole, the reason for the poet's particular choices in creating his collage of lyrics, dramatic interludes, letters, and newspaper reports etc. Unfortunately, when his major work was tackled, the lawyer in Reznikoff subsumed the poet; one longs for the writer to more vigorously exercise his imaginative impulses. This same problem exists in Reznikoff's last book-length work to be published before his death, *Holocaust*, which in terms of technique, is virtually identical to *Testimony*. I personally feel that only the greatest of poets could possibly deal so directly with the Nazi horrors and the World War Two death camps. How does one take command of such material without letting it take off by itself? *Holocaust* is moving; the problem is only that it couldn't have been otherwise:

Many a woman in Germany, whose husband had  
been sent to a concentration camp  
and killed there,  
would get the following message which her  
husband had been ordered to write:  
"Feeling well and like it here."  
Or "Your husband has died of a heart attack;  
we are sending you an urn with his ashes  
and for this send us three marks and a half."

One critic has rightly called this, "modernity with a vengeance," yet I cannot agree with those Reznikoff commentators who call *Holocaust* his masterpiece. I will confess to being perplexed and at a loss for some sense of perspective in predicting how this, the last written of the poet's major sequences, will appear 25 years from now. It is possible that future readers will be moved by what actually bothers me: Perhaps our era will best be remembered for an acknowledged defeat in the grips of a technological universe which defied even the greatest of poetic imaginations to encompass it. At the moment I feel exactly the opposite. As life and culture become more regulated and machinelike, the single creative consciousness is more desperately needed. Somene has to rival the positivists for priority. Reznikoff worked towards obliterating his own presence from *Holocaust* and I think the work suffers for it, even on the poet's own terms because, for example, we don't get the basic honest qualification of knowing what it was like for Reznikoff to experience the Nazi horrors secondhand, from *this* side of the ocean.

## III

Rather than *Holocaust*, I prefer *In Memoriam*, written the year the Nazis took over Germany, a brief but vast canvas across time and space (from ancient Samaria to 1905 Russia) about the continual persecution of the Jews at the hands of various dominating cultures. In the persona of a prisoner of Cyrus, Reznikoff invents moving lines of defiance and prophecy:

Let hands build the walls  
hands more numerous  
may pull down again,  
but we must build in Babylon  
another Zion  
of precepts, laws, ordinances and commandments  
to outlast stone or metal,  
between every Jew and the fury or blandishment of  
any land—  
that shall keep up a man as much as bread  
and swallows of water in his belly, strengthen him  
like links or armor on his body.  
Let other people come as streams  
that overflow a valley  
and leave dead bodies, uprooted trees and fields  
of sand;  
we Jews are as the dew,  
on every blade of grass,  
trodden under foot today  
and here tomorrow morning.

Another short, more loosely organized sequence from the 30's, *Jerusalem the Golden*, is as equally satisfying. Once again we find familiar masks for Reznikoff to hide behind, but for the opening pages of the work such indirectness is dropped. Brief lyrics and epiphanic imagist poems work together towards forming a single vision, New York City as the New Jerusalem:

Feast, you who cross the bridge  
this cold twilight  
on these honeycombs of light, the buildings of  
Manhattan.

What prevented this quite worthy poet from creating a major poem as accomplished as Zukovsky's "A," for instance, is that for some reason or another, Reznikoff couldn't sustain a longer effort without dispensing with the side of his personality capable of such dizzy leaps. But I don't revere any less the many wonderful poems he did manage to leave us.

John Pruitt