

Abstract

In 1934, Kenneth Burke published an essay, "The Matter of the Document," as an introduction to Charles Reznikoff's book *Testimony*. The text is not included in standard bibliographies of Burke's writings. This note examines the circumstances of the composition, publication, and failure of *Testimony*, which may help explain why Burke's introduction has been overlooked. The note then offers an overview of Burke's argument, which characterizes documentary forms of literary composition as both artful and moral. This assessment anticipated Prokofieff's development as a poet, as well as later critical assessments of his work. Burke's view of literary composition from existing documents may be valuable in critically assessing the wide range of contemporary documentary and conceptual poetics in the United States.

IN 1934, THE OBJECTIVIST PRESS issued *Testimony*, a slender prose work by Charles Reznikoff. The book presents short narratives drawn from trial transcripts, and though it marked the first sustained use of the documentary approach that would define Reznikoff's most distinguished works, the book sank into immediate obscurity. Its disappearance took with it Kenneth Burke's six page introductory essay, "The Matter of the Document." That introduction is included in library catalog entries for the book, and is mentioned briefly in articles by Hardy and Listoe. However, the introduction is not included in standard bibliographies of Burke's writings, and the Reznikoff scholars who occasionally mention the introduction have not noticed that they have repeatedly rediscovered a more or less forgotten text of an important theorist. This note serves to call the introduction to the attention of Burke scholars. The note first describes the circumstances of the publication of *Testimony*. It then briefly considers the content of Burke's introduction, which is both an astute reading of Reznikoff, and an illuminating discussion of compositional practices that are now widespread in American poetics.

Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976) was trained as a lawyer at New York University. At the time he wrote *Testimony* he was working as a researcher for *Corpus Juris*, a legal encyclopedia (Watson 651). His work there obliged him to compile and digest cases. He took note of particularly interesting trials, whose transcripts he reworked according to compositional principles discussed in Watson (656). The unstated foundation for these techniques was, of course, his own sensibility and eye for the interesting and lurid: the work describes shipwrecks, industrial accidents, murder, slavery, and similar calamities. Although *Testimony* was written in spare prose, Reznikoff is recognized mainly for his poetry. He would later employ the same techniques of document manipulation to produce his best-known works, *Testimony, Volume II* and *Holocaust*.

The prose volume of *Testimony* received very little notice. It was issued by the Objectivist Press in an edition of 100 copies, and was not printed again until 2015, when it appeared as an appendix to a new edition of Reznikoff's poetic *Testimony*. What little notice an edition of this scale might have garnered would have been divided between several works; the Objectivist Press issued three titles by Reznikoff in 1934 (Cooney 387). This is consistent with a larger pattern: Reznikoff struggled for his entire career to receive notice, and was not a skilled promoter of his work. The remembrances collected in *Hindus* describe an extremely self-effacing and retiring man prone to making poor practical decisions about his writing (see also Cooney 383, Watson 657). Burke's introduction, which was intended to call more attention to the book, was written at the request of William Carlos Williams (Listoe 121), who characterized Reznikoff to Burke as a man "difficult through diffidence" (East 65). There is little to suggest that the introduction had the desired public effect. Even Williams himself never cut the pages of the copy of *Testimony* presented to him by Reznikoff (Weinberger 16).

Although Burke's introduction did not garner wider notice for Reznikoff's work, it is a thoughtful assessment in its own right. The introduction attempts to understand how dry rehearsals of legal fact—what Burke terms "vignettes" (xii)—can have aesthetic and moral power. Burke offers three arguments to explain the force of the work. First, he suggests that the work achieves a balance between the social constraints imposed by legal evidence and legal training (xv) and Reznikoff's own expansive, humane sympathy (xvi). Second, he points to a convergence of scientific and aesthetic forms of expression in modern times. The influence of Naturalism and psychoanalysis had prodded fiction in the direction of the case study. Yet the open or concealed artifice of the case study gives it many of the same qualities as fiction (xi), rendering outwardly objective texts open to many forms of interpretation. Third, Burke notes that Reznikoff's narrative approach is psychologically thin, owing in part to the legal source material, which was largely indifferent to psychology. This approach extends to the reader an account that has, in a sense, not been interpreted in advance, preserving deep psychological ambiguities (xiv).

These arguments are of a piece with many of Burke's larger critical commitments. They also present an astute contemporary appreciation of Reznikoff. Louis Untermeyer, writing in 1930, believed that Reznikoff had no style at all, and *Hindus* (1977) shows that most critics of the 1930's focused on Reznikoff's apparent artlessness, his Jewish immigrant background, or both. Burke, by contrast, identified key features of his compositional technique, and anticipated by several decades the significant role Reznikoff's legal training would play in his mature poetics. Burke's intuition that Reznikoff's concerns are primarily moral—a minority opinion at the time—has now become the consensus critical view; it is his quiet moralism that distinguishes Reznikoff from his modernist contemporaries (White 203), as well as successors who have adopted many of his compositional practices (Magi 262).

It is doubtful that scrutiny of Burke's introduction will yield significant new insights into his thought or its development. However, it may be a useful starting point for a Burkean view of literary composition from factual documents, a practice that is central to many contemporary developments in American poetry. Conceptual writing, which enjoys rapidly growing prominence, focuses upon the

composition of poetry by a number of impersonal techniques; Dworkin and Goldsmith's influential description presents conceptual writing as a means of effacing the subjective and expressive dimensions of literary writing. Magi has offered a strong characterization of the critical challenge posed by such work: its political and ethical valence can be difficult to discern. Vanessa Place's poetry, for instance, uses legal documents in a way that signals no particular commitment. Other poets, such as Jena Osman and Mark Nowak, use similar kinds of documents and compositional techniques for unmistakably political ends. Burke's critical writing may be particularly useful in understanding the range of uses of a single technique. This note has suggested that a nearly-forgotten piece of his work provides a specific starting point for such an effort.

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