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# The Ongoing French Reception of the Objectivists

Abigail Lang

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- 1 The ties between French and American poetry are ancient and profound. In the introduction to his 1984 *The Random House Book of XXth Century French Poetry*, Paul Auster reminds his anglophone reader of the perennial contribution of the French language in general and French literature and poetry in particular to its British and later American counterparts, going back to John Gower and Chaucer. Focusing on the modern period, he claims that “American poetry of the past hundred years would be inconceivable without the French.” From the time of Baudelaire “modern British and American poets have continued to look to France for new ideas” (xxviii). From the early twentieth century, American poets have not only flocked to Paris in search of a cheap living and greater permissiveness, they “have been steadily translating their French counterparts—not simply as a literary exercise, but as an act of discovery and passion” (xxx). The reverse may not have been as entirely true, though one must immediately mention Poe’s exceptional French reception, his work championed and translated by both Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and Whitman’s early influence on the Unanimistes movement. But the late 1960s mark a turning point with now primarily the French poets turning towards American poetry not only with passion and curiosity but also with a motive, that of furthering French poetry. In the context of this surge of interest for American poetry in France since the 1960s, the reception of the Objectivist poets<sup>1</sup> stands out for its exceptional endurance, in turn predicated on its ability for renewal. First brought to the attention of the French readers almost fifty years ago, they are still being discussed and translated.<sup>2</sup> While the French reputation of other American poets tended to wax and wane over a decade or two, the reception of the Objectivists has been comparatively ongoing since the 1970s, each generation of French poets refashioning the Objectivist canon and critical meaning according to their different, at times antagonistic, needs. Championed by a significant number of major poets, the Objectivists have been enrolled to defend sometimes competing poetics in ardent poetic debates.

- 2 The nature of the Objectivist “movement” itself can explain, at least in part, the ease with which it could be appropriated later on. Indeed, the very idea that an Objectivist movement ever existed remains contentious<sup>3</sup> since Louis Zukofsky only came up with the term at the behest of Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, who insisted he label the eclectic group of poets he had gathered at the instigation of Ezra Pound for the February 1931 issue of the magazine. In lieu of manifesto, Louis Zukofsky expanded an essay he had devoted to the work of Charles Reznikoff, a poet twenty years his senior. Entitled “Sincerity and Objectification,” it defined sincerity as “thinking with the things as they exist” or “presentation in detail,” and objectification as “rested totality” (Zukofsky, 1931, 273-278). Some of the poets featured in the 1931 issue were subsequently represented in the “Objectivists” anthology edited by Zukofsky, published by George Oppen in 1932 and in the cooperative Objectivist Press from 1933 to 1936. When they were rescued from almost total oblivion by Black Mountain poets Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley after the war, they tended again to be lumped together for ease of reference, especially after L.S. Dembo published interviews with George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky under the title “The ‘Objectivist’ Poet,” thus establishing the idea of a core quartet.<sup>4</sup> As Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain have convincingly argued, the Objectivists are best conceived as a “nexus” which “magnetized” a set of characteristics and “historical responsibilities” (7). Stemming from Poundian imagism and its insistence on direct presentation but developed by its Marxist proponents towards an emphatically materialist, historically and politically conscious poetics, Objectivism has often been cast as an alternative model to dominant poetic models. In his 1978 essay “The Objectivist Tradition,” Charles Altieri posits the “Objectivist style” as an alternative model of lyric relatedness in concurrence with the symbolist style (DuPlessis, 25 *sqq.*). Where “symbolist poets typically strive to see beyond the seeing” and value evocation, Objectivist poets “seek an artifact presenting the modality of things seen or felt as immediate structure of relations” and value direct reference. The Objectivist thinks *with* things rather than *about* them and values composition and measure over interpretation. The formalist bias of *objectification* (perfection, rest, totality) is balanced with the ethical imperative of *sincerity*, the respectful attention to minute particulars and, in Oppen’s understanding, composition out of moments of conviction and a commitment to clarity. In his 1999 afterword to his original essay, Altieri demonstrates the inherent plasticity of the movement and its key concepts by extending the concept of sincerity to indeterminacy and the concept of objectification to the anti-representational constructions of several contemporary investigative poets (DuPlessis, 18). This plasticity was to allow for similarly inventive interpretations on the part of French readers, making for an exceptionally fruitful reception.
- 3 As Antoine Compagnon has shown, post-war French poetry can be schematically divided between believers and skeptics, between those who have chosen to celebrate the world, to watch for signs of presence, to unveil transcendence, and to put their trust in humanism, tradition and the transparency of language on the one hand, and those who refuse poetry, give up on expressing the real, focus on language, endorse suspicion, advise distance, advocate the experience of limits and remain faithful to the modernist spirit on the other. In Oppen, the believers could recognize a predilection for rugged reality, a distrust of concepts and an aspiration to truth and silence reminiscent of Yves Bonnefoy and those poets associated with *L’Éphémère* (1967-1972): Bonnefoy, André du Bouchet, Jacques Dupin

and Paul Celan. An assiduous reader of Heidegger since the 1930s, Oppen related strongly to Bonnefoy's *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* which he first read in 1965 and which, as Peter Nicholls has shown (89), influenced his 1968 *Of Being Numerous*. Oppen's serial mode, where revelation comes in shards, could also evoke René Char and his Heraclitean aphorisms, though in a muted tone. In fact, like Char who had expressed his fealty to poetry by joining the resistance during WWII and had refused to publish throughout the war, Oppen and Rakosi commanded respect for having, during the Depression, renounced poetry to organize strikes and become social workers. In 1942, Oppen volunteered for duty and was wounded in the Ardennes. Like Char who had expressed his preoccupation for a "common presence," Oppen pursued a tormented reflection on the very possibility of community, which he also carried out on the linguistic front, wondering "whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist" (Dembo, 162). The nominalism of the Objectivists, their care for singulars and their distrust of high-sounding universals, while it chimes with Bonnefoy's rejection of Platonism, could also speak to the skeptics, who praised their early examination of language. Oppen does not renounce a poetics of celebration but pares it down at the risk of hermeticism, and he submits language to a rigorous scrutiny which leaves him using mostly the humble "little words." Among the skeptics, formalists of all persuasions, whether Oulipians or Literalists, recognized the importance of Zukofsky's formal and prosodic experiments. Against Sartre who had asserted that only prose could carry active political content, Zukofsky and his fellow Objectivists produced poems where literary responsibility was embodied in the form, thus legitimizing opacity at the expense of transitivity. For Literalists who aspired to the degree zero of writing but could no longer, as Barthes had originally done in 1953, recognize it in Camus, who by the 1970s sounded as stately as any *grantécrivain* (great writer), Reznikoff's overwhelming *Testimony* offered a more convincing model of that "style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style" (Barthes, 217-218).

- 4 An Objectivist poet or text dominated each period, attuned to the current issues of French poetry. When he discovered the Objectivists in the 1960s, at a time when he was also attending to Bonnefoy's work, Claude Royet-Journoud appeared most taken by Oppen whose poems he set out to translate. But from the 1970s onwards, when, in the wake of Jabès and in a textualist reversal, Royet-Journoud made the book the answer to the quest for the "real place" initiated earlier by the poets associated with *L'Éphémère*, it was Zukofsky, a more formalistic poet and an early reader of Wittgenstein, whom he set up as his principal reference. Similarly, the promotion of *Testimony* at the expense of Zukofsky's "A"-9 in the 1980s signaled the end of the textualist avant-garde set on the experience of limits, and a return to narrative and the quotidian. Not all Objectivists have left a mark on French poetics. Why Carl Rakosi, the one surviving Objectivist to be invited to Royaumont in 1989, still has no book in French may partly be ascribed to his poetics which, as Marjorie Perloff has argued, are best understood in the wake of Wallace Stevens than William Carlos Williams—and Stevens's surface Frenchness never made him a very popular poet with French poets. Finally, as Liliane Giraudon rightly pointed out, the French reception of the Objectivists has sadly repeated the original neglect for the discreet female Objectivist Lorine Niedecker by choosing to foreground "the four musketeers" (Di Manno, 1990, 67).
- 5 While Marjorie Perloff (1989, 1990, 2006) and Serge Gavronsky (1994), early observers of the French-American conversation in poetry, have already highlighted and analyzed the

primary importance of the Objectivists, I hope to offer a more comprehensive historical account of their reception. Concentrating on issues of poetic theory,<sup>5</sup> my aim is to bring out the landmarks and articulations of the French reception of the Objectivists, to show how the controversies attending the interpretations of Objectivist poetics served to further French poetics and, more generally, to shed light on the complex dynamics of reception, textual circulation and canonization. I identify three main moments of this reception, focusing more specifically on the key figures, institutions, publications and events around which these different readings of the Objectivists crystallized, and I dwell on those moments when competing readings of the Objectivists came into conflict. In particular, I show how the Objectivists helped revive formal poetry after Surrealism while also providing a model for an anti-poetic prose poetry; how they spearheaded the movement to do away with an idealistic understanding of the poetic, while providing a disciplined poetics of presence which seemed able to resist lapsing into the sublime and smuggling in transcendence; how they helped break with the hermeneutic reading model and bring about a literalist reading in the 1970s, while also providing the key text for a second foundation of literalist poetics in the 1990s; how they served as the common reference sealing the friendship between contemporary poststructuralist French and American poets, while also fueling alternative views set on reconciling formal exigency and the visionary dimension in a humanist search for a “common song;” how they helped redefine poetry at a time of crisis, providing limit-cases challenging the structuralist or formalist definitions of poetry in favor of pragmatic or heuristic definitions.

## The 1970s or Radical Formalism

### Serge Fauchereau: “the First Deliberately American Movement”

- 6 The Objectivists were first brought to the attention of the French readers by Serge Fauchereau, a French critic, professor and curator, whose 1968 *Lectures de la poésie américaine* gave an unprecedented view of the wealth of modern and contemporary American poetry.<sup>6</sup> By placing the chapter devoted to the Objectivists right in the middle of the book and entitling it “La poésie en Amérique,” Fauchereau singled out the Objectivists as the first deliberately American movement (134). This central position also stressed their role as sole link between what Fauchereau calls the Pound-Williams-Cummings trinity on the one hand, and Charles Olson and the Black Mountain group on the other. In his opening paragraph, Fauchereau noted a surge of interest for the Objectivists in the 1960s and, possibly under the influence of his friend and informant Robert Duncan, stated that Louis Zukofsky appeared to be considered among the three or four greatest poets alive.
- 7 In Fauchereau’s characterization of the Objectivists, one recognizes several of the features that would appeal to those French poets who were going to endorse their poetics. Fauchereau insists on their refusal of metaphors, of explanation, of passing aesthetic or moral judgment. He insists on their deliberate simplicity, their familiar diction, a naturalness that American poetry had never reached before (128-130), characteristics which might well appeal in a country where literary language has always been far removed from everyday language and appeared even more strikingly so after 1968 when conversational French became more informal. Fauchereau quotes Zukofsky saying that the collaborators of the 1931 issue of *Poetry* believed in the necessity of form,

in renewing form rather than resorting to inherited patterns (129), and he quotes Oppen defending “a realist art in that the poem is interested in something it did not create” (129). He contextualizes the importance of the object and likens it to a rehabilitation of objects in other contemporary arts, painting in particular. Quoting Alain Robbe-Grillet (132), he evokes a form of revelation that is not mystical but plainly photographic, thus delineating the evolution of the French poetry to come from a poetics of presence to a poetics of literality. Robbe-Grillet, of course, was the writer who exemplified what Roland Barthes had defined in 1955 as “Littérature littérale,” a literature described as “white,” “objective,” and “neutral.” Fauchereau’s conclusion is that “there are as many Objectivisms as there are Objectivists today” (135), a decisive fact in that it allowed for a variety of interpretations over the next decades.

### Roubaud’s Zukofsky: An Antidote to Surrealism and Anti-Pound

- 8 It is through Fauchereau that Jacques Roubaud first heard about the Objectivists and in the 1977 special issue he guest-edited for *Europe*,<sup>7</sup> he calls this discovery “a true revelation” (24). In the conversation with Charles Dobzynsky and Serge Fauchereau that inaugurates the issue, Roubaud says that he had known about Williams, Pound and Cummings but, like everybody else, had been under the impression that American poetry was something minor and not very interesting. When Fauchereau asks him what attracted him to the Objectivists, Roubaud answers:

What struck me is that these were people who came after their elders, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, that is after people who were innovators and who, in order to continue beyond, found a solution that was not that of the Surrealists. I admire the Surrealists and Dadaists enormously but if you want to write in France you have to determine your stance in opposition to them; so seeing people who took Pound and Williams as starting-points and who went in directions that were markedly different from those we were familiar with in France, that really struck me. (*Europe*, 1977, 24)

- 9 Roubaud makes quite clear that he sees the Objectivists as a solution to a personal and a national problem, a lever to counter the moribund but still pervasive Surrealist influence. Throughout the 1970s, Roubaud was reading far and wide in search of remote poetic models to counter the Surrealist influence that he had initially suffered under: he found them primarily in the Troubadours, in Japanese medieval poetry, and in American poetry, above all in the Objectivists, in Gertrude Stein and in some of the New American poets represented in Don Allen’s anthology, *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*. In the mid-1970s, Roubaud was also reflecting on French verse. In his book on the demise of the alexandrine, he criticized what he terms the *vers libre standard* (standard free verse) propagated by the Surrealists and increasingly popular worldwide. The alternative poetic models he turned toward are all strongly formal and, unsurprisingly, Roubaud took a keen interest in Zukofsky in whom he may have seen a predecessor, a poet who shared his concern for the renewal of form and his growing distrust for avant-garde gestures.<sup>8</sup>
- 10 In the 1970s, Roubaud wrote at least three introductory notes<sup>9</sup> in which he refined his views and modulated Zukofsky’s reception. His 1973 notice begins with a grand canonizing gesture: radicalizing Fauchereau’s assertion of Zukofsky’s importance, Roubaud calls him “the most important American poet of the century.” Roubaud expresses his fascination for “A”: “this monumental, fascinating, off-putting, contradictory text, both attractive and difficult” (Roubaud, 1973, 12). He emphasizes

some unforgettable “formal feats” and a wide range of formal poetics. He adds that no one seems capable yet of tackling critically the problem posed by Zukofsky’s poem, that most critics play down the political and technical dimension of the work (“A”-9 and “Mantis”) in favor of the merely autobiographical (“A”-12). In his 1977 presentation, Roubaud elaborates on the Zukofsky/Pound parallel and, in 1980, he goes on to call Zukofsky an “anti-Pound” who has provided opposite answers to the same questions. Zukofsky follows Pound’s injunction to make it new but he doesn’t seek modern meaning in “the solar dust of their original fragments but through a meditation of the formal seen in the formal” (*Europe*, 78). Stressing the political and technical dimensions, Roubaud lays emphasis on form, “a meditation on form, in form itself,” as exemplified in “A”-9,<sup>10</sup> or “Mantis,” poems which strip formalism of its arguably reactionary overtones, flaunting a brilliant reconciliation of radical formalism with radical politics.<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, in the battle that raged between Parisian avant-garde coteries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this represented a pointed attack against *Tel Quel* where Denis Roche and Marcelin Pleynet championed Ezra Pound. For Roubaud, Zukofsky offered not only an original combination of radical politics and formal experimentation but, unlike Pound, had opted for the adequate politics (Marxism) and poetics, i.e. Zukofsky’s “objectification” in which poems aspire to the condition of object, as against *Tel Quel*’s prescription against genres in favor of the “text” and *écriture*.

### Anne-Marie Albiach and Claude Royet-Journoud’s Gestures: Defeating Hermeneutics

- 11 In the 1970s, Roubaud was the French poet who most outspokenly and discursively shaped the French reception of the Objectivists, doing so in major poetic venues: the communist-friendly magazines *Action Poétique* and *Europe*, as well as an anthology of American poetry published by Gallimard. But, just as importantly, this initial decade of reception was shaped by the *gestures* of two poets: Anne-Marie Albiach translated the first half of “A”-9 in 1970 and Claude Royet-Journoud entitled two of his magazines, “A” and *ZUK*,<sup>12</sup> after Zukofsky, and started using objectivistically-loaded words in the titles of his own books: *obstacle*, *objet*, *préposition*.<sup>13</sup> Royet-Journoud and Albiach didn’t need to learn about the Objectivists from Fauchereau. They lived in London in the 1960s, avidly reading contemporary American poets many of whom were published in England at the time; Zukofsky’s “A”-1-12 was published by Jonathan Cape in London in 1966, and three books by Lorine Niedecker were published by Wild Hawthorn Press in Edinburgh and Fulcrum in London in the 1960s. The British poet Anthony Barnett introduced them to the work of George Oppen. In each of his introductory notes, Roubaud mentions Albiach’s translation of the first half of “A”-9, calling it very beautiful in 1977 and “exemplary” in 1980. The reason why it is exemplary, I suspect, is that it replicates Zukofsky’s endeavor and formal feat: to paraphrase Roubaud, it constitutes *a meditation on translation as form, in the translation itself*. That both Jacques Roubaud and Anne-Marie Albiach should have initially focused on Zukofsky’s “A”-9 makes clear that, for this first generation of French poets, the appeal of the Objectivists lay in an original combination of form and politics.
- 12 Albiach’s translation has been reprinted three times since 1970, most recently in 2011, and has attained to something of a mythic aura, for reasons one can try to account for. First, she translated a poem of formidable formal complexity and semantic obduracy. And

she did so in a very personal way, making forceful decisions, choosing to translate the form rather than the words.<sup>14</sup> She repeated Zukofsky's posture, composing a prose paraphrase or commentary ("Contrepoint") just as Zukofsky had provided a prose restatement for his own poem in a 1940 privately published pamphlet. Secondly, Zukofsky approved of the translation,<sup>15</sup> and several French poets did too: Jacques Roubaud, Jean-Pierre Faye, Alain Veinstein, Jean Daive. To my knowledge, Albiach and Royet-Journoud are (with Fauchereau) the only French poets who corresponded with Zukofsky and Oppen. Thirdly, "A"-9 haunts Albiach's most celebrated book, *État*, published in 1971, a year after her translation. *État* revealed Albiach as a poet and, after Jean Daive's 1967 *Décimale blanche*, implemented a new poetics in French poetry, which violently defeated representation and hermeneutic reading and established a literal reading.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, proponents of *littéralité* continued exploring the Objectivists' work and acclimatizing their poetics.

## The 1980s and 1990s or *Littéralité*

### Royaumont, 1989: Negative Modernity Meets Language Poetry

- 13 1989 stands as an *annus mirabilis* in the French reception of the Objectivists, with a three-day international seminar on the Objectivists at the Abbaye de Royaumont, the translation of Zukofsky's theoretical essays including "Sincerity & Objectification" by Pierre Alferi, the translation of Reznikoff's *Holocaust* by Auxeméry and two special issues devoted to the Objectivists by *Banana Split* and *Java*.<sup>17</sup> 1989 also marks the coming-of-age of a new generational reception and a change of emphasis.
- 14 Convened by French poet Emmanuel Hocquard, the Rencontres Internationales de Royaumont were held from September 29 to October 1. They featured presentations by Charles Bernstein (on Reznikoff), Michael Davidson (on Oppen), Lyn Hejinian (on Zukofsky), Michael Palmer (on Objectivism), as well as discussions with other invited poets including Objectivist Carl Rakosi, David Bromige (who chronicled the event), Stephen Rodefer, Joseph Simas, Emmanuel Hocquard, Claude Royet-Journoud, Jean-Paul Auxeméry, Yves di Manno, in addition to Pierre Alferi and Judith Crews who provided translations. The event is sometimes referred to as the first international conference devoted to the work of the Objectivists but Hocquard insisted that he "never intended an academic-type colloquium on the Objectivist movement"; his primary aim was to invite "contemporary American poets whose work I have known and valued [...] to France to share with contemporary French writers their *present reading* of the Objectivists" (*Poetry Flash*, 22). Hocquard here clarifies the stakes of an Objectivist reception orchestrated by poets as opposed to academics: the focus is not on historical reconstruction but contemporary creation, the shaping of the field. In hindsight, the conference contributed to the recognition and canonization of the Objectivists, and sealed a Franco-American friendship<sup>18</sup> on the grounds of a common lineage and a certain interpretation of these ancestors. The conference also revealed diverging interpretations of the Objectivists, indicative of fault-lines among their admirers in France and beyond.
- 15 That this conference, organized in the outskirts of Paris, was discussed and denounced as far as California in several issues of *Poetry Flash*, an institution in the Bay Area's literary culture, proves that its stakes were legible, and exemplifies the feedback or, in this case, backlash effect that the French reception of the Objectivists may cause in the United

States. Carl Rakosi, the sole surviving Objectivist, was invited at the conference and, as he made known in a March 1990 letter to *Poetry Flash*, strongly disagreed with many things he heard. This included Bernstein's stress on Reznikoff's Jewishness and the participants' interest in opacity and language. Clearly hostile to Language Poetry,<sup>19</sup> *Poetry Flash* editor Richard Silberg characterized the Royaumont mind-set as "formalistic, extremely theory-bound and centrally concerned with language in itself and with problems of meaning" (*Poetry Flash*, 22) and denounced the commandeering of the Objectivists in the service of a Language Poetry agenda. The main fault line crystallized around the term "opacity," dividing those who believed in communication and distrusted theory (Rakosi, Yves di Manno and the *Poetry Flash* editor) and those who embraced the "era of suspicion" and the "linguistic turn": the Language Poets and Hocquard who, while himself a great believer in the *ligne claire*, expressed surprise and dismay at the idea that some still believed in the so-called transparency of language. Yves di Manno described the Objectivist meeting as a turning point in his life and a leap into the public debate. Invited to speak about his experience as a translator of Oppen's work but angered by the "textualist clichés" he heard, di Manno rewrote his talk during the seminar and launched into "a long and rather polemical historical overview, insisting on the social dimension of the Objectivists' work as well as the epic tradition they were part of" and denouncing "the narrowly formalistic rhetoric which had until then dominated the debates" (di Manno, 23).<sup>20</sup>

- 16 Di Manno's reaction points to an interesting paradox at the heart of the Franco-American poetry connection in the 1980s and 1990s. Emmanuel Hocquard, Claude Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach and other poets identified as proponents of *poésie blanche* or, in Hocquard's term, "negative modernity"; they had kept at a safe distance from the "theoretical and polemical turmoil" (Gleize, 1992, 124) of the late 1960s and early 1970s and generally refrained from any theoretical pronouncements or jargon. But their work bears the mark of the theoretical investigations of this era of suspicion.<sup>21</sup> Contrasting it with the "triumphant modernity" of the pre-war avant-gardes, Hocquard defines "negative modernity" as riddled "with suspicion, doubt and questions about everything, itself included" (Hocquard, 2001, 25). It is precisely this common theoretical background that enabled a true conversation with the Language Poets. Indeed, in his preface to the *49 +1 Poètes américains* anthology (1991), Hocquard identifies "the shared assumptions between French and American poets of the same generation" as: [1] "emphasis on language itself, taken as the substance or material of the poem and not merely as an instrument of expression or aesthetic veneer; [2] richness and complexity of formal invention; [3] mobility, freedom and dynamism of a vigilant poetry, breaking with those formally and ideologically academic and conservative models that exist in the United States no less than elsewhere" (Hocquard, 1991, 13-14).

### Reznikoff's *Testimony*: a Model for the Second *Littéralité*

- 17 Although Hocquard readily quotes Oppen and Zukofsky, it is Reznikoff's *Testimony* that provides him with the decisive model for *littéralité*. Composed over several decades and only published in full posthumously, *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915), Recitative*<sup>22</sup> portrays turn-of-the-century America from the statements of courtroom witnesses that Reznikoff sampled and versified.

What makes this book so moving is precisely its literality, which is the contrary of literature. Duplication logically reveals the model in a new light, relentless,

overwhelming. Through repetition, in that gap, that distance, which is the very theatre of mimesis, *suddenly you see something else* in the model, which now loses its value as original, as origin. The words are the same, the sentences are the same and yet these are no longer the same utterances [*énoncés*]. It is prodigious how this infinitesimal transfer of the same text, this simple passage from one form to another, produces meaning—and how violently—while operating, by means of language, a considerable cleansing. (Hocquard 2001, 28)

- 18 “Suddenly you see something” (Dembo, 212) is a pronouncement by Zukofsky that Hocquard often quotes. It embodies his concept of elucidation. For Hocquard, the business of poetry is the logical organization of thought or, in Wittgensteinian terms, the logical clarification of thought. As such, it has nothing more in common with literature than with any other language-based activity (Hocquard, 2001, 22). The work of Hocquard is a continuous escape from literature, from its “fuss, its sleight of hand, its meta-discourses, its simpering airs, its intimidation” (Hocquard, 2001, 448).<sup>23</sup> As against literature, *Testimony* offers Hocquard a model for literality or, as he makes clear in “La Bibliothèque de Trieste” (1987), for a second foundation of literality. Both first and second literality share an awareness that the real is inaccessible and that language is bound to fail in its attempt at representation. But while the first literality, initiated by Albiach and Royet-Journoud in the 1970s, experienced the impassable gap between words and things as a form of terror or ecstasy, the second literality, predicated on differential repetition, joyfully engages in grammatical investigations of a very practical nature. The foundation on this second literality marked an important turning point in French poetry, away from mid-century Kojevian and Blanchotian negativity. It offered a theoretical frame for all the techniques of sampling and appropriation to come. It also marked a turning point in the French reception of the Objectivists. In becoming the exemplary instance for this poetics of copying, Reznikoff’s *Testimony* imposed itself as the emblematic Objectivist reference from the 1990s onwards.
- 19 *Littéralité* became a key word on the French poetry scene in the 1990s, which opposed the lyricists to the literalists: *lyrisme contre littéralité*. The Objectivists, of course, were duly rounded in the camp of the literalists. *Littéralité* was taken up and further theorized by Jean-Marie Gleize in *A noir, Poésie et littéralité* (1992), a defense of literality against *la poésie*—poetry as essence—, and a plea for *prose en prose* (prose in prose, a pun on *poème en prose*, prose poem).

### ***La Revue de littérature générale*: the Limits of the Objectivist Alternative**

- 20 If Hocquard’s endorsement and interpretation of *Testimony* have proven so crucial for French poetry it is because his insistence on procedure made it palatable for a younger generation of poets increasingly invested in sampling, mixing media and combining high and low material. Hocquard has provided a key in articulation between the *poésie blanche* of the 1970s and a new generation of poets who began to publish around 1990, with Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadiot in the forefront. The two mammoth issues of the *Revue de littérature générale* constitute a landmark in late twentieth-century French poetry. Edited by Alferi and Cadiot, these strikingly attractive 400-page volumes made a clean break with the avant-garde magazines of the 1970s by presenting themselves as cross-generational tool boxes rather than coterie-driven manifestos and works in progress. Alferi and Cadiot’s opening piece to the first volume entitled *La Mécanique lyrique*

obliquely assesses the appeal and limits of Objectivism while couching their presentation in Objectivist terms. If only to avoid the loaded reference to genres and “texts,” they refer to literary products as “objects” and conceive of them in mechanical terms.<sup>24</sup>

- 21 In the closing pages of their presentation, Alferi and Cadiot single out the object as the fate and, conversely, the curse of poetry. “In poetry more than elsewhere is accomplished the ideal of the arrested object [*l’arrêt sur objet*; a pun on “*arrêt sur image*”= freeze-frame]” (RLG1, 20). And even if the American Objectivist poems, with their “literal fragmentation,” appear as a refreshingly non-precious, non-baroque alternative to “symbolist metaphors or surrealist juxtapositions,” in the end, they remain “small isolated apparatus [*dispositifs*] in the service of an ideal of the Object, hieroglyphs to be deciphered, baubles [*bibelots*], monsters.” (RLG1, 20) This fetishizing of the object portends “automutilation and seclusion” and constitutes:

a limit (the limit?) of poetry. The arrest of poetry: already an old story. From Ducasse’s *Poésies* to Denis Roche’s dramatic exit, from the performers’ more nuanced elusions to the rejection of literary poetry in the name of “the true life out there”, etc., it is still the talk of the day and it’s turning to a farce. On the one hand, the fetishistic craftsmen, keepers of forms and *savoir-faire*. On the other the ex-iconoclasts who either brood over a “modern” destiny or move into ordinary prose. (RLG1, 22)

- 22 Having taken stock of this recursive dead end of poetry and identified the characteristic postures with which the situation is dealt with by various players of the field (the return to formal poetry or the headlong escape into prose), the young poet has little choice but to go on anyway and search for alternative routes with the following imperative in mind: “how to keep the precision of the poetic mechanism without losing speed?” (RLG1, 22). The two volumes do not offer any easy answer but a rich toolbox. In the 2000s, a new generation of poets stripped the Objectivists of these formalist, autotelic overtones and used *Testimony* to engineer a pragmatic poetics. But before that, we shall see how both “the fetishistic craftsmen and keepers of forms” and “the ex-iconoclasts moving into ordinary prose” vied to round up the Objectivists into their camp.

## Into the Twenty-First Century, or *Testimony* as a Test of Poetry

### Jean-Marie Gleize: Establishing a French Objectivist Tradition

- 23 While Alferi and Cadiot were taking stock of contemporary French poetry and putting the Objectivist model in perspective as an exotic but nonetheless recognizable model, a writer they would no doubt have identified as an “ex-iconoclast” was “moving into ordinary prose” and fostering yet another reception for the Objectivists. Part of the third-generation surge of interest for the Objectivists can be ascribed to Jean-Marie Gleize and his young associates, the post-poets. Jean-Marie Gleize is a writer, a critic, the chief-editor of *Nioques* and a professor *emeritus* of the École Normale Supérieure where he founded the Centre d’études poétiques in 1999, a unique research group that fostered an awareness of contemporary creation in students through the invitation of poets and artists. Through his critical writing and his teaching Gleize has effectively renewed and reshaped the interest in the Objectivists.

- 24 More than previous go-betweens, Gleize has sought to reveal an underestimated Objectivist tradition within French poetry and pointed to Rimbaud and Ponge in particular as indigenous proto-Objectivists (Gleize, 2009, 117): “I try to establish that there is a diffuse French Objectivism, with Ponge representing one possible manner. Like its American counterpart, French Objectivism necessarily devotes a very great attention to language” (Gleize, 2002). Already in his 1992 *A noir, Poésie et littéralité*, Gleize had delineated a literal current taking its source in Romanticism and going through Lamartine, Stendhal, Rimbaud, Artaud, Ponge and negative modernity. Taking up Rimbaud’s request for “an objective poetry” in a 1871 letter to Izambard, and in the wake of *modernité négative*,<sup>25</sup> he called for a poetry that is objective, literal, neutral, violently simple, naked, impersonal, prosaic, couched in simple diction, a poetry that refuses images and metaphors—in other words, a poetry that is antipoetic. Pursuing the attacks on *la poésie* (poetry as ideal, as washed-out lyric) launched by Francis Ponge after World War II and taken up by Denis Roche in the 1960s, Gleize has called for an exit from poetry: hence the term “post-poet” that his followers have adopted.
- 25 Ponge’s focus on the object makes him an obvious candidate as a French cousin of the Objectivists.<sup>26</sup> Benoît Auclerc has usefully clarified Ponge’s Objectivist leanings.<sup>27</sup> While Ponge shares with his American contemporaries an interest in the trivial, stubbornly closed object, a certain prosaic simplicity, a distrust of verbiage (which he famously dubbed “*la pompe lyrique*”), a refusal of sentimentality and a generally anti-lyrical stance, he refuses objectification. Even Oppen, much less of an ostensible formalist than Zukofsky, reaffirmed the importance of objectification in his 1969 interview with L.S. Dembo and stressed “the necessity for forming a poem properly, for achieving form. That’s what ‘Objectivist’ really means [...]. It actually means the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem” (Dembo, 160). But after 1940 Ponge increasingly refused to objectify his writing, to indulge in what he called “a poetic abscess,” preferring various forms of notes or drafts. He also refused to call himself a poet. In the wake of Ponge and Roche, many contemporary French poets refuse the term “poet,” and call themselves “writers” instead. The stance for or against poetry as an independent genre creates a sharp line of demarcation in the world of French poetry. Auclerc suggests that for some French poets, “resorting to the Objectivists may appear as a way of avoiding Ponge” (Auclerc, 159). It is by implicitly letting Ponge contaminate the American Objectivists that Gleize can describe their movement as “in certain respects, antipoetic” (Gleize, 2002, 116).
- 26 While Jacques Roubaud agreed with Gleize that several Objectivist works constituted generic borderline cases, he drew opposite conclusions from this diagnosis. In 1996, in an essay entitled “La tentative Objectiviste” and published in the second volume of the *Revue de littérature générale*, Roubaud offered a clarification on the Objectivist movement in which he vindicated “a radical Objectivism” and posited Reznikoff’s *Testimony*<sup>28</sup> as the paradigm of “a (radical) Objectivist attempt in poetry.” While the general public commonly associates poetry with sentimentality, “Radical Objectivism” demonstrates a “conception of poetry so remote from what is generally considered as poetry that it runs the risk of not being recognized as such” (Roubaud, 1996, 36). But Roubaud’s goal is to keep *Testimony* firmly in the domain of poetry both against those who would exclude it as lacking in feelings and lyricism and those, like Gleize, who would enlist it in their anti-poetic project. As Burton Hatlen has pointed out, “Reznikoff levels language down to almost prose—but the ‘almost’ is the key word here, for we are constantly impelled to try

to define the ways in which what we are reading is *not* prose” (DuPlessis, 53). In his clarification Roubaud discards Ponge in a pointed parenthesis: “rhetoric is often a disguise for a conventional, if not regressive, moral; see the example of Ponge” (Roubaud, 1996, 36). Works identified as “diluted Objectivism” are discarded on the same grounds. For Roubaud, “late Oppen, late Rakosi,” the late Williams of *Paterson*, and Reznikoff’s “Horse” give up on the drastic Objectivist tenets<sup>29</sup> and give in to “the Anglo-Saxon inclination towards the moral lesson.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, where the dividing line at Royaumont had passed between the champions of opacity and those of transparency, Roubaud implicitly rejects this opposition as false when he claims that Reznikoff’s highly-legible *Testimony* and Zukofsky’s most obdurate *80 Flowers* both embody radical objectivism in spite of their varied surfaces and accessibility: the difference is one of material not of method. Incidentally, Gleize offers yet another take on that opposition when he claims that the truly “modern obscurity of poetry [resides] in the extremism of its simplicity” (Gleize, 1992, 15). The muted argument between Gleize and Roubaud in the 1990s demonstrates *Testimony*’s exceptional ability to support competing interpretations and be enrolled in the service of starkly different poetics.

## Post-Poetry or the Pragmatic Turn

- 27 For the community of scholars and artists known as post-poets, often former students and collaborators of Gleize, the issue is no longer to escape from literature into literality, or from poetry into prose, but to devise new analytical tools or formats that enable one to correlate radically heterogeneous areas of art, media and everyday life so as to see things differently and solve problems. Hocquard’s concept of elucidation has clearly carried over and, once again, Reznikoff’s *Testimony* offers itself as a striking model. In his afterword to *Portraits chinois* (2007), “a ‘promenade’ through different websites of various military and political activists, mapping the ‘uncovered realities’ of the low intensity conflicts,” Frank Leibovici explains that

these utterances [énoncés] were taken from websites. not a word is from my heart. my work lies elsewhere— selection, organization, redistribution. many have worked thus, long before me. charles reznikoff, to name only one, belongs to this under-recognized tradition. [...] I consider this work [*Portraits chinois*] as a contribution to the genre of the “poetic document.” By that I mean not a poem, not even a text with a poetic aim, but an apparatus [*dispositif*] destined to produce a certain type of knowledge. More than specific contents, it is the forms and formalizations of various types of knowledge that I am after, that I hope to invent. (Leibovici, 2007a, 259)

- 28 Further down, Leibovici notes that the purely aesthetic apprehension of poetry has heretofore obscured its capacity as purveyor of intellectual technologies.<sup>31</sup> Leibovici is less interested in Reznikoff’s aesthetic achievement than in his radically simple compositional procedure which throws the United States and its legal system in a harsh light. In *Poésie action directe* (2003), his post-poet fellow Christophe Hanna had already sought to redefine poetry on heuristic and pragmatic grounds. Furthering Alferi and Cadot’s view of the fetishized object as the curse of poetry, Hanna launched an attack on the “poetics of the bauble” (8). Finding that “almost all theories of poetics are essentialist,” (10) he criticized Jakobson’s poetic function of language and his view of the poem as autotelic, in favor of a pragmatic approach to literature: “One gives up on a poetry conceived as a provider of aesthetic objects subject to a judgment of taste in favor

of a positive poetry conceived in concrete terms as an exercise in language with a heuristic goal” (121).

- 29 The secret of *Testimony*'s endurance lies in its ability to be seen according to different interpretations or poetics. The post-poets cast Reznikoff in a pragmatic and conceptualist light, in sharp contrast with the Blanchotian light shone by Michael Palmer in 1989 at Royaumont when he had likened Reznikoff to Bartleby the copyist whom Blanchot calls the “pure writer.” What made *Testimony* a critical text for French poetry in the 1990s was its ability to question the very definition of poetry at a time when a new generation was reconsidering the genre and its aims. As Sandra Ragueneau has shown, this most prosaic and translatable of poems “defeats the structuralist method” (vol. II, 185) and all Jakobsonian and Genettian definitions of poeticity founded on a gap between poetic language and ordinary language. *Testimony* makes true the hope for a poetry stripped of the poetic.
- 30 What has made the French reception of the Objectivists exceptional/singular? is their ability to crystallize fault lines and to provide poems which serviceably questioned the very definition of the poetry and the poetic. A striking and almost constant feature of their reception has been their revelatory quality and their ability to materialize a latent alternative: to Roubaud they revealed a modernist alternative to surrealism; they helped Albiach achieve a literal alternative to hermeneutic reading; to Hocquard they confirmed the revelatory and cleansing virtue of copying procedures; to Gleize they revealed a buried French Objectivist lineage; they offered the post-poets a model of heuristic poetic document enabling a redefinition of poetry on pragmatic rather than aesthetic grounds. Hanna compares the revelatory power of poetic documents and apparatus (*dispositifs*) to the scenes of *anagnorisis* in Greek tragedies: “not so much the passage ‘from ignorance to knowledge’ as that from blindness and stupor to immediate clarity” (Hanna in Gleize 2009, 14). “[S]uddenly you see something else,” the motto of elucidation that Hocquard uncovered in Zukofsky's interview, also sums up the contribution of the Objectivists to French poetics, its renewal of the tradition of poetry as vision (as opposed to poetry as craft) on grammatical grounds and towards a more pragmatic end.
- 31 The values ascribed to the Objectivist legacy are so heterogeneous that one may reasonably judge the name to be a universal and a misnomer for a series of nominalist singularities. Still, the sense that there is such a thing as an Objectivist poetics endures and their appeal hinges on a subtle combination of simplicity and complexity, clarity and obduracy, which neatly dovetailed with certain needs in French poetry. Growing out of imagism's ideal of “direct presentation” and Williams's speech-based poetics, Objectivists demonstrated a radically different tone and poetics: simplicity, directness, description, sometimes bordering on the prosaic. These qualities are best exemplified in Oppen and Reznikoff but also in parts of Zukofsky, who defined poetry as an integral whose upper limit is music and “lower limit speech” (Zukofsky, 1978, 138). In a 1998 interview, French poet Dominique Fourcade conveyed his transformative discovery of Williams's iconic and proto-Objectivist poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923) which he called his first low voltage poem: “I have gained enormously from the trivial and prosaic character of a poem such as ‘The Red Wheelbarrow,’ which suddenly opened up new horizons for me which I avidly embraced” (*Java* 17, 1998, 63). Objectivism, as well as later movements represented in Donald Allen's 1960 *New American Poetry* anthology, offered a model for toning down a French poetic tradition long accustomed to tonal heights.

32 Almost fifty years after they were first introduced in France, and with the new generation having successfully toned down French poetry, it is difficult to tell whether yet another wave of reception is in store or if the appeal of the Objectivists has played itself out. Their mainstream currency and the consequent blurring of their doctrine through often third-hand knowledge plead for the latter option. Since 2010, Frank Smith has been publishing a series of books which straightforwardly replicate the method used by Reznikoff in *Testimony* and *Holocaust*, adapting interviews of Guantanamo detainees in *Guantanamo*, selecting from press coverage of the Lybian civil war in *États de faits*, and sampling the Goldstone report on the Gaza war of December 2008 in *Gaza, d'ici-là*. And in 2014, post-poet Sylvain Courtoux launched the first head-on critique of what he terms “French-style Objectivism” (30) as “a poetry of the infra-ordinary, an objevisto/artly poeticism which fascinates the Bobo critics of contemporary art and has been kindling/capturing (since the 90s) the pathos of the time where some of the more prominent members of the poetic ‘showbiz’ love to wallow.” (18) The constructivist jeremiad in *Consume rouge* embodies the *subjectivist* post-poetry which Courtoux vindicates.

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## NOTES

1. The Objectivists correspond to a nexus of American poets who began publishing in the 1930s with the encouragement of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Committed to Pound's Imagist tenets but critical of his fascist positions, which clashed with their own Communist sympathies and often Jewish origins, they developed a formally inventive and ethically exigent poetry.

2. Recent translations include George Oppen, *Poésie complète*, trans. Yves di Manno, Paris, José Corti, 2011; a new edition of Louis Zukofsky, “A”- 9 (*première partie*), trans. Anne-Marie Albiach, Marseille, Eric Pesty Éditeur, 2011; Louis Zukofsky, « A » sections 13 à 18, trans. Serge Gavronsky and François Dominique, Dijon, Virgile, 2012; Charles Reznikoff, *Témoignage*, trans. Marc Cholodenko, Paris, P.O.L., 2012; Lorine Niedecker, *Louange du lieu et autres poèmes (1949-1970)*, trans. Abigail Lang, Maïtreysi and Nicolas Pesquès, Paris, José Corti, 2012; Charles Reznikoff, *Rythmes 1&2, Poèmes*, trans. Eva Antononikov and Jil Silberstein, Genève, Héros-Limite, 2013; Charles Reznikoff, *Sur les rives de Manhattan*, trans. Eva Antononikov, Genève, Héros-Limite, 2014; Charles Reznikoff, *In Memoriam*, trans. Jil Silberstein, Genève, Héros-Limite, 2016; Charles Reznikoff, *Chacun son chemin*, trans. Eva Antononikov, Genève, Héros-Limite, 2016.
3. See the “Objectivism” entry by E. Berry in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* (1993, 848).
4. The Wisconsin-based poet Lorine Niedecker and the British poet Basil Bunting have both been associated with this core Objectivist quartet.
5. I am concentrating on issues of poetic theory as articulated by the poets, at the expense of a close analysis of their own works under the influence of the Objectivists. Yet another approach would focus on the French reception of the Objectivists from the point of view of translation, which I attempted in a paper given in Marseilles in 2013 at the invitation of the research network “Contemporary French Poetic Practice: An Interdisciplinary Approach.”
6. Three years later, Serge Fauchereau supplemented his theoretical introduction with a sizeable anthology: *41 poètes américains d’aujourd’hui*, choisis et traduits par Serge Fauchereau, Paris, Les Lettres Nouvelles-Denoël, 1971. Although George and Mary Oppen lived in France in the 1930s and published *An “Objectivists” Anthology* in the Var, the Objectivists seem to have remained entirely unknown to French readers until the late 1960s. The copy of *Discrete Series* that Jacques Roubaud read at la Bibliothèque Nationale in 1972 was yet uncut (Roubaud, 1980, 15).
7. Founded in 1923 by Romain Rolland and led by those poets of l’Abbaye de Créteil who helped popularize Whitman in France, *Europe* has always taken a keen interest in foreign literatures.
8. In his interview with L.S. Dembo, Zukofsky says: “if that thing has lasted for two hundred years and has some merit in it, it is possible I can use it and somehow in transferring it into words [...] make something new of it. [...] So there’s no reason why I shouldn’t use this ‘old’ form if I thought I could make something new” (Dembo, 213-214). Both Serge Gavronsky and Marjorie Perloff have written about Zukofsky’s place of honor among French avant-garde poets and ascribed it primarily to his use of numerical constraints and his commitment to form. Gavronsky denounces this as a Mallarmean misreading of Zukofsky (see Gavronsky, 1994, and Perloff, 2006, 102-20).
9. In 1973 in *Action Poétique* 56 (“Poésies USA,” 12); in 1977 in *Europe* 578-579 (“Une littérature méconnue des USA,” 78); in 1980 in *Vingt poètes américains*, ed. Michel Deguy and Jacques Roubaud, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, 16-18.
10. “A”-9 is composed of two *canzone* that respect an exacting rhyme scheme and invisible letter-based constraint, the first written in the vocabulary of Marx, the second of Spinoza. “Mantis” is a *sestina*.
11. In the conversation reproduced in the 1977 issue of *Europe*, among the appealing characteristics of the Objectivists, Roubaud stresses the fact that they never wrote *poésie engagée*, that is, openly and rhetorically political poetry (*Europe*, 15-17).
12. “A,” a xeroxed periodical which ceased publication when Zukofsky died (1976-1978) and *ZUK*, a four-page monthly which printed 24 issues between October 1987 and September 1989. A digital version of *ZUK* is available online from *Jacket 2*.
13. *La notion d’obstacle* (1978), *Les objets contiennent l’infini* (1983), *La poésie entière est préposition* (2007), *Théorie des prépositions* (2007). Zukofsky entitled his collection of essays *Prepositions*.
14. While Serge Gavronsky and François Dominique chose to translate the semantic meaning when they translated the same poem years later, Albiach translated the form, keeping as close as

possible to the exceedingly constraining rhyme scheme. See « A » sections 8 à 11, trans. Serge Gavronsky and François Dominique, Dijon, Ulysse fin de Siècle, 2001.

15. Letter of March 9, 1969 to Albiach kept at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, #6027, item 10.

16. Emmanuel Hocquard provides a lucid account of “the radical reversal implied in substituting the inaugural aim to the cartographic aim,” in favoring presentation over representation, showing [monstration] over demonstration. (Hocquard, 1987, 54, 57)

17. Louis Zukofsky, *Un objectif & deux autres essais*, trans. Pierre Alferi, Un bureau sur l’Atlantique / Royaumont, 1989; Charles Reznikoff, *Holocauste*, trans. Auxeméry, Bedou, 1989 (repr., Prétexte 2007); *Banana Split* 26 (1989), containing poems by Carl Rakosi (trans. Auxeméry), excerpts from Reznikoff’s *Testimony* (trans. Auxeméry) and the first seven sections of Zukofsky’s “A” (trans. Serge Gavronsky); *Java* 4 (1990), Objectivist special issue edited by Yves di Manno. Published from 1980 to 1990 by poets Liliane Giraudon and Jean-Jacques Viton, *Banana Split* featured a joyful mix of poets from across the modernist and experimentalist spectrum and published many American poets in translation. Founded in 1989 by Jean-Michel Espitallier and Jacques Sivan, *Java* offered new readings of historic avant-gardes and featured contemporary poets working in the experimental tradition.

18. That same year, 1989, Hocquard also established “Un Bureau sur l’Atlantique,” an association and Franco-American center for contemporary poetry whose goal was to intensify the exchange of work between poets of both languages through invitations, seminars and publications.

19. An *avant-garde* group of poet-critics who started publishing in the 1970s, the Language poets reacted against the spontaneity, orality and individuality that characterized much of the poetry of 1950s. Language poetry was critical, textual, and often written collaboratively. Among the four main speakers at the Objectivist seminar, both Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian were leading members of the movement while Michael Davidson and Michael Palmer might be called fellow travellers .

20. The feature that Yves di Manno discovered in American poetry and has been trying to promote in French poetry is what he calls the common song (*le chant commun*). Cf. *Action poétique* n° 137, 196. He champions the epic scope and the quest for form of the Poundian project against what he feels is the narrowly individualistic voice and hermeticism of the Mallarmean heritage. A poet, critic and prolific translator of American poetry, di Manno has been in charge of Flammarion’s poetry collection since 1994.

21. As Hocquard explained in San Diego in 1987, these poets fed on the theoretical food that abounded everywhere (philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology...) but, back home, concentrated on their own writing, considering that it possessed an implicit theoretical dimension which dispensed them from writing manifestoes and taking sensationalistic stances (“La Bibliothèque de Trieste” in Hocquard, 2001, 26).

22. Just as Roubaud must have felt his own project anticipated in certain aspects of Zukofsky’s endeavor, Hocquard must have been struck to discover the kinship between *Testimony* and his first “book” in which he copied by hand the diary of a 1870 Alsatian soldier on the front (*Le Portefeuil*, avec Raquel, Paris, Orange Export, 1973.) As Vincent Descombes shrewdly notes on the subject of influence: “Through a sort of platonic reminiscence, the text one falls in love with is that in which one keeps learning what one already knew” (Descombes, 14).

23. In his 1989 talk at Royaumont, Michael Palmer had mentioned Oppen’s stance “against literary contrivance”, “against the poetic” even (Palmer, 232).

24. See William Carlos Williams’ famous statements: “There’s nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” (Preface to *The Wedge* (1944) in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. II, 54).

25. To my knowledge, Gleize was the first academic to respond (positively) to the work of the poets associated with *modernité négative* and to attempt a study of Anne-Marie Albiach (*Le théâtre du poème. Vers Anne-Marie Albiach*, 1995).

26. Fauchereau, however, had from the start rejected any similarity between their projects, relating instead the Objectivists to Robbe-Grillet (Fauchereau 132; *Europe*, 30). That said, Robbe-Grillet had himself pointed to Ponge as a precursor of the Nouveau Roman.

27. An essay published as part of a collection entitled *New Objectivists* and partly devoted to the Italian and French reception of the Objectivists. I warmly thank Luigi Magno who kindly sent me the manuscript of the volume. I refer the interested reader to Luigi Magno's own charting of the French reception of the Objectivists in that volume.

28. Roubaud translated the first volume of *Testimony* in 1980. *Témoignage, Les États-Unis, 1885-1890*, Paris, Hachette/P.O.L., 1981.

29. In his 1969 interview with L.S. Dembo, Reznikoff defined the Objectivist as "a writer [...] 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 and, if he writes in verse, by its music" (Dembo, 194).

30. This is by no means a strictly French critique: Geoffrey Twitchell-Waas also finds sections of Oppen's late work "annoyingly moralistic" (330).

31. Initially proposed by Daniel Bell, the term "intellectual technology" was extended by anthropologist Jack Goody to designate the tools we use to classify information, to formulate and articulate ideas, to share know-how and knowledge, to take measurements and perform calculations.

## ABSTRACTS

For almost fifty years, the Objectivists have been an enduring reference in French poetry, or at least for that section of French poetry committed to the modernist legacy. From the 1968 publication of Serge Fauchereau's *Lectures de la poésie américaine* to the documentary poetics of the post-poets, every generation has refashioned the Objectivist canon and critical meaning according to their different, at times antagonistic, needs. Focusing on issues of poetic theory, this paper brings out the landmarks and articulations of the French reception of the Objectivists and shows how the controversies attending the interpretations of Objectivist poetics served to clarify and advance certain issues of French poetics. More generally, it sheds light on the complex dynamics of textual circulation, reception and canonization.

Cela fait bientôt cinquante ans que les Objectivistes constituent une référence pour de nombreux poètes français héritiers des expérimentations modernistes. De la publication des *Lectures de la poésie américaine* de Fauchereau en 1968 jusqu'à la poésie documentaire des post-poètes, chaque génération a reconfiguré le canon objectiviste et réinterprété sa signification en fonction d'un contexte et d'un projet poétique. Centré sur les enjeux de poétique, cet article dégage les moments-clés de la réception française des Objectivistes; il montre comment les interprétations divergentes de leur poétique ont aidé à clarifier et à prolonger la réflexion de la poésie française sur elle-même, et, plus largement, éclaire les dynamiques complexes qui sont en jeu dans la circulation, la réception et la canonisation des textes.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Objectivist poetics, French poetry, influence, transatlantic exchanges, Charles Reznikoff's Testimony, reception, canon-making, circulation of texts, literary history.

**Mots-clés:** poésie objectiviste, poésie française, influence, échanges transatlantiques, Témoignage de Charles Reznikoff, réception, reconfiguration du canon, circulation des textes, histoire littéraire.

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