Elie Wiesel has claimed that testimony is the generic legacy of the Holocaust.¹ Other critics have pointed out that testimony, in the sense of first-person literary accounts of events to which the author was eye-witness, also characterized earlier historical calamities, in particular the First World War.² That war produced testimony in the form of lyric poetry, in which the reader recognized the author as a witness and assumed a close fit to the poem’s speaking subject. Yet it is not poetic but prose testimony that is typical of Holocaust eye-witness, while Holocaust poetry is considered a separate and self-contained genre. In this essay, I will explore the reasons why this should be so, and whether there is a closer link than at first appears between the construction of the first-person narrator of a prose testimony, such as Wiesel’s Night (1958), and the lyric ‘I’ of some Holocaust poetry.

For the purposes of this investigation I have chosen two very different examples of self-consciously testimonial Holocaust poetry. The first is the sequence of four poems entitled ‘Razglednicas’, the word for ‘Postcards’ in Serbo-Croatian,³ by the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti. Radnóti was of Jewish origin although his chosen allegiance was to Catholicism. However, he was called up as a Jewish slave labourer and had been anticipating death as an ‘objective certainty’⁴ since the Nazi accession to power in 1933, on account of his Jewish antecedents. Such ‘certainty’ seems more politically astute than ‘mystical’, in Zsuzsanna Ozsváth’s term.⁵ ‘Razglednicas’ were composed while Radnóti was a slave labourer in German-controlled copper mines at Bor in Serbia, and written in a notebook provided by a local peasant. Radnóti was shot and thrown into a mass grave by Hungarian gendarmes in October 1944, and the notebook was only found when his corpse was exhumed some nineteen months later. In this sense Radnóti’s last poems were almost literally what Shoshana
Felman describes as “‘a message in a bottle’, which may or may not reach a “you”” – although some of the poems Radnóti composed while working as a slave labourer were published while he was still alive, the nature of the addressee, let alone the reader, in Holocaust poetry of this kind is one of its radical uncertainties. The notion of such poems as ‘postcards’ is ferociously ironic, given not just what picture we might see when looking at them, but also because of the absence of a named addressee. The circumstances in which Radnóti’s poems were composed make them testimony written as close to the events as is imaginable. As lyric poetry, Radnóti’s ‘postcards’ are subjective and imagistic responses to catastrophe at the moment of witness. However, they are not only testimony but also aesthetic artefacts. An extra layer of mediation between event and reader is present, despite the poems’ first-person address.

My second example is the long poem Holocaust (1975) by the American poet Charles Reznikoff. Reznikoff, a self-styled Objectivist poet, used for Holocaust a ‘documentary’ technique he had perfected in his two-volume work, Testimony: The United States (1965 and 1968), which were edited extracts from nineteenth-century American legal records transcribed as poetry. In Holocaust Reznikoff restyled into verse a selection of the testimonies recorded at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials of 1945 to 1949, and the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann. The progression from Testimony to Holocaust shows a shift in Reznikoff’s conception of testimony from the legal to the memorial, while preserving the notion of the all-important eyewitness utterance. And for Reznikoff in Holocaust, poetry is the most fitting way of representing the testimony to catastrophe. While Reznikoff and Radnóti as authors have diametrically opposite relations to the events in their poems, the writings of both draw upon the generic features of testimony.

Radnóti’s ‘Razglednicas’ are about the circumstances of their composition – each ends with the date and place of its writing – and constitute implicit reflections on the role of poetry at such a time. Reflection on the role of poetry itself is clearest in ‘Razglednica 2’, which Radnóti wrote at the brick factory of Cservenka where the slave labourers arrived on 6 October 1944:

At nine kilometres: the pall of burning
Hayrick, homestead, farm.
At the field’s edge: the peasants, silent, smoking
pipes against the fear of harm.
Here: a lake ruffled only by the step
of a tiny shepherdess
where a white cloud is what the ruffled sheep
drink in their lowliness.8

In this ‘postcard’, the effects of violence approach closer to the poem’s speaker as the poem progresses. Yet geographical closeness is matched by sensory distance. The burning farms are nine kilometres away; their inhabitants, the pipe-smoking peasants, are closer still, ‘at the field’s edge’. But when the poem’s visual perspective is united with its speaking subject – ‘Here’ – what we see is a vision of another world, not of the present and its ‘fear of harm’. The ‘tiny shepherdess’ is a figure from the kind of bucolic and mythic poetry Radnóti himself wrote, in homage to Virgil, in his less turbulent youth, and conveys, according to Marianna D. Birnbaum, an ‘idyll of ignorance’9 that parallels the very different powerlessness of the peasants. In this ‘terrifying tableau’10 it is as if the shepherdess is about to be submerged in the lake onto which she steps. The aestheticized unreality of her sheep is emphasized by the fact that they are ‘ruffled’ like the lake, and the water they drink is a reflective surface.

In ‘Razglednica 3’, dated 24 October and written at Mohács, the connection between humans and animals has the opposite effect. Oxen and men are linked in a direct and unmetaphorical way:

Bloody drool hangs on the mouths of the oxen.
The men all piss red.
The company stands around in stinking wild knots.
Death blows overhead, disgusting.11

As in ‘Razglednica 2’, the speaker in the third postcard does not explicitly identify his position in relation to what he describes, but the present-tense, pictorial construction of the poem shows us that he is among the suffering company. Ozsváth notes of ‘Razglednica 3’ that, ‘Aside from its formal precision’ in the regular beat of the original Hungarian’s iambic pentameter, ‘the poem captures a condemned convoy’.12 It is indeed the form of this ‘postcard’ rather than factual retrospection that points to death’s inevitability. The laconic, deadpan observation of sickening detail and the presence of endstopped lines convey hopelessness just as much as the precise nature of what is described.13
The temptation to knowing retrospection when reading ‘Postcards’, given the details of Radnóti’s death, is greatest in ‘Razglednica 4’, dated 30 October 1944 and written in another forced labour camp. In this ‘postcard’ it appears that the poem’s speaker is predicting or even describing his own death:

I fell beside him; his body turned over, 
already taut as a string about to snap. 
Shot in the nape. That’s how you too will end, 
I whispered to myself: just lie quietly. 
Patience now flowers into death.

Der springt noch auf, a voice said above me. 
On my ear, blood dried, mixed with filth.14

In contrast to the other ‘postcards’, the fourth one opens in the first person and the past tense. It is not clear from what point in the present these events are being narrated, since the scene depicted is that of a mass grave. Emery George even terms this ‘Razglednica’ a ‘ghost story’,15 as if it were being narrated posthumously. Here the poem’s speaker can only address himself, which both echoes a poetic habit of Radnóti’s16 and conveys the absence of any interlocutor in the mass grave apart from oneself or, even more shockingly, the German guard. It appears that the speaker’s warning to himself not to move fails horribly when he hears a voice delivering a deathly verdict on his continuing to live: ‘“Der springt noch auf”’, ‘That one is still moving’. Historically speaking, there is a conflation here of different events. The German phrase was one that Radnóti overheard when he witnessed the death of his friend Miklós Lorsi, who was killed during a massacre of slave labourers at Cservenka on 8 October 1944 – Lorsi’s profession as a violinist is preserved in the description of his body ‘taut as a string’. In the ‘postcard’, the poem’s speaker lies in the same grave at the same time as his murdered friend. It is as if the poem’s shared grave represents an imaginative or memorial effort to be in the same place as Lorsi, as much as it is any kind of literal prefiguring by the poem’s narrator, or Radnóti himself, of his own death. In this way the use of the past tense actually stands for a look forward. Yet the German voice sounding ‘very near’ to the speaker does suggest the expectation of a shared fate and of a temporal as well as spatial ‘nearness’ – it is hard to say whose blood is drying on the speaker’s ear, Lorsi’s or his own. This effect is increased in Ozsváth’s
translation of the poem, which knits together through its triple rhyme
the notions of premonition and proximity:

‘Now patience flowers in death’. Then I could hear
‘Der springt noch auf’, above, and very near.
Blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear.17

The German phrase quoted in the poem is not a recognition of life but
a summons to death, just as the Hungarian proverb ‘patience bears
roses’ – meaning ‘patience will be rewarded’18 – has turned from the
promise of a reward to the certainty of an untimely end.

In contrast to Radnóti’s fragmentary ‘postcards’, written and sent
by an eye-witness, the very title of Reznikoff’s Holocaust suggests an
overview. Holocaust is divided into thematic sections such as
‘Deportation’, ‘Ghettos’, and ‘Rescue’. What we might take to be the
definitional feature of testimony has been removed: first-person
utterance has been transformed into third-person narrative. While the
authenticity of the original depositions is preserved, the distinctions
between voices are no longer clear to the reader – and the distinction
between survivors and those who died, their stories told by others, is
also blurred. A composite experience is constructed by this lack of
individuality. We move from one event whose subject is anonymous
– ‘He ran –/escaped–/ and stayed in the forest two days./ Then the
Russians came’ – to another – ‘One Saturday when he was thirteen,/ he was taking a walk with his father in the ghetto of Lodz’ – within
the space of a few lines. The only first-person utterance that remains
in Holocaust is in the section entitled ‘Research’ which begins, ‘We
are the civilized –/ Aryans’ and ends ‘Heil Hitler!’’. It is as if first-
person utterance only exists within the poem in terms of unreliability.

Reznikoff’s transformation of trial testimony into poetry has
several functions. It re-presents material for an audience who might
not otherwise read it, yet without the commentary or framing of an
overt narrator. In the process of versification sentences have been
simplified and ironic effects heightened. Reznikoff named the free
verse form he relied upon in Holocaust ‘recitative’, the term used to
describe those musical passages in operas that deploy the rhythm of
the speaking voice. The very notion of versifying material from the
Nuremberg and Eichmann trials suggests both preservation and
immolation, as if Holocaust testimony has become part of an epic set
in the fixed past. The poem’s footnotes contribute to such an effect,
with their implication that the reader may not know the meaning of ‘Nazis’ or what the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was.

Robert Alter observes that Reznikoff’s project is ‘the ultimate Objectivist treatment of the past’, following the definition the poet gave in an interview of 1968:

> By the term ‘objectivist’ I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject matter.19

The ‘writer’ to whom Reznikoff refers here is the transcriber or speaker of the poem rather than the testifier whose words are quoted. The strength of Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* lies in its matching content and method. The real-life ‘testimony of a witness in a court of law’ is made even more objective by his editorial changes, however emotive and subjective it may originally have been. The poem’s focus on the small details that encapsulate the illogicality of the Nazis’ behaviour is also the result of Reznikoff’s objectivist method, in which fact and specificity are as significant as in a courtroom. For instance, the poem’s speaker describes the deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto in a ‘transport train’:

> Russian freight cars without steps –
> And they had to lift each other into the cars.

The irony of the Jews helping each other onto the freight train which will take them to their deaths is shown here but not commented upon. The lines are sombrely spare, emphasizing the fact that this is a matter of great simplicity and seriousness. In another section, the horrible account of the death of a mother and her baby at the hands of an SS man concludes,

> Just then a stray dog passed
> and the SS man stooped to pat it
> and took a lump of sugar out of his pocket
> and gave it to the dog.

The particular paratactic structure of these lines reproduces in the repetition of ‘and’ the mysterious and terrible mixture of murder and kindness on the SS man’s part, by refusing to link the lines of the poem with causal conjunctions.20
The sugar lump reappears in altered tropic form in ‘Children’, where we read,

and the children were screaming and crying, ‘Mamma, mamma’,
even though the guards were trying to give them pieces of candy to quiet them

Here again a sweet is the focus of the narrator’s implicit moral indignation in another episode which disrupts the bonds between mothers and children. In this instance, the narrator’s judgement is made clear in the phrase ‘even though’, with its ironic suggestion that the children should have accepted the loss of their mothers in exchange for ‘candy’. Susan Gubar analyses Reznikoff’s reliance on horrifying detail in terms of Primo Levi’s notion from The Drowned and the Saved of the inexplicable and widespread ‘useless cruelty’ of the Holocaust years. However, the very decision to focus on such detail also has a decontextualizing effect by emphasizing what are simply individual instances of horrible cruelty. It is as if the poem implies that these acts were the essence of the Holocaust, rather than any ideological or political meaning.

Yet of course a narrator is present in Holocaust, through the selection of verse-form and other choices. Occasionally a narratorial voice is heard to speak aloud, as in the instance below where the exclamation mark indicates righteous irony:

all who had come on the train were ordered to undress
and hand over eyeglasses and false teeth –
nothing to be wasted!

Similarly, in the section ‘Work Camps’ the narrator repeats with double-voiced satire both the ideological conviction and the exclamation uttered earlier by the Aryan voice:

Get as much work as possible from the young and strong
in concentration camps …
Heil Hitler!

But even the lack of narratorial comment acts for more pointedly poignant effect than its presence, for instance in the incident quoted above about the SS man and the stray dog – such an occurrence is presented as an isolated instance or an image. It does not seem to be the case, as Gubar claims, that ‘the reader is situated in a vertiginous
moral void’.\(^{23}\) Our moral reaction is taken for granted as a dialogic response to the inverted morality of the universe that is represented. Ultimately, it seems that *Holocaust* is a testimony – but one given by the reader of trial transcripts. This is a reader who has been inspired by righteous anger and ‘stylistic force’\(^{24}\) to select and edit a huge volume of testimonial material into a poetic sequence. What we read is what this reader chose. As Antony Rowland argues of Geoffrey Hill’s poetic tribute to Miklós Radnóti in Hill’s *The Triumph of Love*, Reznikoff’s Holocaust poetry is composed of the ‘memory of the witness’s memory’\(^{25}\).

The differences between Radnóti’s and Reznikoff’s testimonial poetry can only partly be attributed to their different historical moments. Radnóti’s oblique representation of his life as a slave labourer and his suffering on the death-march from Bor in Serbia to Hungary is not conventionally testimonial. His ‘Razglednicas’, like Paul Celan’s early post-war poem ‘Todesfuge’, include details of his experiences alongside meditations on the function of poetry and the possibility of a readership at a calamitous time. Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* is also concerned with the function of poetry and the nature of the reader, but, unlike Radnóti’s, Reznikoff’s sequence is fully predicated on the notion of retrospection. The death of the poem’s speaker is not implicit within it; indeed, the speaker is outside the action, as a reader and not a victim. For Radnóti, continuing to write poetry in the late days of 1944 was a ‘moral act’, according to Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri,\(^{26}\) and in one poem he poses the rhetorical question, ‘Is there a land still, tell me, where this verse form has meaning?’ Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* is technically innovative, based on a poetic method he had developed in relation to other material and which Milton Hindus describes as ‘a concept in poetry so completely original that I cannot think of any precedent for it’\(^{27}\). However, *Holocaust* is more successful as a poetic experiment than as a way of representing the events of the Holocaust. The implied narrator’s temporal and geographical distance from events gives him a ‘masochistic’\(^{28}\) passivity that the speaker of Radnóti’s poems, who is so close to events that we hear his voice from a mass grave, does not have. Paul Auster credits Reznikoff with being ‘a master of the everyday’,\(^{29}\) which suits his work in *Testimony* but not that in *Holocaust*, where ‘everydayness’ has been deformed out of recognition. Indeed, the incidents in *Testimony* – which include accounts by American testifiers of the ‘everyday’ injustices of petty thieving, racism,
industrial accidents and assaults – are particularly fruitfully represented without commentary. The ‘system of domination and disregard that has won’ in Testimony is, ironically, more inscrutable and more troubling than that in Holocaust, where it is clearly Hitler’s National Socialism.

The difference between the two writers’ testimonial poetry follows a distinction drawn by Felman and Laub in an analysis of a talk given by Stéphane Mallarmé. In this talk, Mallarmé described the changes forged in contemporary poetry – in particular, the use of free verse – as if he were a traveller bearing testimony to an accident which is, in his words, ‘“known, and pursuing him”’. Felman and Laub detect in Mallarmé’s phrase an ambiguity in the original French which leaves it unclear whether it is the accident that pursues the witness–traveller or the latter who pursues the accident. This ambiguity is helpful as a distinction between different kinds of testimonial poetry. While Radnóti is ‘pursued’ by the ‘accident’ to which he is a witness, Reznikoff ‘pursues the accident’ and acts as a ‘medium of the testimony – and a medium of the accident’ because of his conviction of its ‘historical significance’. In other words, Radnóti could not but write about the times in which he was caught, while Reznikoff’s testimonial poetry bears witness to his conviction that the events of the Holocaust must not be forgotten. Wittgenstein argues that ‘a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information’. Non-fiction prose testimony, which may well ‘give information’, depends on just the close fit between author and narrator which Holocaust poetry denies; although poetry may include or quote testimonial elements, the ‘fabricated words’ of its first-person address are always primarily aesthetic.

**Notes**


3. As Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri point out in the notes to their translation of Radnóti’s Forced March: Selected Poems (London: Enitharmon Press 2003), the original title was ‘Razglenicák’, ‘a Serbian word with a Hungarian plural ending’ meaning ‘picture postcards’ (92).
10. Ibid.
13. On the detail of the men ‘pissing blood’, Ozsváth cites medical opinion to the effect that blood in the prisoners’ urine was caused by ‘the strain on, and disintegration of, their kidneys and inner organs … due to the brutal march’ (*In the Footsteps of Orpheus*, 239 n. 35) – however, it is as an imprecise sign of horrifying disintegration that the image is most powerful.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. *Foamy Sky*, 118. Ozsváth has also reproduced the iambic pentameter of the Hungarian original in her version, to less successful effect than George’s use of free verse.
22. See Janet Sutherland’s analysis of the section about the SS man and the stray dog, in which she demonstrates the substantial alteration Reznikoff made to the source material in terms of phrasing and the order in which events are narrated: ‘Reznikoff and His Sources’, in Milton Hindus, ed., *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1984), 302–3.
32. Ibid., 22. The original French reveals the source of the ambiguity, as Mallarmé speaks of a ‘témoignage d’un accident su et le poursuivant’ (quoted in ibid., 18 n. 12): the referent of the pronoun ‘le’ is unclear.
33. Ibid., 23–4.