



GRAAT On-Line issue #8 August 2010

The Question of Sincerity in Objectivist Poetry

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The word “objectivists” refers to the work – essentially from before the thirties onto the late seventies and early eighties – of five American poets, Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky, plus English poet Basil Bunting, all working under, or perhaps along, the influence of the key figures of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens.

In his article “The Objectivist Tradition,” Charles Altieri points out that “the Objectivists repeatedly insist that theirs was not a doctrinal movement: there are objectivists but no Objectivism because the poets share only a sense of the necessity and value of sincerity and a concern for the attention to craft, for the poem as machine made of words or the poem as thing in which ideas inhere.”¹ This paper proposes to discuss this notion of sincerity as a cornerstone of Objectivist poetics, rapidly going back to the notion as it was evolved by Zukofsky, then exploring how it may resonate with, rather than apply to, a reading of a poem by Reznikoff and a poem of Oppen, bearing in mind the essential paradox at the heart of the idea of sincerity, which simultaneously implies the experience of a phenomenological reduction to “things themselves” while acknowledging that such a programme leads to *words* themselves as the things that are encountered in what remains an experience of language.

In doing so, I hope to show how the question of sincerity may prove useful in enlightening us as to some aspects of the linguistic turn in the Modernist experience: as a test of the combined factualness and effectiveness of the single word in

Zukofsky, word condensation being his first test of poetic labour, as a test of language as common tender for Reznikoff, considering his caution regarding a possible idolatrous reading of linguistic signs, and as a test of truth in Oppen, a test of consciousness, of being with words and the Being of words.

It has been noted that Zukofsky's 1931 essay, "Sincerity and Objectification, With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff,"² is an extension and a reworking of Pound's credo, "I believe in technique as the test of man's sincerity."³ Yet any discussion of these two terms, sincerity and objectification, rarely avoids duplicating in some fashion the traditional subject-object split, with sincerity on the side of the subject (a kind of minor or highly restricted lyrical I) and objectification relating to the text considered as an object, in the formal terms of its praised constructedness. Though there is some truth to this balance, it seems to imply that Zukofsky merely rewrote Pound's sentence into something such as: "I believe in the technique of objectification as the test of a poet's sincerity." But the poet's growth in the thirties tells of Zukofsky's estrangement from Pound's poetics, economics and politics. At the time, Zukofsky was translating the Marxist redefining of the notions of *praxis* and *poiesis* and amalgamating these two notions into the notion of labour, which was a way for Zukofsky to return poetry to its own *poiesis*, and to assert that, quoting Zukofsky, "A poet's technique keeps up with the working materials of his time, just as other craftsmen and workers keep up with theirs..."⁴. The notion of sincerity may well depend upon such an effort to keep up, which implies a discrepancy that is essential to Oppen's politics of the text, a discrepancy between the concrete materials of the text and political beliefs - this is a difference with the language writing of Bruce Andrews for instance, as pointed out by Peter Nicholls⁵, if one thinks of Andrews' collection of essays entitled precisely *Paradise and Method: Poetics and Praxis*.

When closely reading Zukofsky's essay, rather than opposite or even complementary notions, sincerity and objectification appear as mere distinctions between possible levels of reading, whether one is concerned with the word as the smallest unit (words as "minor units of sincerity"⁶) or with the totality of the text, since "each word in itself is an arrangement, it may be said that each word possesses

objectification to a powerful degree.”⁷ Zukofsky transforms Pound’s sentence, starting from technique as the test of man’s sincerity but redefines the notion of technique as part the work of sincerity, part the work of objectification, which accounts for a new test, a test of poetry as that of poetic labour, on a par with any working man’s labour. The equation which superimposes the materials which are words and the materials of the world as “the mind’s act being brought to objective form”⁸ is the axiom of objectivist theory. Laying the word bare as a test of sincerity ultimately explains the rejection of the temptation of closure, in Altieri’s words, “both closure as fixed form and closure as writing in the service of an idea, doctrine, or abstract aesthetic ideal.”⁹ The Marxist options of the objectivists are well known and have been viewed as contextual or more accurately as ethical. Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments for instance that “this poetics [...] had an ethical dimension, for it began with the person, not the word, that is, began with sincerity.”¹⁰ But one could argue that the ethical and the linguistic precisely do cohere where the objectivists are concerned and that such is the kernel of their contribution to modern poetry.

While it would take a much more comprehensive reading of Zukofsky’s essay than could be provided here, let it suffice to say that while Burton Halten rightly argues that Zukofsky’s poetics “affirms the objective reality of a material world”¹¹, this affirmation cannot satisfactorily embrace his poetics if one does not include language as the prime object and objective of an objectively material linguistic world. When Zukofsky writes that “poems are only acts upon particulars,” and that “only through such activity” as he prescribes “do they become particulars themselves – i.e. poems,”¹² he is working at locating poetic activity within a narrow, almost tautological, distich which mirrors signifier and signified as acting or acted upon particulars or facts. Objectification is presented as a mental process assimilated to a form of perception, a perception of the text as “the resolving of words and their ideation into structure,”¹³ while Zukofsky insists on “the entirety of the single word which is in itself a relation, an implied metaphor, an arrangement, a harmony or a dissonance.”¹⁴ The paradox with Zukofsky lies in his ambiguous concern for referentiality, both as a means to show up the word as semblance, as commodity fetish, and as a way for the word to become in itself a demonstration, a definition and

a perception¹⁵. Quite typical of Zukofsky's approach and propensity to condensate, writing as process and product becomes a conceit for a poetics of literary labour, the stepping stone for a theory which owes much to his return to Spinoza, as Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas has demonstrated. It would take us to Zukofsky's reading of Shakespeare and how he finds there, quoting from A-13: "such reconciliation of the abstract and the actual."¹⁶

In humble imitation of the author, I would like to submit a poem by Reznikoff to a sincere reading. In doing so, given the importance of Spinoza for Zukofsky, I propose to consider that the word "sincerity" may have been derived by Zukofsky from Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, where in the first pages of the famous seventh chapter which deals with the interpretation of the Scriptures we find the Latin phrase "*historia sincera*" which refers to the exact or actual historical knowledge of the text of the Scriptures which Spinoza sets as a requirement for reading the text. The philological and hermeneutic connotations of this notion of sincerity are particularly relevant when reading Reznikoff, who applied his technique of recycling court transcripts to various biblical texts, discarding the metaphors of "biblical English" in an effort to reestablish the text of the Bible (or one should say the Torah in this case) as man's own.

Spinoza's care to return the text to its own truth is shared by Reznikoff in the echo which his constant rejection of pre-lexicalised metaphors finds in his rewriting of the pages of the Old Testament, in relation to the poet's concern for the idolatry of signs, even though Reznikoff's relation to transcendence sets him apart from Spinoza.

The connection I propose relies on the need to account for the interlacing of scenes from everyday life "by the waters of Manhattan," to quote one title of his, and of biblical scenes which we find so often in Reznikoff. Yet the specifics of his poetry do not result from diverging logics, one after the influence of Williams and the general Imagist movement, and the other derived from intertextual play. On the contrary, it is the internal dialectics of his work which requires our attention. This is not an attempt to offer a Spinozian reading of Reznikoff but to take under consideration this philosopher's critical reading of the miraculous inasmuch as it is

taken up by Reznikoff, as his relation to the Scriptures and to poetic writing coincide. This poem, *God and Messenger*, is often quoted to illustrate the intersection of an American and a biblical scene in Reznikoff.

XIV
The Bridge

In a cloud bones of steel.

XV
God and Messenger

This pavement barren
as the mountain
on which God spoke to Moses--
suddenly in the street
shining against my legs
the bumper of a motor car. 17

Paul Auster sees this poem as an illustration of “the point that Reznikoff the Jew and Reznikoff the American cannot be separated from one another,”¹⁸ while Norman Finkelstein finds it ambiguous and offers the following interpretation: “[...] irony [...] deflates the poet as urban Moses. God will not speak to him though the New York pavement is as barren as Sinai: the motor car as messenger bears God’s silence in the modern world and not his voice. Or is the poet the messenger? In that case, his prophetic desire is thwarted, and his only message (to his fellow New Yorkers? to American Jews?) consists of his rueful observations of secular life.”¹⁹ This interpretation tries intently to assign a single meaning to the text as a closed unit. Yet Judaism or Americanism are words which cannot make sense in Reznikoff’s poetry outside of his relation to the English language and to Hebrew, to English texts and Hebrew texts.

Upon reading these two poems consecutively one appreciates the parallel between the elliptical construct of the first one-line poem and the more elaborate construct of the ellipsis in the second poem after the dash on the third line, which had been introduced by the analogy linking the city’s pavement and Mount Sinai using the conjunction “as.” This ellipsis around which the poem revolves comes to redirect the reader’s eyes to the ground after they have risen analogically from the scene of a direct perception, and in doing so the biblical reference echoes for the

reader as a connotative memory would, entwined among actual present perceptions as a manner of added denotative awareness of a manifold field of experience on which the opening deictic has directed our attention from the start. Indeed, in a twofold movement, the abruptness of the sudden contact with “the bumper of a motor car” is smoothed by the text returning to the scenery attached to the pavement from the opening line, while the analogy established in the second and third lines, though it is introduced by the topical conjunction, occurs in the absence of a verb and dislocates the scene so that it may not be prolonged any further than the dash takes it. The suspended line-ending nevertheless gets continued by the alliterative [s] sounds from “Moses” to “suddenly.” These two different realisations of the consonant (which is the initial of the word Sinai and pervades this short poem) open the hiatus between the two mentions of God’s glory, his voice as the letters of the Law on the mountain, and its perversion as Moses comes down from the mountain, the reader’s eyes being brought back down to the street in a similar motion, to find an equivalent to the Golden Calf in the shape of a shining bumper. Hence the poem’s ellipsis serves not only as separation but offers traces of a connection between those two scenes.

Reznikoff’s poem may be said to use this interplay further, if we consider that between the words “legs” and “car,” we hear the word “calf” in its anatomical sense. Further still, Reznikoff may be aware of the Hebrew word which transliterates as “har” – which means the mountain and is used in the phrase “har Sinai.” This “a-r” phoneme that we find in “car” also appears on the first line of the poem differently pronounced in “barren,” and this could be glossed as a hint by the poet (whose first name is Charles, which figures the three letters *har*) a hint as to the powers of language as a cross between a vehicle and land (in Hebrew “*erets*,” a near anagram of “street”). Such a reading of this poem aims at reminding the reader of all the different possibilities of the text, which both refers to the words of God and points to an industrial product, potentially a vehicle of idolatry. Seeing the streets of the city as barren as the desert of Exodus does not simply denote a resorting to the tropism of biblical imagery, but aims at questioning the fertility of textual soils, at the same time as it may be construed as an indirect comment by Reznikoff on commodities as idols,

and the need, after Marx, to demystify our perception of such commodities. This point is all the more crucial if one sees the poem as an oblique comment on the lure for immigrants of the well-known phrase which would have the streets of New York “paved with gold.”²⁰

If such a reading pertains to a “*historia sincera*,” it is because such a method rests upon the premise (quoting Spinoza, Chapter 13 of the *Treatise*) that “*difficultatem intelligendi Scripturam in sola lingua, et non in sublimitate argumenti sitam esse.*”²¹ Sincerity qualifies what has not been adulterated or falsified, and in this case, makes us ask quite simply whether a poet may be truthful, tell the truth and tell it slant, in Dickinson’s words, inasmuch as it is this slant which sincerity seeks to address, rather than redress, discarding “*sublimitate argumenti*” which one is tempted to transliterate as a rejection of the sublime as mystifying, and make that slant that of language only, the sincere slant of language, of the letters on the page. In this sense one may be justified in comparing Spinoza’s desacralization of the linguistic matter of the Scriptures and Reznikoff’s desacralization of poetic forms, which rests upon the belief central to Judaism, which Levinas puts very succinctly when he writes: “Judaism is perhaps nothing else but the rejection of the idea of sacredness filtering through the world.”²² Or, as Reznikoff puts it: “The wind has blown here, the wind itself is gone.”²³ It allows one to reconsider the input of Imagism for such a poet as Reznikoff, in the sense that the visible world, standing as a limit to our perceptions, sends us back to the text as the only visible expression of the readability of this world, but a different readability – one devoid of fetishist or idolatrous strategies of the filtering through of a presence, and built upon – in Zukofsky’s words – “*inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.*”²⁴

We find similar inextricabilities in Oppen. For Oppen, sincerity relates to the perception of the impenetrable objectivity of the world, which prompts in return a heightened sense of consciousness, a becoming aware of what he calls “the actuality of consciousness.” Oppen speaks of the image (which he opposes to metaphor) as “an account of the poet’s perception, of the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness.”²⁵ This image relies on what he calls “pointing,” paraphrasing Heidegger’s “Saying as Showing,” as Peter

Nicholls notices in his recent book on Oppen²⁶. Such an image as he aims at is an image in the making, and an image of the making, a construct in which writing and reading praxis combine as a mutual test of conviction, a test of the perception of the world by the poet and the perception of the text by the reader as it becomes impossible to set them apart. It is a moment of disclosure, in the words of Oppen, who writes in 1964: "If one is to move to experience further one needs a syntax, a new syntax. A new syntax is a cadence of disclosure, a new cadence of logic, a new musical cadence. A new 'structure of space'."²⁷ In the poem *Chartres* from *The Materials* (1962) we may see how Oppen moves, in the words of Marjorie Perloff, "Against Transparency," and "From the Radiant Cluster to the Word as Such,"²⁸ if we take it as Oppen's answer to Pound's account of the building of the city of Ecbatan in the early *Cantos*, quoted by Perloff, which open with the line: "Great bulk, huge mass, thesaurus; / Ecbatan [...]"²⁹ - a line which Oppen may be directly reworking in the opening of his poem.

CHARTRES

The bulk of it
In air

Is what they wanted. Compassion
Above the doors, the doorways

Mary the woman and the others
The lesser

Are dreams on the structure. But that a stone
Supports another

That the stones
Stand where the masons locked them

Above the farmland
Above the will

Because a hundred generations
Back of them and to another people

The world cried out above the mountain 30

About the last lines of this poem, Oppen writes to John Crawford in 1973: "what the world cried out above the mountain was I Am What IS The marvel of the fact,

the marvel of the real, not the whole of Christian or Hebrew orthodoxy - - (as for your point: what 'produces a cathedral' is a thousand men hauling stone and cracking stone."³¹ The assimilation of creator and creation understood as the real, the facts as a source of marvel alongside the orthodoxy of the two founding texts, this draws our attention to the notion of value and the Marxist-Zukofskian notion of poetic labour. The poem is composed as the praise of an architectural work accomplished by the masons as compassion shifts from Mary and the lesser biblical figures to become the compassion felt for the builders of the cathedral. By synecdoche, the stones would then read as the masons themselves who "support one another" in the same effort as the stones they haul. The immaterial, the invisible, the massive voids in the volume of the cathedral taken up by the syntax and typography of the poem contain and express a celebration of the work, while the ornamental sculpting of figures is designated as mere "dreams *on* the structure" and not actively part of it. Yet this is not a homogenous totality. As Peter Nicholls writes in his paper on Oppen's ethics, Oppen understands sincerity "not as a question of truth [i.e. not the inner truth of the self] but rather as one of relation and exposure to the claims of others."³² But it may be a question of the truthfulness of such a relation and an exposure.

Oppen's dialectics revolve around an otherness out of which to build one bulk, a word which refers to a large as well as a numerous mass (there is a latent play in the text between the two meanings of the word mass, which was in Pound's line, and may well also refer us back to Eliot's rituals; and we know the importance of the numerous for Oppen). From its foundations the text tries to hold together these human generations ("a hundred generations"), according to different types of association as we find in the different occurrences of the word "other": first, juxtaposition, "and the others," then articulation ("Supports another"), then an address ("to another people"). In fact, if we follow the signifier "other" within the text, the accumulation builds up - from a series of characters to the assembling of stones - to reach the word people, in itself an assembling, and perhaps an arrangement, a harmony and a dissonance, either in the biblical or the political sense of the word people, or yet again, either in the political or biblical sense of the world,

as the last lines present an analogy between Mount Sinai and the Christian cathedral, opening the world to both texts or both texts to the world. Oppen writes in *Of Being Numerous*: “In this nation / Which is in some sense / Our home. Covenant! / The covenant is / There shall be peoples.³³” – in the plural.

Indeed the title *Chartres* hints at a “chart” or a graph, wherein the poet’s perception is inscribed, and yet the poem does not merely stand as an architectural ekphrasis and is not only directed at an architectural interaction between text and object: it also relies on a dialogue between texts as we read at the end of the poem, a dialogue between Old and New Testament, the text then being the graph or chart bridging the gap between the ark and the new covenant. We may add that the interior of a cathedral is often said to resemble the inverted hull of a boat, hull being another sense of the word bulk. This would imply an allusion to Noah’s ark, which is quite interesting here as the Hebrew for ark (*teivah*) means both literally “box” (and then ark) and “word,” so much so that we cannot help but notice the repetitions of the initial “b” of bulk in the text built around that letter, which we have repeatedly in “Above,” and in “But,” “Because” and “Back”, all capitalised. These grammatical words are the keystones of the poem and we know that Oppen wrote of his faith in what he called the small nouns, which for him should include shifters, what he called “poor words” which constitute, he wrote, such a “wealth of parlance.” He states in the poem *The Song*: « When the words *would with not and* / Take on substantial Meaning / It is a poem // Which may be sung / May well be sung »³⁴. Thus literally shifting the weight of referentiality, Oppen insures that we are being brought back to the word as a unit of sincerity through which to see, and at which to look, with which to say and show.

The bare word stands as the only support for the text in another poem of Oppen’s, *The Building of the Skyscraper*, which is very useful to further understand *Chartres* and perhaps also Reznikoff’s poem.

THE BUILDING OF THE SKYSCRAPER

This steel worker on the girder
Learned not to look down, and does his work
And there are words we have learned
Not to look at,

Not to look for substance
Below them. But we are on the verge
Of vertigo.

There are words that mean nothing
But there is something to mean.
Not a declaration which is truth
But a thing
Which is. It is the business of the poet
'To suffer the things of the world
And to speak them and himself out.'

O, the tree, growing from the sidewalk---
It has a little life, sprouting
Little green buds
Into the culture of the streets.
We look back
Three hundred years and see bare land.
And suffer vertigo. 35

Oppen referred to the poem as the "moving edge," and certainly it is a test of conviction, sincerity and truthfulness to stand on that edge and suffer vertigo. It should be noted that word "girder" has a special significance for Oppen, who cared very much for Reznikoff's two-line poem which reads: "Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies / a girder, still itself among the rubbish."³⁶, which he rewrote in his foreword to Reznikoff's *Complete Poems*: "the girder, still itself / among the rubble" after which he observed:

That line of Reznikoff's and the poem of which it is a part, and line upon line of his perfect poems have been with me for the forty-eight years since I first came upon them. If we had no other poetry I think we could nevertheless live by virtue of these poems, these lives, these small precise these overwhelming gentle iron lines and images of all that is and our love and pride and our small life which is immeasurable as these lines which are still themselves among the rubble. (September 1976)

The iron structure does not stand there for the poet to flesh it out. Those words we have learned not to look at are the "small words," the girder, the grammar. These lines cannot sustain a tall construct if they rise architecturally unsubstantial. But neither can they help draw a williamsian-botticelcian tree: the poem may no longer depend upon such an image. No looking *at* will be able to prevent the vertigo of

looking *down* or looking *back*. This bare land newly laid waste demands that the poet should abandon sky-reaching declarations of truth and instead scrape at the ground for the things which are. Such would be yet another definition of sincerity, showing how objectivist poetics did have an ethical dimension, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis wrote, but not so much because it began with the person instead of the word.

It would seem rather as if sincerity began at the junction of person and word. Such is the place for the poem, for Oppen surely, when he speaks of this place as:

place in another sense; place without the words, the
wordless sphere in the mind - - Or rather the wordless
sphere with things including a word or so in it
That I still believe to be, as they say, Poem: the thing in
the mind before the words to be able to hold it even
against the language - - - 37''

Against the language – this means there is no clear choice to be made between the supposedly insincere speaking I nor the equally supposedly objective seeing eye (or vice-versa), and the language-games of Oppen’s successors; instead, setting the standard for sincerity from the triangle of these three options, it opens onto a poetics which has perhaps truly not been touched on yet.

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- ¹⁹ Norman Finkelstein. « Reznikoff's Tradition and Modernity », in *The Objectivist Nexus*. op. cit., p. 203-204.
- ²⁰ I would like to thank H el ene Aji for suggesting this addition.
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- ²² Emmanuel Levinas. "Heidegger, Gagarine et nous", in *Difficile Libert e*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1963 et 1976, p. 349 (translation mine - the French is : "Le sacr e filtrant   travers le monde - le juda isme n'est peut- tre que la n gation de cela.").
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