Covenantal Poetics: Jewish, Irish, and African American Modernisms Beyond the Lyric

by

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And Rachel: some people, I guess, are simply beyond words, beyond language, beyond even the upper limit of poetry, where only music can speak.

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades scholarship has recovered the works of writers ignored or forgotten due to their race, politics, or gender, restoring the largely unknown history of early-20th century American poetry beyond an Anglo-American canon. Yet a new problem has emerged: conventions of poetic reading and scholarship developed around canonical high modernism and postwar lyric continue to obscure the poetic self-theorizing of ethnic and immigrant modernists. Recovering texts alone is not enough. We no longer know how to *read* this poetry.

Covenantal Poetics: Jewish, Irish, and African American Modernisms Beyond the Lyric develops reading practices that can account for the communally-oriented verse forms of immigrant and ethnic modernists. In doing so, it suggests one alternative to practices of lyric reading. This research explores the ways in which a quartet of ethnic modernists enjoin their readers to engage in solidarity with other outsiders by forming mutually-obligated communities. To do so, they look beyond the lyric to recover abandoned forms, conventions, and experimental strategies from within the histories of English and American verse. Drawing on historical approaches to prosody and lyric theory and recent work in post-secular studies, *Covenantal Poetics* examines archival materials, publication histories, and multilingual intertexts in order to account for their poetic self-theorization. They draw on the biblical and prophetic rhetoric of 19th-century America not only to critique visions of the United States as a “promised land” or “new Jerusalem,” but also to call out readers as members of a shared, covenantal community.

By taking a comparative, multiethnic approach, *Covenantal Poetics* reveals that the shared interest among African American, Jewish American, and Irish American poets in prophetic texts establish them as some of the most creative explorers of new forms in a period of formal innovation. Extensive archival research demonstrates that James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927) addresses Americans as members of a shared, racially-mixed congregation. By "scoring" the voice of the African American preacher to the King James Bible, he revises the covenantal discourse of American civil religion while allowing us to re-imagine the genealogy of modernist experiment. The avant-garde works of Louis Zukofsky re-imagine the Passover seder and transform poetry into an act of moral pedagogy. Only through modernist experiment, his poetry insists, can readers translate the "Israelite" identity of Puritan rhetoric and the American imagination into the experience of having been a slave in Egypt—of standing in solidarity with the contemporary oppressed. Lola Ridge produces a similar aesthetics of labor solidarity—but by challenging avant-garde aesthetics. Alongside her editorial work at the influential modernist magazine *Broom*, her many retellings of the crucifixion upend expectations of lyric and epic, creating poetry intended for use in labor rallies and awareness campaigns. Whether read on broadside posters in public or at home from a book, her works join readers together in solidarity with the cause of labor. The themes of biblical typology, documentary poetics, prosodic experiment and convention, and the history of immigrant and ethnic American life come together in Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*. Shaped by Reznikoff's legal training and biblical translations of the 1920s, Testimony positions the poet as a prosecutor who engages readers in an act of covenantal community by demanding that they act as jury in the trial of the United States. *Testimony* establishes community through shared acts of witness, advocacy, and judgment.

Introduction

I. An American Tale

This scene should not be too hard to imagine: It's 1909, or 1910 or 1912 (the dates on the newspapers fluttering nearby are hazy) and on the streets of Lower Manhattan, south of Houston, where the grid starts to break down, the streets sometimes gently curving, sometimes colliding into each other at angles, a small Jewish boy, somewhere between the ages of five and eight, his eyebrows already so thick that it looks, as he runs, almost as if they're drawing him forward—like he moves from something other than pure terror of the group of older boys chasing after him, determined to exact retribution for the murder, by his ancestors, of their Lord and Savior some one-thousand eight-hundred and eighty years before. These are, the boy would recollect a half-century later, his "Italian neighbors"—so perhaps they're on the border between his Yiddish-speaking Lower East Side streets and their Little Italy, fleeing toward the East River on Grand or Canal, hearing cries of "Christ-killer!" and "Kike!" growing closer behind him.

Only when they corner the boy does something remarkable happen:

> dort hot er dem lid gezungen,
> dos gesang fun Hayavata'n,
> dort bazungen zayn geburtshaft
> un zayn leben ful mit vunder,
> zayne tfiles un zayn fasten,
> zayne tkhaten un zayn layden,
> um di menshen tsu bagliken,
> um zayn shvot tsu derhoyken.

The words come from his memory in an odd, Yiddish trochaic tetrameter. The Italian boys pause and watch him. He continues. They don't know what to make of this child, of this scene, of these odd verses, their beat (perhaps) strangely familiar to one or two or three of them who pay more attention in school than they like to let on, though they can't say why. Then they recover their menace, fish in their pockets for spare pennies, and toss them, laughing, at the Jewish boy. Through it all, the child keeps chanting, the foreign words echoing off the walls around him. Finally, bored, the Italian boys leave our young poet in peace.

The poem the young Louis Zukofsky recited that day (and, by his telling, on many others) is more recognizable in its English original:

> There he sang of Hiawatha,
> Sang the Song of Hiawatha,
> Sang his wondrous birth and being,
> How he prayed and how he fasted,
> How he lived, and toiled, and suffered,
> That the tribes of men might prosper,
> That he might advance his people!

By his account, Zukofsky had memorized the popular Yiddish translation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*—*all* of it—by the time he was five.[1] *Dos lid fun Hayavata* was the work of the American Yiddish poet Yehoash, né Solomon Bloomgarden, part of an oeuvre that, through its globe-spanning cosmopolitanism, laid claim to America. Yehoash's poetry was the first influence, a truly formative one, on Zukofsky's poetry—but that's a story for a little later. (Of course, like all legends, this narrative rubs uncomfortably against the facts we know to be true: Zukofsky was five in 1909; Yehoash's translation wasn't completed until 1910.)

Surrounded by a violent mob in a New York alley, Zukofsky managed to communicate something beyond the words themselves. Maybe even despite them: after all, they would have

[1] Zukofsky mentions these incidents obliquely in "A"-14 and more fully in a 6/28/60 letter to Cid Corman (LZ Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas-Austin, Box 18, Folder 2). Mark Scroggins summarizes these accounts and others in *Poem of A Life* (3, 18).

been unintelligible to his Italian neighbors. The poem that caused them to pause made them, as another poet, James Weldon Johnson would write, reflecting in his memoirs on an even more fraught encounter with a violent mob, "look at each other"—at their victim-to-be, that is—a moment in which "a quivering message from intelligence to intelligence has been interchanged" (*Along This Way* 315). These bullies do not become Zukofsky's friends; they do not come to love him; but they also do not beat him. They acknowledge him, somehow, even if just in this moment, as members of a shared community.[2] To put it in terms perhaps excessively Levinasian, in the pause created by the poem, they see the face of the other and decide against committing violence against him. In the middle, mediating this interaction, stands a poem—a translation into Yiddish of an English-American Fireside poet's attempt to write an American epic in a new, American epic meter, about a Native American tribal leader. The pluralism of this poem-mediated encounter does more than create an open-ended Americanness out of a variety of ethnic, religious, and linguistic experiences. It serves as the impetus for the creation of Zukofsky's modernism—and that of James Weldon Johnson, Lola Ridge, and Charles Reznikoff. A poem, more than a thing read in private, a matter for contemplation, or even serving as an alternative way of organizing, arranging, and communicating knowledge about the world might be capable of—might be *needed* to—act in the world, to organize and create relationships among the individuals within its audience.

The goal of *Covenantal Poetics* is to explain what took place on that unknown day on an unknown street somewhere on the Lower East Side—and then to understand how this interaction might be harnessed and geared toward the creation of a truer, fuller community. The quartet of ethnic and immigrant modernists examined here enjoin their readers to engage in solidarity with

[2] They throw pennies, yes, but at the son of a pants-presser so poor that, on his death in 1950, his life savings came out to less than one dollar, willed to his synagogue. Zukofsky's verb, in his 1960 letter to Corman, was "toss."

other outsiders or marginalized groups by forming mutually obligated communities. To do so, they look beyond the lyric to recover abandoned forms, conventions, and experimental strategies. Drawing on historical approaches to prosody and lyric theory and recent work in post-secular studies and the study of religion and literature, I examine archival materials, publication histories, and multilingual intertexts in order to account for their poetic self-theorization. As they call out readers as members of a shared, covenantal community, Zukofsky, Johnson, Reznikoff, and Ridge suggest an alternative to practices of lyric reading that allow us to revise genealogies of modernist poetics.

II. Beyond the Lyric

That *any* poem mediated the young Zukofsky's street corner encounter is remarkable. The fault, Shakespeare's Cassius might have put it had he become a poet rather than a politician, lies not in our verse but in our selves: in the assumptions and frameworks of reading that we bring, even (especially) when we do not know that we bring them, to the poems that we read. Scholarship under the heading of historical poetics has, in the past decade, turned its eye upon these assumptions, rightly contending that our idea of what a poem is—like the idea of a poem in any era—is not a transhistorical constant, but the product of history. As critics including Virginia Jackson, Yopie Prins, and Mark Jeffreys have pointed out, since the late-19th century we have come to think of "poetry" and "lyric" as synonymous.[3] Lyric, Jeffreys writes, "did not conquer

[3] Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Princeton UP (2005); Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, Johns Hopkins UP (2013); Mark Jeffreys, "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," *PMLA*110.2 (March 1995), 196-205. See also works that develop historically-attuned practices of reading poetry, whether lyric or not (the following attend, in particular, to the theory and practice of prosody and rhythm), such as Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930*, Princeton UP (2012); Sarah Ehlers, "Making It Old: The Victorian/Modern Divide in Twentieth-Century American Poetry," *MLQ* 73.1 (March 2012), 37-67; and Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science*, Columbia UP (2008). Gillian White's *Lyric Shame:The*

poetry; poetry was reduced to lyric" (200)—a process Jackson describes as the "idealization of poetry" and then the lyricization of that ideal.[4] Trained to read not only for a specific idea of poetry, but for a specific idea of *lyric* poetry, the result has been that "the history of various genres of poetry was read simply as lyric, and lyrics were read as poems one could understand without reference to that history or those genres" (Jackson 10).

The defining characteristic of "modern" lyric—that is, the idealized lyric which emerged from the late 19th-century through the mid-20th century and which continues to shape the twenty-first century's idealized vision of poetry—is its privacy. The words of John Stuart Mill and, to a lesser extent, W.B. Yeats, are alternately credited and blamed as defining expressions of the inwardness of the lyriciziation of poetry. Yet, I suspect, they have stuck in the minds of readers and critics less because they truly were the engines of a change in the reading of poetry than because they describe, better than you or I could, what many readers of poems *already* believed. Their thinking serves as evidence of the history of our shared assumptions about what a poem is and does.

The first declaration (chronologically) was Mill's, written in 1833: "we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *over*heard" (1216).[5] The second, eighty-five years later, Yeats': "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (29).[6] The two men disagree with each other, to be certain: Mill's poetry (like his eloquence) is "the expression or utterance of feeling," while Yeats frames each in the language of agon: both rhetoric and poetry emerge from, and participate in, struggle. Yet each theorizes poetry as

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"Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry, Harvard UP (2008) explores the debates in contemporary American poetics over what lyric is, means, and ought to be.

[4] Virginia Jackson, "Who Reads Poetry?" *PMLA* 123.1 (Jan. 2008): 181-187.

[5] "What Is Poetry?" in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, eds. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle (Broadview Press, 1999).

[6] "Per Amica Silentia Lunae: Anima Hominis," *Per Anima Silentia Lunae*, The Macmillan Company (New York), 1918.

fundamentally inner-directed. Though one might imagine Yeats' poetry being *aware* of the contest in which rhetoric is engaged, this awareness is distinct from its own contest, in which the self is turned toward itself. Likewise, we find Mill's poetry even more disinterested, "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind"—in direct contrast to eloquence, which "is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or action." Both Yeats and Mill imagine poetry as self-contained, an object that needs only itself to exist, a poem that could still be a poem without a single reader.

The first steps toward what Jackson has called the "lyricization" of poetry—from Mill's pristine, idealized museum-piece poem to the well-wrought urn of the New Criticism, from Yeats' "quarrel of self with self" to Auden's "poetry makes nothing happen"—depended in large part on the assumption that the poem's relationship to its audience does not matter—or at least not very much. In even stronger terms, we might say that this relationship does not matter because the ideal poem needs no audience—that the Platonic Poem to which all Poets strive is a kind of singularity of versification: a Poem as Unmoved Mover, capable of both writing and reading itself.

"Eloquence," writes Mill, "supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener." Audience—our age, gender, or place in society—is superfluous. Not far, here, to T. S. Eliot's complaint that *The Waste Land* "was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling."[7] Eliot protests too much—and Mill's description of the poet's mind in

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[7] Quoted in *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Original Drafts, Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Ed. Valerie Eliot. Harcourt Brace Jovanich (New York): 1971.

writing a poem strikes me (at least) as far distant from the actual experience of contemplating and composing a poem. Yet Mill's assumptions, and Yeats', and the New Criticism's, and and those of mid-century movements (Beat, Confessional) have taught more than a century of English-language readers how to read a poem.

Even the contemporary and late-20th century avant-garde, which have often cast themselves as explicitly anti-lyric, have been shaped by Mill's distinction between poetry and eloquence. Poet-critics including Charles Bernstein, Lynn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, and Bob Perelman, write Jackson and Prins, "no longer needed the lyric as a generic placeholder, but . . . continue[d] to need the lyric as the definition of the kind of poetry it [their avant-garde] is not."[8] Insofar as they reinforce the view that a poem is a thing to be looked upon, perhaps better suited to a museum than the world, even the deliberate artifice of the Language poets is not so different from the formats in which much poetry is first encountered as art in the United States: the textbooks and Norton anthologies of high school and college classrooms.[9] The world-engagement of Claudia Rankine's recent "American Lyrics," *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014), pushes beyond the norms of lyric reading—but in claiming the genre, she, like Marjorie Perloff in her critical writings, continues to participate in the idealization of poetry as lyric precisely by attempting to expand the genre.

Yet the variety of poetic forms, verse schemes, and genres has always been more diverse than these assumptions and poetic reading practices allow us to see. These forms, often, are precisely the kind of public, exhortative verse that both modernism and lyric reading eschew. To read "beyond the lyric" is not to critique or diminish lyric poetry—but, by acknowledging its

[8] *Lyric Theory Reader* 452. Gillian White also discusses avant-garde anti-lyricism and its connection to Mill and the history of lyric as genre and reading practice in the Introduction to *Lyric Shame* (2008), pp. 7-26 esp.
[9] Mike Chasar's *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (Columbia UP, 2012) is an excellent and provocative guide to the poetic contexts these encounters overlook and erase.

others, to offer it the respect born of difference, as one genre of poetry among many, as one set of reading practices best suited for particular poems. But not for all poems. As her work on the varieties, development, and social roles of verse forms in late-19th and early-20th century Britain draws to a close, Meredith Martin reflects on her own practices as a reader of poetry: "I am learning to ask, when poets were inventing or experimenting with prosodic systems, with what else, in addition to the measure of the line, were they wrestling?" (204). This question is not simply one that an historically-aware approach to poetics and lyric theory demands of scholars, but a question that many poems require their readers—any readers—to ask.

To return to our opening vignette: the young Zukofsky was, of course, neither author nor translator of the poem he recited at the bullies circling around him. Yet, a nascent poet, he still recognizes that audience matters; his recitation is hardly "unconscious of a listener." With what else, we might ask, beyond the measure of the line, was he wrestling in the moment? With the threat posed by his audience, with the need to communicate his humanity to them, with the need to enact some—*any*—kind of change within them. "But," I hear you protest, "*Hiawatha* isn't *lyric* poetry at all!" This is precisely the point. Both the poem and the context Zukofsky offers as the Ur-moment of his poetic consciousness cannot be reconciled with the idealized poem or the reading practices assumed, in various forms, by Mill, Yeats, Eliot, the New Critics, Perloff, and Bernstein (among others). The poem is not lyric; the form in which he encountered it—a translation—is precisely one which *must* be aware of its audience; the audience it addresses, by *not* sharing the language of the original, calls it into being. Only by setting aside the assumptions which grew from the task of reading, understanding, promoting, and then canonizing works of Anglo-American high modernism can we open ourselves to the possibility a *poem* might mediate their encounter and contain the possibility of creating a community among those present.

III. Ethnic Modernism Beyond the Lyric

The poets most affected by our shared assumptions about how a poem ought to be read are those who differ from the poets and critics whose works helped to codify these assumptions. In the early 1990s, Cary Nelson began his important works of literary recovery with the lament that "we no longer know the history of the poetry of the first half of this [the 20th] century" *(Repression and Recovery* 4*)*. In the nearly three decades that have followed, scholarship has done much to fill out and restore our knowledge of various forgotten and repressed authors: racial, linguistic, and sexual others; political radicals and outsiders; women; immigrants; "difficult" personalities; those who, simply, fell victim to the passage of time. Our sense of literary history expanded and fuller, we now face another difficulty: we no longer know how to *read* the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century, trained as we are in poetic reading by those works which had initially survived. Moving beyond the practices of lyric reading allows us not only to recognize these poetic contributions, but to meet them on their own terms and better understand the self-theorization of their authors.

By coming to understand the struggle with form and the "what else" with which a poet wrestled as overlapping concerns that cannot be separated without failing to understand each, I suggest a way to address what Dorothy Wang has identified as one of the most pervasive, if often unconscious, flaws in the study of modern poetry, a "double-standard in poetry studies" in which "Form, whether that of traditional lyric or avant-garde poems, is assumed to be the provenance of a literary acumen and culture that is unmarked but assumed to be white" (*Thinking Its Presence* 20). The result, as she puts it, is that "Critics are more likely to think about formal questions—say, poetic tone and syntax—when speaking about [John] Ashberry's poems but

almost certain to focus on political or black 'content' when examining the works of Amiri Baraka" (xx). Insofar as this dissertation has a scholarly "agenda," it is to promote the recognition that, as Wang aptly puts it, "All writing is situated in both the aesthetic and social realms" (xxii). The relationship of lyric and lyric reading to both realms is fraught, its reading practices often asking readers to make an either/or choice—rather than the both/and that I, like Wang, find necessary.[10]

The chapters that follow explore the ways four modernist poets deployed traditional and innovative verse forms in order to enact the creation of communities among their readers. They are not necessarily representatives of their backgrounds—African American, Jewish and Irish immigrants; religious outsiders; multilingual; politically marginalized—but rather help to demonstrate the ways in which shared practices overlook the alternative paths toward poetic innovation taken by those who wrestled with their status as American outsiders. The examples of Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff reveal how we've been limited. I often explain their relevance to non-specialists in 20th-century poetics through the role of "poet's poet": their works continue to shape the contemporary avant-garde as they did post-war experimental poetry. Yet even in this role, Zukofsky and Reznikoff are often read as "Poundian"—as vectors of his poetics not tainted by his sins. Even when their contemporary advocates resist this adjective, their arguments are shaped by reading practices that can't capture the full breadth of their innovation and—indeed—the continuity with earlier formal and generic conventions.[11] Their works, like Longfellow's *Hiawatha* or Yehoash's Yiddish translation, are neither lyric nor anti-lyric.

[10] See *Dickinson's Misery*, 70ff.

[11] See, for instance, the essays on Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and George Oppen in *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture* (eds. Stephen Miller and Daniel Morris, U of Alabama P 2010) and *The Objectivist Nexus* (eds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, U of Alabama P, 1999).

The poetry of James Weldon Johnson and Lola Ridge has been alternately misunderstood and neglected. Johnson, though the focus of growing scholarly reappraisal, has long served as a straw man against whose views of vernacular writing critics have pushed since the 1980s.[12] Lola Ridge has her handful of champions (a growing, but still quite small group), but has been largely unread and forgotten since her death in 1941.[13] Despite their disparate backgrounds and involvement with distinct movements within American modernism, what these poets share brings us back to a moment when the nature of how to read a poem was far from settled.[14] These aren't roads not taken—but taken and, by later readers, *mis*taken for the paths of others. They explore and experiment with how poetry might both be made "new" in the new century yet also serve a public function, enacting among its readers the communal obligations of a church on Sunday, a classroom, a labor rally, or the jury empanelled in an American courtroom. To accomplish this, all four draw on the formal and generic conventions of non-lyric poetry, from commemorative newspaper verse to the epic to broadway musicals.

Though by no means a formal group, these poets and their verse crossed paths and circulated in the same literary and physical spaces of New York City in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. It is doubtful that Lola Ridge, the Irish-born, New Zealand raised poet and labor activist ever met James Weldon Johnson. By the time each had permanently settled in New York, they had taken on different roles and distinct personalities. Johnson, the son of a Bahamanian immigrant and a

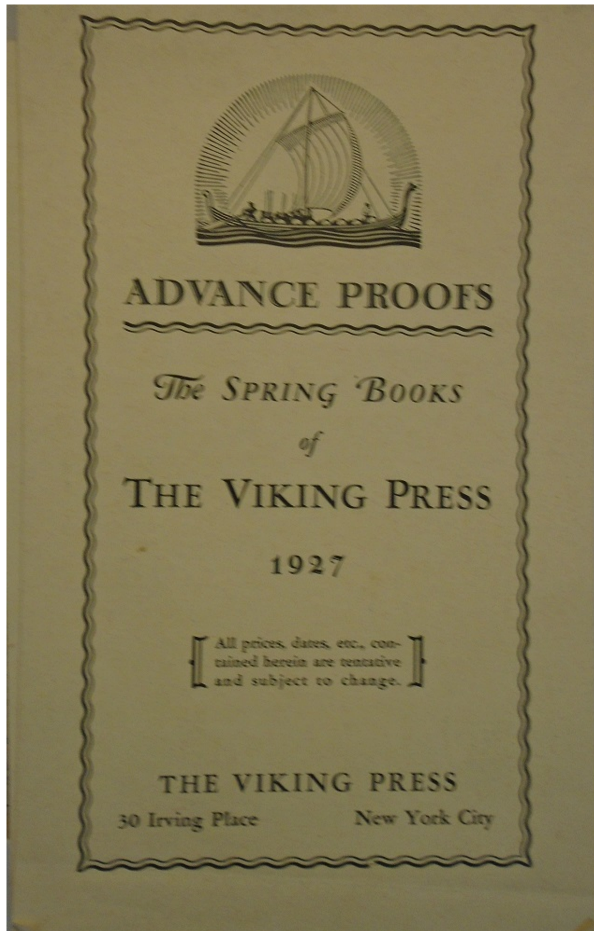
[12] For example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford UP, 1988); Houston Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (U of Chicago P, 1984) and *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (U of Wisconsin P, 1988); and Eric Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* (U of Georgia P, 1997).
[13] Major works in this vein include Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory* (Routledge, 2001); Nancy Berke, *Women Poets on the Left* (U of Florida P, 2001); Caroline Maun, *Mosaic of Fire* (U of South Carolina P, 2012); John Timberman Newcomb, *How Did Poetry Survive?* (U of Illinois P, 2012); Therese Svoboda's *Anything that Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet* (Schaffner Press, 2016); and Belinda Wheeler, "Lola Ridge's Pivotal Editorial Role at *Broom*," *PMLA* 127.2 (March 2012), 283-91.
[14] It's hardly a coincidence that Ezra Pound's manifesto of literary criticism was titled "How to Read" and, expanded to fill a book, re-imagined as a textbook titled *ABC of Reading* (1931). Zukofsky followed this model with his *A Test of Poetry* (1948).

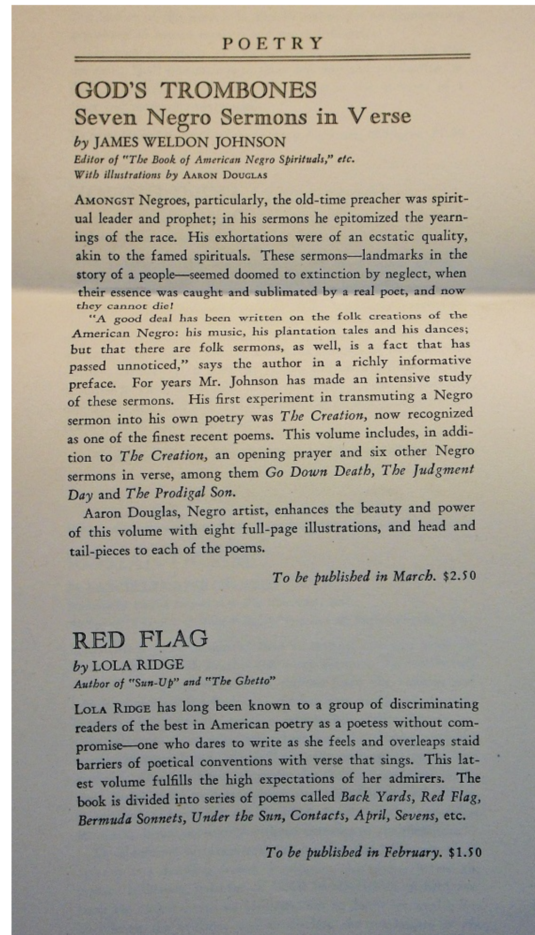
Jacksonville, Florida, hotel headwaiter, had been the principal of Jacksonville's African American elementary school, founded a high school for the same population, was the first African American to pass the Florida state bar, served in the diplomatic corps during the presidency of William Howard Taft, and, in 1920, became the first African American Secretary of the NAACP. His organizational and lobbying efforts over the next decade would help to define the century's seminal civil rights organization. He arrived on the scene of the Harlem Renaissance fully-formed as an elder statesman, dressed in three-piece suits with carefully-knotted ties; he was deliberately mannered, holding his tongue through meetings with President Woodrow Wilson, toward whom he felt nothing short of physical revulsion. Political efficacy flowed through moderation: organize; threaten to withhold votes; make the case for legal reform on shared principles of good governance; write at set hours of the day.

Ridge, on the other hand, was a bohemian through and through. Born in Ireland and raised in New Zealand, she abandoned a husband, and then their son, joining Emma Goldman's entourage as she toured the United States. In New York, Ridge chose to live in what was still the poor, crowded slum of the Lower East Side. According to both legend and eyewitness accounts, she alone refused to break ranks when mounted police charged protestors rallying against the convictions of Sacco and Vanzetti. She spent the latter decades of her life addicted to painkillers and opiates; she wrote in frenzies; she looked toward imprisoned and exiled labor leaders for inspiration; she admired the young Soviet Union from afar, naming her third volume of poetry, *Red Flag*, in its honor.

Yet they did meet—if not literally, then in the pages of Viking Press' "Spring Books of 1927" advertising pamphlet, in which that radical, proudly Red volume of sonnets and free verse was given prominence on the center page. Above it was a blurb for the elaborately-produced,

elegantly-bound work on which Johnson staked his reputation as a poet: *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. At least in the eyes of their publisher, they were companions. And both poets sold books. Johnson's volume became what it was intended to be: a staple of parlors and churches, the performance of his poems crossing racial divides.[15] Ridge's poems, bestsellers in their day, came to life at labor rallies.





POETRY

GOD'S TROMBONES
Seven Negro Sermons in Verse
by JAMES WELDON JOHNSON
Editor of "The Book of American Negro Spirituals," etc.
With illustrations by AARON DOUGLAS

AMONGST Negroes, particularly, the old-time preacher was spiritual leader and prophet; in his sermons he epitomized the yearnings of the race. His exhortations were of an ecstatic quality, akin to the famed spirituals. These sermons—landmarks in the story of a people—seemed doomed to extinction by neglect, when their essence was caught and sublimated by a real poet, and now they cannot die!

"A good deal has been written on the folk creations of the American Negro: his music, his plantation tales and his dances; but that there are folk sermons, as well, is a fact that has passed unnoticed," says the author in a richly informative preface. For years Mr. Johnson has made an intensive study of these sermons. His first experiment in transmuting a Negro sermon into his own poetry was *The Creation*, now recognized as one of the finest recent poems. This volume includes, in addition to *The Creation*, an opening prayer and six other Negro sermons in verse, among them *Go Down Death, The Judgment Day* and *The Prodigal Son*.

Aaron Douglas, Negro artist, enhances the beauty and power of this volume with eight full-page illustrations, and head and tail-pieces to each of the poems.

To be published in March. $2.50

RED FLAG
by LOLA RIDGE
Author of "Sun-Up" and "The Ghetto"

LOLA RIDGE has long been known to a group of discriminating readers of the best in American poetry as a poetess without compromise—one who dares to write as she feels and overleaps staid barriers of poetical conventions with verse that sings. This latest volume fulfills the high expectations of her admirers. The book is divided into series of poems called *Back Yards, Red Flag, Bermuda Sonnets, Under the Sun, Contacts, April, Sevens,* etc.

To be published in February. $1.50

[Illustration 1: "The Spring Books of Viking Press, 1927." James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 61, Folder 222]

Charles Reznikoff's address in New York changed frequently, but at least for a time, he lived at 5 West 4th Street, near Washington Park and not far from the 5th Avenue, Greenwich

[15] Search for *God's Trombones* or the title of any individual poem in the collection on Youtube. You'll find dozens of videos of their *contemporary* performances in African American churches.

Village headquarters of the NAACP, where Johnson worked.[16] Like Johnson, he was an attorney, having graduated from nearby New York University in 1915. Reznikoff, self-publishing his works from a printing press in his parents' basement during the 1920s, sold them (so the title pages indicate) at The Sunwise Turn, "A Modern Bookshop" located in Midtown, not far from 5th Avenue and the flagship 42nd Street branch of the New York Public Library, at 51 East 44th Street. Ridge, too, gave readings here during the early 1920s, and we can imagine Reznikoff's terse, highly redacted lines making an odd partnership with either Ridge's effusive, Whitmanian free verse or hermetic, mystically-inclined sonnets.

Although they wouldn't meet until the end of the decade, Louis Zukofsky spent the 1920s admiring Reznikoff's verse from afar, reading (like Johnson, Ridge, and Reznikoff), *Poetry* and *The Masses* along with the Yiddish papers taken by his father, Pinchos.[17] In 1920, Zukofsky was a sixteen year-old Columbia freshman, commuting from his parents' Lower East Side tenement to Morningside Heights, translating the works of Yehoash, and offering them to *Poetry* as representative examples of one of the great American poets of the age—albeit one whose writing, because in Yiddish, was not accessible to the vast majority of American readers.[18] Like Johnson, he was also impeccably dressed—as his wife would later recall, joking, he never went to weed their garden without first shaving and putting on a tie. Yet he, too, was active in radical politics—not the anarchist circles of Lola Ridge, but, befriending a young Whittaker Chambers, nearly joined the same Communist cell. (The explanation of his failure to do so varies: either Zukofsky, never a "joiner," declined to formally sign-up, or, laden with too many professional

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[16] This is the address listed on the copyright page of the self-printed *Nine Plays* (1927).
[17] Some scholarship has also attempted to link Zukofsky to the American Yiddish avant-garde. The most persuasive cases are Ariel Resnikoff's "Louis Zukofsky and Mikhl Likht, 'A Test of Jewish American Modernist Poetics' (*jacket-2*, September 2013) and Sarah Ponichetera's dissertation, *Yiddish and the Avant-Garde in American Jewish Poetry* (Columbia University, 2012), which she graciously shared with me.
[18] Zukofsky to Harriet Monroe, 9/1/20 (*Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* Records 1895-1961, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Box 43, Folder 3).

and literary aspirations, his application was rejected by the cell for being too "bourgeois.") William Carlos Williams, whom Zukofsky would befriend, whose early collections he would help edit, and (with Reznikoff) help publish, had by 1925 already met Lola Ridge at one of her regular literary soirees.[19]

Each, in their own way, was already a prominent figure of New York's interwar literary avant-garde: Johnson the elegant, well-connected, elder statesman so consumed by both literary and political work he would nearly suffer a nervous collapse by the end of the 1920s; Ridge, the indefatigable networker, literary host, and pragmatic editor determined to see her visions through; Zukofsky, the single-minded and self-confident striver who would soon catch the eye of Ezra Pound; and the quietly successful Reznikoff, all the more striking for his silent indifference to the usual literary accolades. Together, they form a new modernist quartet, an alternative to T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, and Wallace Stevens formed both by its difference from that which we have both remembered and remembered how to read—and by their shared dependence on a poetics of covenant.

IV. From Typology and Prophecy to Covenantal Poetics

Their covenantal poetics emerges not only from the "how" of their poetry's workings and relationship to readers, but also from the "what" of its content—and, perhaps most importantly, the conversation between these aspects. Though Zukofsky's and Reznikoff's poetry often grapples with the legacy of Greek and Roman literature and myth and Johnson had studied the languages as part of his college-preparatory and undergraduate curricula, for the raw "stuff" of their modernist revisions, they turn to the Bible—and, particularly, its legacy in American public

[19] Svoboda 130.

life, political rhetoric, and civil religious discourse. (This serves, that is to say, much as Irish folklore does for Yeats or Classical literature for Pound, Eliot, and Joyce.)

Indeed, the rhetorical and literary strategies which Colonial, Revolutionary, and antebellum Americans had used to define themselves as Americans are remarkably like those which modernists used to define themselves as moderns. In place of Greek myth or national legend, they revised biblical typology, drawing on both the legacy of the Protestant Reformation and their own encounters with the place of America. The short version is: Colonial, Revolutionary, and antebellum Americans came to think of themselves as *Americans* by thinking of themselves as Israelites fulfilling the biblical imperative to settle a (new) Promised Land. Where traditional biblical typology read the Old Testament into the New, American biblical typology read the Old Testament (and, to some extent, the New) into the encounter with the "New World."[20] To "make it new" was a central act of American culture and imagination from the very beginning. So, in the waning years of the 17th century, we come to find no less a figure of Colonial Puritanism and New England government than Cotton Mather "wearing a skullcap in his study and . . . calling himself a rabbi."[21]

At the turn of the twentieth century, representatives of "new" groups of American citizens—Jews, African Americans, Catholics, recently-enfranchised women, political outsiders,

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[20] The major figure in this field of study is still Sacvan Bercovitch, particularly his *Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), *The American Jeremiad* (1978), and *The Rites of Assent* (1993). Nan Goodman's and Michael P. Kramer's edited volume, *The Turn Around Religion in America: Literature, Religion and American Culture* (2011) and a 2014 roundtable, "Short Reflections on Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad*," in *Common-Place* 14.4 offer both a retrospective view of Bercovitch's influence and forays into how his work can continue to converse with contemporary scholarship. More recently Michael Hoberman has explored the interactions between Puritan thinking about Jews and Colonial-era encounters with them (*New England/New Israel: Jews and Puritans in Early America*, 2011), while Shalom Goldman has studied what he terms Puritan Hebraism (*Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries* (ed.), 1994; *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination*, 2004). Meanwhile, scholars such as Tracy Fessenden (*Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*, 2006) have taken the study of American biblical typology in early American literature and rhetoric in new directions.

[21] Arthur Hertzberg, "The New England Puritans and the Jews" in *Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries* (1994), ed. Shalom Goldman, p. 105.

immigrants from Ireland and eastern, southern, and central Europe—turned to this legacy, still prominent in American life, as they grappled with and attempted to write themselves into the very stories earlier Americans had told to invent themselves. If Puritans had become Americans by imagining themselves as metaphorical, latter-day Jews, and their descendants (mutatis mutandi) had continued to hold onto this language and framework—then what did it mean to be a flesh-and-blood Jew newly-arrived in the United States in the late-19th century? What did it mean for African Americans, both before and after emancipation, to contest white Americans' claim to the role of "Israelite"? How do we reach the point where, in her 1918 poem "The Ghetto," the Irish-born Lola Ridge, educated by Catholic nuns in New Zealand, lays claim to Americanness by associating herself with Lower East Side Jewish immigrants?

Sacvan Bercovitch's works of the 1970s, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978), form the foundation from which later studies of American prophetic rhetoric and biblical typology have built and, at times, built against. His works shaped the study of early American literature, and, explicitly, Werner Sollors' seminal *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Literature* (1986). Bercovitch identifies a rhetorical typology that runs through and develops from Puritan colonists to their descendants in the 19th-century, New England-based American literary Renaissance. Rejecting a separation between sacred meaning and a profane world, "The American Jeremiahs obviated the separation of the world and the kingdom, and then invested the symbol of America with the attributes of the sacred" (179). The foundational role of the Jeremiah/jeremiad in establishing American biblical typology—think, for instance, of Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"—ultimately allows for the absorption of critics and criticism into the American community

itself. A mode of understanding criticism is already built into the system; indeed, the role of critical outsider can, in this way, become a *means* of entering the group identity of "American."

A similar conclusion forms the foundation of much scholarship of the roles of the biblical and religious imagination in American public life beyond typology. So, in James Darsey's reading, American radical rhetoric of both the right and the left draws on the rhetorical tradition of Hebrew prophetic writings to produce their critiques of a larger American center—to remain, that is, critical outsiders who are nonetheless a part of the community itself. For Michael Walzer, the biblical Exodus in particular offers an historical paradigm for revolutionary thought in the 20th century, something looser than either Medieval or Puritan typological approaches but resembling the use modernists made of, for example, the *Odyssey*: a "narrative frame" or "story [that] made it possible to tell other stories" (7). Like Walzer, Melanie J. Wright observes the use of an Exodus framework within novels of the American modernist left during the first decades of the 20th century, a trope deployed by both Lincoln Steffens and Zora Neale Hurston.[22]

The role of the biblical Exodus in the American imagination plays a central role in studies of American civil religion, biblical typology, and prophetic rhetoric—likely because of its central role as a narrative of self-understanding for various American groups, from John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), to European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century fleeing persecution and starvation, to the enactment of its journey from slavery to freedom in African American history and culture.[23] Telling, revising, and laying claim to

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[22] James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York UP, 1999); Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (Basic Books, 1986); Melanie J. Wright, *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative* (Oxford UP, 2002).

[23] Particular emphasis has been placed on the African American encounter with American biblical discourse. This is the focus of Rhondda Robinson Thomas' *Claiming Exodus: A History of Afro-American Identity, 1775-1903* (Baylor UP, 2013), as well as Philip Gorski's discussions of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois in *American Covenant* (2017) and Wright's reading of Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* in *Exodus in America* (2002). Joanna Brooks' *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (Oxford UP, 2003) is an indispensable study in this regard.

these stories is itself an American ritual—and a ritual of Americanization. To claim the story was to cast oneself in the role of an American Israelite, an action that bore consequences for the literary engagements among Jews, African Americans, Irish Americans, English Americans, and others at the turn of the twentieth century. Zukofsky, Reznikoff, Ridge, and Johnson all take up the Exodus narrative in their poetry—but it plays widely divergent roles, from the central structural framework of Zukofsky's *"A"* to the topic of one sermon among many in Johnson's *God's Trombones*. Likewise, though the most prominent narrative of the American typological imagination and civil religious ritual and discourse, the Exodus was not singular.[24] Ranging from the Creation to the Crucifixion, the works discussed in the chapters that follow reflect this reality.

Only by moving beyond the lyric can we read poetry within this discourse or understand the prophetic role it assumes as it calls for social change through covenantal renewal. Experiments with new verse forms and attempts to reinvent or renew conventional forms go hand in hand, I show, with Johnson's, Zukofsky's, Reznikoff's, and Ridge's experiments with and reinventions of ways of being American. By contesting and revising the narratives and typological frameworks of American civil religion, Americans worked to renew a national, civic covenant—a process that, as Philip Gorski has shown, suffused the political, cultural, and literary air at the turn of the twentieth century—permeating even the halls of Columbia University at the time that Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Johnson took courses there.[25] By disputing and revising civil religious narrative, all four participate in the ritual renewal of an American covenant.

[24] Brooks, for instance, explores the figure of Lazarus and Gorski attends to the importance of the Crucifixion narrative. Even Bercovitch's model of the jeremiad points toward this variety: its biblical model, lamenting the fall of the sacred state and the expulsion from the Promised Land, is the inverse of the Exodus (not to mention of a different genre altogether).

[25] See Gorski, 109-42. Reznikoff took graduate courses in law at Columbia in 1917 (*Poems of Charles Reznikoff, 1918-1975*, 383) while Johnson took courses in English and Drama at Columbia from 1903-6, studying with and befriending the critic Brander Matthews (*Along This Way* 341-2, 883).

Considering themselves at once fundamentally American yet nonetheless outsiders, they take up the voices and roles of the biblical prophets, not (like religious seers or their Greek-infused counterparts, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) predicting or calling for apocalypse—but highlighting the threat of suffering if there is not a return to covenantal values of economic, social, and political justice: workers' rights, religious pluralism, civil rights for African Americans, the acceptance of immigrants. To do so, their poems must do more than speak to readers, to call out to them, or even challenge or condemn them—must, that is, act on more than the individual alone. By creating conditions that allow for and call on readers to imagine themselves not as isolated individuals but as members of a situated, communal audience, their works serve as the mechanism through which covenant is enacted, revised, and renewed. The establishment of a relationship between the poem and the reader creates relationships, each individually mediated by the poem, among the real and imagined audience of its readers, all of whom are called on to reimagine themselves within covenantal and typological Americanness: as members of a church congregation, a jury, a labor rally, or a Passover seder, shaping the larger community through the poetic experience of local spaces.

V. A Note on "Rooted Cosmopolitanism"

While the modernism of this quartet of poets leads them beyond the lyric and toward alternate, experimental forms and genres, their ethnic particularism leads them to political and ethical commitments very different from the deracinated modernism of Pound and Eliot. In place of the apocalyptic and a yearning for a lost, heroic age that define high modernist efforts to turn from lyric to epic, they introduce a covenantal poetics that acknowledges the flaws—indeed, the crimes—of the present, but view it and the future as sources of human potential.

This combination of modernist experiment with the political and ethical obligations of covenant produces what I refer to as a rooted cosmopolitanism. This term draws on the recent work of theorists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, with “rooted,” “partial,” or “conversational” cosmopolitanism (his titles are slippery) and Gerard Delanty with “critical cosmopolitanism,” who have produced formulations of cosmopolitanism that account for—and insist on—continued commitment to the local. Such cosmopolitanisms, in Delanty’s words, are “post-universal. . . shaped by numerous particularisms as opposed to an underlying set of values,” consisting of a plurality of practices “rooted in real experiences” of individuals and communities, a continuing process of imagining ways to resolve tensions inherent in society’s “ongoing process of self-constitution in light of the encounter with the Other” (13). My addition to their accounts is the observation that the phenomenon of the “rooted” cosmopolitan is not unique to the globalized world of the early twenty-first century but can be found, prefigured, within the works of Johnson, Zukofsky, Ridge, and Reznikoff. A cosmopolitanism that consisted of overlapping global and local commitments, and did not abandon particular, affective attachments —especially in instances where, as Appiah notes is frequently the case, it is born of necessity and circumstance rather than elitism or privilege— allows us to refocus our understanding of political art.

Their poetry is deeply rooted in the physical and social spaces of New York City, a quality which comes also to maintain supposedly cosmopolitan commitments to aesthetic modernism and left-wing political change. In this, they do not resemble the forms of cosmopolitanism alternately feared and practiced by their contemporaries, one in which, as Delanty writes, cosmopolitanism “reflected the revolt of the individual against the social world,” where “to be a ‘citizen of the world’ was to reject the . . . world of particularistic attachments” (51-2). Where T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound felt constrained by the cities of their birth and worried

about the dissolution of national energy, these poets feel their way toward life in genuinely pluralist cities. They recognize that the betterment of the world rests decisively in human hands and must begin in specific places, molded to their specific flaws.

In the chapters that follow, rooted cosmopolitanism joins the prophetic role of a covenantal poetics and the historically particular dynamics and politics of modernism through its exploration of the place between insider and outsider. Leftist politics were cosmopolitan politics: yet they were not always international politics. A rooted cosmopolitan, committed at once to global ideals and the betterment of a particular place and people, takes on a necessarily liminal role, straddling that divide of insider/outsider. This, we might also say, could have been the role of the biblical prophets. From the perspective of the ruling authorities, they were root*less* cosmopolitans, loyal to the abstract, an individual in revolt against norms—a global citizen more than one of the state. But from the prophet's perspective, their loyalty to the abstract—whether God or revolution—runs through a commitment to the particular mission of a particular people, in keeping with the uniqueness and variety of its customs.

This commitment, Reznikoff openly acknowledges, comes only through historical accident. New York is, in the title of a 1933 collection, "Jerusalem the Golden" not because it is a counter-Zion but because he happened to be born there. In a 1941 poem, "Autobiography: Hollywood," he complains of Los Angeles that,

> I like the streets of New York City, where I was born,
> better than these streets of palms.
> No doubt, my father liked his village in Ukrainia
> better than the streets of New York City (196).

This is not at-homeness in diaspora, or an at-homeness in America compared to rest of the Jewish diaspora, but a basic predilection for the place of one's birth. He only happens to be a New Yorker—but that historical accident (wondered at explicitly by Zukofsky, too, as he

compared his ease in the city to the difficulties of his Yiddish-speaking parents, by Johnson as he puzzled over being "born for a New Yorker" in Jacksonville, Florida) also makes him responsible to this place. New York is only an accidental Jerusalem—and would and could not be one to those born in Russia, Los Angeles, or Jerusalem itself. But as Jerusalem, it is not the actualized ideal. Read as a sequence and a kind of ars poetica, the collection in which this poem appeared sees Reznikoff turn back to the city of his birth and local affections in order, like a Nathan storming into the court of King David, to deliver a damning critique—the abbreviated, 1941 version of "Testimony." Reznikoff does not give up on New York despite its failures; he is too rooted there, with too much affection for it. Pointing toward a higher ideal of justice, he rejects compromise with historical circumstance.

VI. A Short Preview of What's To Come

In Chapter 1, I draw on extensive archival research and historically-informed approaches to prosody to demonstrate how James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927) addresses Americans as members of a shared, racially-mixed church congregation. By "scoring" the voice of the African American preacher to the King James Bible and biblical parables to the psychology of the lynch mob, he writes the African American preacher into the typological discourse of what it means to be an American and frames the U.S.-as-congregation within the specific space of the African American church. His poetry frames two of the key contributions made by theorizing a covenantal poetics. By drawing on the conventions of 19th-century commemorative verse and the sheet music industry as he develops a documentary poetics, Johnson's works point toward an alternative genealogy of this central modernist form, usually associated with Ezra Pound. His writing also expresses a rooted cosmopolitanism: a

commitment to universal ideals and aesthetics that retains the political obligations of local community. Johnson, like those discussed in the following chapters, uses the idea of covenant to resolve the tensions this produces.

Chapter 2 explores Louis Zukofsky's use of the biblical Exodus as a central structural motif in the pre-World War II sections of his decades-long poem *"A"* (1928-1941) to show how he conceives of his role as a revolutionary, avant-garde poet in terms of transmitting prophecy. This transmission is an act of moral pedagogy: *"A"* teaches readers that the true meaning of American biblical typology is not to be a "light unto the nations," but a reviled, oppressed outsider. As a way to understand history, the Exodus casts the U.S. as an "Egypt" rather than "Promised Land." It also redefines the role of the modernist avant-garde, as I show by offering the Yiddish newspapers and poetry Zukofsky incorporated into the poem as a crucial documentary archive. Modernism takes (or ought to take) the side of the outsider because, by replacing geographical movement with linguistic circulation, it produces a translational Exodus. Only modernism, his poetry implies, allows readers to translate the typological "Israelite" of the Puritan imagination into the experience of having been a slave in Egypt. To think typologically demands that Americans see themselves in solidarity with the contemporary oppressed: beggars, workers, and refugees.

The New Zealand-raised, Irish-Catholic immigrant and labor activist Lola Ridge, I argue in Chapter 3, develops a cosmopolitan, transnational definition of "Americanness" that challenges clear distinctions between "ethnic" and "American" literature. Reading *Firehead* (1927), her book-length retelling of the crucifixion, alongside her work as the editor of the influential 1922 "American" issue of the modernist magazine *Broom*, I argue that she turns to stories of martyrdom—imprisoned labor activists, the suffering of immigrants, the crucifixion

itself—to write biblical counter-histories that produce contemporary counter-typologies. Immigration, in her writing, fulfills the democratic and polyvocal promise of American literature and society. As immigrant and ethnic Americans supersede their forebears, they replace a limited national covenant with a universal covenant of labor and ethnic solidarity. Not all modernist poetry produces this solidarity, however. Documentary poetics wander from injustice toward the mundane, while parody and pastiche limit the use of certain forms to Anglo-American insiders. Because of this, learning to read Ridge's poetry suggests how we might understand the use of conventional forms by ethnic modernists as acts of cultural supersession rather than the quest for acceptance as "normal" literature.

Chapter 4 argues that in Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* (c. 1934-1976), his training as an attorney and his biblical translations of the 1920s merge to cast the covenantal community in terms of a courtroom. The origins of this documentary project, I demonstrate, lie not in the influence of Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos (1939-40), but in his relationship with biblical Hebrew. In his translations "Israel" and "King David" (1929), covenant is established and upheld through acts of witness, testimony, and advocacy. In *Testimony*, the poet serves as a courtroom advocate whose own voice must remain secondary to the subjectivity of history's forgotten, unvoiced victims as discovered in legal case books. Never offering a verdict, *Testimony* demands that its readers act as jury in the trial of the United States during the immigration era. In doing so, they participate in an act of covenantal community.

Chapter One: A Congregation of Readers: James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*

I. Introduction: Modernism, Race, and Community

On June 26, 1912, in the small Nicaraguan port town of Corinto, James Weldon Johnson drafted the first fifteen verses of "Fifty Years." He regarded this poem as his first claim to literary accomplishment, the means through which he would turn from a successful career as a songwriter. After finishing these first lines, Johnson composed a letter to his wife, Grace Nail Johnson, then in New York with her parents. "I know that I am a poet," he wrote, "and with the power to be the first great poet the race has produced in America." For this to be true, however, the late Paul Laurence Dunbar must, against the opinion of the time, have failed to achieve this status:

> Dunbar, though he was a master of his art, had great technic and a mastery of pathos, humor and delicacy, he lacked depth, comprehensive broadness, prophetic vision and consecrated seriousness; and so he falls short of being the first great poet of the race in America. In a good measure I know I possess these very qualities which Dunbar lacked.[26]

Modernism was not born on or about June 26, 1912, nor with the publication of "Fifty Years" on the editorial page of the New York *Times* on New Year's Day, 1913: as it reflects on the trials and achievements of African Americans in the half-century since the Emancipation Proclamation, the poem trots along in a regularly metrical and regularly rhymed iambic tetrameter; its at times high-flung rhetoric reveals those genteel flourishes the New Poetry would disdain.

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[26] Box 41, Folder 22 in the James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Beinecke Special Collections and Rare Books Library, Yale University (hereafter JWJ Papers).

Yet, written at roughly the same moment Ezra Pound was aggressively laying out his own vision of a "great" and "new" poetry, Johnson's letter offers a starting place for one of the core tasks of this dissertation: to trace an alternative, convergent genealogy for the defining formal experiments of modernist poetry. Johnson did not write in isolation from the New Verse—he was an early subscriber to *Poetry*—but his modernism develops not from the abrupt rupture of a self-proclaimed, ultimately isolated genius, but from the struggles and modest formal experiments of turn-of-the-twentieth century verse as it sought to make sense of the emergence of technological and political modernity.[27] Poems like "Fifty Years" are essential to understanding how Johnson's modernism arrives, independently and, in fact, earlier, at a documentary form; its myriad companion pieces, meanwhile, allow us to say something similar of a multi-ethnic constellation of modernist poets, including the immigrant writers who are the focus of this dissertation.

The modernism of Johnson's collection of "sermonic" poems, *God's Trombones* (1927), develops from a sustained engagement with literary conventions rejected by modernism: the public verse of "Fifty Years," and the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Seeking forms that could establish community not only with but *among* readers, Johnson draws on these practices as he engages with the biblical and prophetic typologies that informed American civil religious discourse. The resulting verse develops a modernist documentary poetry distinct from both the high modernist, "Poundian" strain and the Depression-era leftist variant informed by conventions of reportage. *God's Trombones* deploys these techniques to write the African

[27] 1913 was the year of "A Pact" with Walt Whitman as well as the early Imagist manifesto "A Few Don'ts." Writing, like Johnson, from abroad to challenge a major figure of nineteenth-century American poetry (for each, *the* towering figure with whom they must struggle), Pound willingly cedes the status of national poet to Whitman in a way that Johnson will not—or cannot—to Dunbar. "I see him America's poet," Pound had declared in 1909, "He *is* America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it *is* America" ("What I Feel" 187). In "A Pact," his attitude turns explicitly supercessionist: "It was you that broke the new wood, / Now is a time for carving" (*Personae* 90).

American preacher into the typological discourse of what it means to be an American, framing the congregation that is the United States within the specific space and moment of the African American church on Sunday morning.

Johnson's life and literary career uncover the overlapping and often ambiguous relationship among modes of national and ethnic identification and belonging. He was a cosmopolitan figure, setting out for literary greatness from the Caribbean, where he served in the consular service from 1906 to 1913. Born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871, he was the child of an immigrant (his mother was Bahamian, from Nassau) and an enterprising, multilingual, free-born Virginian: his father spoke fluent Spanish and, under his instruction and within Jacksonville's multilingual, multinational African American and Afro-Caribbean community, Johnson also learned the language.[28] (Later, he would study Latin and Greek with a private tutor in Jacksonville and at Atlanta University; he knew French well enough to correspond with his wife in the language.) A primary school principal and attorney by training, he moved to New York in 1902 and, with his brother Rosamond and Bob Cole, established the popular and successful songwriting trio Cole & Johnson Brothers. From 1920 to 1930, he was the NAACP's first African American Secretary, in which role he lobbied federal and state officials on behalf of anti-lynching legislation. Johnson traveled widely from the city of his birth, making his home variously in Latin America, Maine, Atlanta, Nashville, and (again and again) New York City while also touring Europe and the Pacific.

The nature of Johnson's self-proclaimed cosmopolitanism informs and shapes the poetics he began to lay out in his 1912 letter and in later critical writings: his cultural and political commitments took forms that were both global and local. Such a cosmopolitanism should be

[28] He knew it, and the inconsistencies of American racial dynamics, well enough to pass for a black Cuban (rather than a black Floridian) while traveling between Jacksonville and Atlanta—and so to avoid being moved to the Jim Crow car at the Georgia border (*Along This Way* 205).

distinguished from the expatriate or high modernist strain exemplified by Pound, T. S. Eliot, or Gertrude Stein which, as Gerard Delanty observes in his study of modern cosmopolitanisms, "reflected the revolt of the individual against the social world," where "to be a 'citizen of the world' was to reject the . . . world of particularistic attachments" (51-2). Such is the case, for instance, when Pound attacks the crude "stench" of Walt Whitman and America from the position of "my world citizenship" ("What I Feel" 187), imagining himself poet laureate of the cosmopolis. Johnson, by contrast, defines cosmopolitanism through the specific, placed quality of "being born for a New Yorker"—even if you were really born in Jacksonville (*Along This Way* 187). This rooted cosmopolitanism consists of overlapping global and local commitments and does not abandon particular, affective attachments.[29] This vision of a simultaneously global and local community serves as the foundation for the congregational, covenantal community that *God's Trombones* seeks to create—and for the poetic practices deployed to bring this community about.

A rooted cosmopolitanism constantly negotiates overlapping but not identical cultural and civic commitments. As an African American, Johnson saw himself as a member of a particular "folk" residing within a larger political community which, as he would put it in "Fifty Years," was his "by right of birth" (814). Yet he was *also* a member of what he termed the "Aframerican" community, a racial community that crossed national and linguistic borders. By this, he did not simply intend a variant spelling of African- or Afro-American, or a positive alternative to "Negro" or "Colored." Rather, aware from birth of an African diaspora in the Americas that extended far beyond the U.S. South and, after seven years in Nicaragua and Venezuela, able to imagine himself under the heading of a complex and varied community that

[29] Johnson, like the other poets considered in this dissertation, prefigures the related twenty-first century phenomena of Delanty's "critical" cosmopolitanism and Appiah's "rooted," "partial," and "conversational" cosmoplitanisms (his terms are slippery).

stretched into and beyond Central America, Johnson's formulation of "Aframericanism" prefigures twenty-first century theories of "rooted" or "critical" cosmopolitanisms.[30] Johnson imagines a national identity that crosses the borders of states, but that is not as expansive (or truly global) as Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic: to be Aframerican is to be defined by shared, particular, and ultimately local or rooted heritages: those of American identity, culture, and history as well as African; at once by shared ancestry in African chattel slavery in the Americas and its racist and racialist aftermath, and by their residence within states that fell under the scope and influence of the foreign and domestic policies of the United States. Past and present link them; residence in the "New World" links them; and the influence and interconnectivity of states (in a word [or three], the Monroe Doctrine) links them.

Literature and culture are likewise shaped and obligated by these considerations. For Johnson, art exists in society and therefore can and inevitably will affect it. It is itself a kind of actor, obligated along with the artist who created it. These obligations, in his telling, are at once cosmopolitan and local. Indeed, the way to frame the true measure of artistic value is the ability to fulfill both sets of commitments without sacrificing one for the other. In his 1928 essay, "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," Johnson describes the development and consequences of what he terms "the individual Negro artist" (755)—in effect, the modernist (re)iteration of the capital-A Romantic Artist, as against the "folk" artist of earlier periods; the individual artist of which he sought to be first great iteration among African Americans. "What," he asks after a lengthy overview of the rise and recent history of such artists, "is the significance of this artistic

[30] The preface of Johnson's 1922 *Book of American Negro Poetry* situates this anthology within an Aframerican context. Writing of his friend and early influence Paul Laurence Dunbar, he concedes that, "although he is the most outstanding figure in literature among the Aframericans of the United States, he does not stand alone among the Aframericans of the whole Western world. There are Placido and Manzano in Cuba; Vieux and Durand in Haiti, Machado de Assis in Brazil; Leon Laviaux in Martinique" (710). This community is trans-national and multi-lingual, working in Spanish, English, French, and Portuguese. Placido's poetry is smuggled into an anthology supposedly bound by "national" borders, just as Johnson used his position in the NAACP to help organize a 1920 fact-finding mission to Haiti to examine and publicize the abuses of the U.S. military occupation of the island.

activity on the part of the Negro and of its reactions on the American people?" (763) There are two contributions. On the one hand, "they are bringing something fresh and vital into American art" which "will be richer because of it" (763-4). This is the global, or cosmopolitan claim: Paul Robeson, Claude McKay, and Bessie Smith are significant because they enrich the lives of all Americans. (So, too, he might have written in another context, because they can enrich the life of an "Aframerican" reader in Corinto—or a Yiddish-speaker in Poland.) This is the aesthetic obligation of art and artist, in which art becomes a universal heritage.[31]

The second contribution, Johnson continues, which "is of deeper significance to the Negro himself is the effect that this artistic creativity is producing upon his condition and status as a man and citizen" (764). The very fact of their contribution of cultural value counteracts "the stereotype . . . that the Negro is nothing more than a beggar at the gate of the nation, waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization. Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing this immemorial stereotype faster than he has ever done through any other method he has been able to use" (764). "[T]hrough artistic achievement," he continues, "the Negro has found a means of getting at the very core of the prejudice against him, by challenging the Nordic superiority complex" (765). Johnson's belief in the ability of art—and poetry especially—to re-shape American race relations is, to be certain, more than a little idealistic. But he repeated similar claims with such frequency throughout his writings and lectures that we can say either his belief in it was genuine—or that he genuinely believed it was necessary for the general public to

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[31] Appiah eloquently depicts art and cultural projection as being subject to claims from both the local and the global: "We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can fully respond to 'our' art only if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art. But equally important is the human connection. My people–human beings–made the Great Wall of China, the Chrysler Building, the Sistine Chapel: these things were made by creatures like me, through the exercise of skill and imagination. I do not have those skills, and my imagination spins different dreams. Nevertheless, that potential is also in me. The connection through a local identity is as imaginary as the connection through humanity. The Nigerian's link to the Benin bronze, like mine, is a connection made in the imagination; but to say this isn't to pronounce either of them unreal. They are among the realest connections that we have" (*Cosmopolitanism* 135).

believe that art had such power.[32] As it pertains to the destruction of stereotypes the truth in this claim is apparent. If works playing off stereotypes, whether Dunbar's indulgence of chicken-theft motifs or Woodrow Wilson's White House screening of *Birth of a Nation*, could do harm, then their rejection and replacement—even by merely moving the depictions to neutral—could only do good. So, writing elsewhere of "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" (1928), he insists that "there is not a single Negro writer who is not, at least secondarily, impelled by the desire to make his work have some effect on the white world for the good of his race" (751). Even if Johnson could not truly speak for *all* African American artists, it stands to reason that he *did* speak for himself.

God's Trombones seeks to accomplish these goals through the creation of a shared, covenantal community among its readers, no matter who or where they are. Such a task requires a distinctive poetic form: a public poetry capable of marrying political and aesthetic, global and local, without sacrificing one to the other. Johnson's documentary poetics record the voice of the African American preacher by using the techniques of verse to record its score, developing modernist practices in continuity with the genteel, public poetry that had defined his earlier efforts. At the same time, the pan-racial congregation that Johnson's poetry imagines draws on and re-imagines the tropes, imagery, and rhetoric of American biblical and prophetic typology. The political community imagined by American civil religious discourse is thereby transformed and reset within the confines of the African American church. The African American preacher,

[32] To offer a handful of examples from among many, Johnson declared in a New York *Age* editorial, "I wish my readers to think of the production of poets by a race as a vital thing. It is vital not only as an indication of the development of the race but it is vital as to the place and recognition which that race is given by the world at large" ("A Real Poet", May 20, 1922; *LA* 646). In an April 10, 1924 address at Howard University on "American Negro Poets and Poetry," he impressed upon his audience that, "The matter of Aframerican poets and their poetry does have a distinct bearing on the Race Question" (JWJ Collection, Box 76, Folder 466), and notes for a talk titled "Contributions of the Negro to American Culture" express a similar sentiment (JWJ Collection, Folder 487). In "Convention – and the Negro in American Fiction," a May 7, 1931 lecture at Fisk University, he called on young writers to alter the conventions that make for poor depictions of African Americans in US fiction (JWJ Collection, Box 76, Folder 488).

long a formally-determinative figure in African American writing (in the genre of the "preacherly text"), assumes a prophetic role once held by white (or WASP) figures, calling on the civic congregation to repent—to turn back, that is, to the secular, civic covenant that binds them, and which Johnson's poems model among readers.

God's Trombones, the remainder of this chapter argues, offers a vantage point from which to re-view the development of modernist poetic technique and witness its origins in and engagement with ethnic and immigrant literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With a focus on the first "sermonic" poem Johnson wrote, "The Creation" (1919), I demonstrate how Johnson manipulates traditional prosody within modernist form to "score" the voice of the preacher to the rhythms of the King James Bible. Blurring distinctions between "high" and "ethnic" literature and voice, Johnson at the same time transposes the space of American civil religious discourse onto the African American church. Covenantal poetics, I argue, are characterized by the formal qualities of poetry as much as their content, and it is to this concern that this chapter turns next, examining how *God's Trombones* re-imagines and re-creates its readers into a communal audience bound by the shared obligations of covenant by developing a mode of direct address characterized by a modernist practice of documentary interpolation, drawing on the source-based poetics of an increasingly referential modernist scene, the tradition of commemorative verse, and the double-voiced allusion of the "preacherly text." Johnson's verse does not, like much of that labeled "prophetic" among his contemporaries, offer a visionary poetics or a poetics of apocalypse. His concerns, like the immigrant modernists to be discussed in subsequent chapters, have been shaped by those of the Biblical prophets, whose rhetoric enters American political, rhetorical, and cultural discourse during the Colonial period. This poetry is rendered prophetic through its continuing emphasis on a covenantal community.

II. Typological Documents: Scoring "The Creation"

James Weldon Johnson's literary career bridges modernism, the late nineteenth-century "genteel" forms it eschewed, and the popular songwriting which it ambivalently came to embrace.[33] While *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917), his first volume of poetry, consists entirely of genteel and dialect verse (almost nothing in it could have found a home in the venues of the New Verse), over the next decade Johnson began to engage more with formal experimentation. "The Creation," written over the course of 1918-1920, marks Johnson's poetic breakthrough, turning from the style of *Fifty Years* toward modernist technique. In his telling, the idea for the poem came to him as he traveled the country on behalf of the NAACP to rally support for anti-lynching legislation. After a series of dull, unremarkable preachers one Sunday in a Kansas City church, a man like the preachers Johnson had heard in his childhood rose—and as he electrified the crowd, Johnson "took a slip of paper and somewhat surreptitiously jotted down some ideas for the first poem, 'The Creation'" ("Preface" 837).

"The Creation" first appeared in the December 1, 1920 issue of *The Freeman*, a successor journal to *The Seven Arts* that absorbed its political-aesthetic worldview and much of its editorial

[33] Johnson's career in writing and publishing began while he was still the principal of the Stanton School in his native Jacksonville, Florida from 1894-1902. In 1895, he founded, edited, and served as the primary editorialist for the *Daily American*, Florida's first African American daily newspaper (it folded in 1896); in 1897, he began writing songs with his brother, Rosamond, including, in 1900, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." From 1902 to 1906, he was the primary lyricist for the Broadway songwriting trio Cole and Johnson Brothers, along with Rosamond and Bob Cole; the group would produce a number of hits during this period. Johnson's verse, likewise, appeared in venues such as *The Century* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. His verse of this period, as Timo Müller notes, operated within the formal norms of genteel poetry while attempting to assert race as valid, serious subject matter ("James Weldon Johnson and the Genteel Tradition," *Arizona Quarterly* 69.2 [2013]: 85-102). Had he written nothing further, this alone would mark Johnson as one of the "'lost' predecessors" of modernist poetry who, in John Timberman Newcomb's words, "first broke the ground, struggling to use verse to articulate the ambiguous meanings of their own modernity" (*Would Poetry Disappear?* xv-xvi). Newcomb's book offers an overview of the interplay between genteel, popular, and modernist verse in the years preceding 1910.

staff.[34] It was then reprinted in Johnson's anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), and, in 1925, as a central, transformative work in Alain Locke's movement-consolidating anthology, *The New Negro*, in which it figures as the longest individual poem, arranged so that it is the first free-verse poem to appear, marking a break with the old making way for the poems of Langston Hughes that immediately follow it. From its first publications, "The Creation," like the poems Johnson would develop from it for *God's Trombones*, spoke to members of multiple audiences: the New Verse as well as the New Negro Renaissance. The 1927 publication of *God's Trombones* marked an attempt, as I will argue, to speak not within the confines of different audiences, but to their members simultaneously and as one. The volume itself was brought out by Viking in an expensively produced, elegantly designed edition meant at once to be a prestigious mantelpiece item and a guide to public readings and performance.[35] Yet, it is through the formal construction of the voice of the African American preacher and the poems themselves, even more than the physical text, that Johnson constructs a congregation of readers.

In "The Creation" and *God's Trombones*, the thematically-unified collection of "Negro Sermons in Verse" he developed from it over the course of the 1920s, Johnson links the rhythms of ragtime and jazz, the King James Bible, and the voice of "the old time Negro preacher" ("Preface" 839). In doing so, he draws on the under-explored tradition of what Marcellus

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[34] Other early contributors to this journal included William Carlos Williams, Witter Bynner, and Leonora Speyer, winner of the 1927 Pulitzer Prize. George Hutchinson reads *The Freeman* against *The Dial* as the two competing progeny of *The Seven Arts*. While *The Dial* placed more emphasis on—and became far more influential in—promoting *The Seven Arts*' literary/cultural agenda, it also "became unabashedly highbrow and emphasized that American writers worked 'in the same *milieu* and in the same tradition of letters as the Europeans,' that 'we are all in the Western-civilized-Christian-American tradition'" (117). The *Freeman*, with its name purchased from an African American paper in Indianapolis, was its socialist/progressive, anti-imperialist alternative, in possession of a worldview in much closer alignment with that of the publications of the New Negro movement.

[35] Speaking of both *God's Trombones* and *St. Peter Relates an Incident*, Caroline Goeser notes that "with such high production values, the books' visual appearance carried as much weight as their texts, an attribute that won Viking distinctive awards and unusual critical attention" (141-2). The prestige of the press was part of the strategic accrual of cultural capital which Nowlin describes as a central part of Johnson's literary agenda and quest to develop "a 'normal' African American literature" (504; see also 514-5).

Blount, writing in 1992, identifies as the "preacherly text."[36] The key figure in this tradition for Blount (as for Johnson) is Paul Laurence Dunbar—or, more precisely, the speaker in his poem, "An Ante-Bellum Sermon." By necessity double-voiced and subversive, the speaker "pretends to consign his sermon to the task of biblical exegesis to dupe those listeners who might be threatened by his real text"—that is, the coming of freedom to the South's slaves.[37] Although he deceives the slaveowners, he does not, as a figure from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s account of the African American "speakerly" text might, "signify on" them. Instead, Blount writes, these "double and antagonistic voices allow him the freedom to console his black listeners and discerning whites."[38] In their literary representations, these so-called "traditional" sermons become both allusive and meta-linguistic, relying on the listener's/reader's knowledge of external texts and meditating on the inadequacy of their own language.

Johnson adapts these conventions to offer more than consolation and deception. Like Dunbar's, his preacher has a sense of humor—but the community this preacher asserts is even more expansive, including even those whites who, in Dunbar's poem, don't get the joke or subtext. The images, references, and narratives his preacher references are largely those of the typological discourse of American sermons, rhetoric, and literature.[39] This is, in part, because by the time Johnson wrote, to employ a preacherly voice was to engage in a project of recovery. The preacher who is expected to deploy these typological referents, whose presence looms over the works of Hawthorne and Melville, and within the scholarship of Sacvan Bercovitch, James Darsey, and Tracy Fessenden, is white, male, New Englander, a Puritan presiding over the

[36] "The Preacherly Text: African American Poetry and Vernacular Performance." *PMLA* 107.3 (1992): 582-93. In the more than twenty years since Blount's article appeared, scholarship's engagement with his reading has been conspicuously absent.
[37] Blount 589.
[38] Blount 589.
[39] See Introduction, pp. 15-20.

foundations of American citizenship. The African American plantation preacher, on the other hand, was by popular association in the early twentieth century a comic figure (precisely the expectation which, in Blount's reading, Dunbar's "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" manipulates). Indeed, in a 1931 address at Fisk University, Johnson noted that the negative associations with this figure were so strong that he received letters from editors of African American newspapers asking him not to publish *God's Trombones*, for fear that it would only reinforce stereotypes.[40]

Johnson's track record, were it better known at the time, would not have assuaged these worries. Although his "Preface" to *God's Trombones* describes the plantation preacher as "generally a man far above the average in intelligence . . . not infrequently, a man of positive genius" (836) and singles out as the most famous of these folk geniuses John Jasper (1812-1901), to whose Richmond, Virginia church "[t]housands of people, white and black, flocked" (834), in Johnson's early career, Jasper was not always such a genius. In *Aunt Mandy's Chicken Dinner*, a film scenario he sold to Lubin Productions in the summer of 1914, the title character has invited a Reverend Jasper Jones for supper, precipitating the chicken-theft plotline that earns the film the full weight of its subtitle: "A Darkey Comedy."[41] Reverend Jones himself is composed entirely of "comic" stereotypes: dressed in an old, shabby suit, he thinks himself a dandy but merely looks ridiculous; he fantasizes gluttonously about the meal to come; he drinks whiskey from a

[40] "Convention—and the Negro in American Fiction," Fisk University, May 7, 1931 (JWJ Papers, Box 76, Folder 490). In his introductory remarks to a 1929 reading of *God's Trombones* at the Institute of Pacific Relations, he further notes that he deliberately chose "not to paint the oldtime [*sic*] preacher in his external comic aspects" (JWJ Papers, Box 77, Folder 513).

[41] When Johnson returned from the consular service in 1914, he found that Jacksonville had become a boomtown for the nascent motion picture business. Excited, perhaps, by the possibilities of this new form, "I thought to make a try at this new art field" (*Along* 461). Johnson sold three scenarios: *Aunt Mandy's Chicken Dinner* (June 25, 1914), *Do You Believe in Ghosts?* (July 9) and either *The Black Billionaire* or the frankly repellant *Why Don't You Get a Lady of Your Own?*, which, in presenting the African American male as at once violently sexual and sexually violent, incorporates every stereotype Johnson's criticism would later rail against. Johnson's first biographer, Eugene Levy, glosses over this period in his career, as did Johnson himself, writing in his autobiography only that, "We saw the exhibition of the first picture," Johnson wrote, "and were so disappointed in it that we were actually ashamed to see the others" (*Along* 461). Nonetheless, this little-remarked nadir of his career survives in the lacunae, a negative against which he pushed in his career as poet, mentor to and promoter of younger New Negro writers, newspaper editorialist, and Secretary of the NAACP.

hidden bottle; and, in the concluding scene, attempts to fight Mandy's husband Mose with his umbrella, only to be chased away as the title-character swats at him with a broom.[42]

Johnson returned specifically to this figure from the nadir of his career as he worked on *God's Trombones*. A discarded "Introductory Poem" titled "The Reverend Jasper Jones" sets out, quite literally, to transform Jones from the figure Johnson had presented in *Aunt Mandy's Kitchen Dinner* into the dignified man of genius he would describe in the volume's preface. (Indeed, in a note to W. E. B. Du Bois, Johnson acknowledged that, "I originally intended to use [the poem] as a sort of preface to the sermons.")[43] In its final version, this poem enacts the metamorphosis which the collection itself seeks to effect. As it begins, Jones is still the comic grotesque: "A man of medium height but massive bones. / A ponderous head, a brow both wide and full" to which "Add on short arms, bow legs and ample feet."[44] But as the poem describes the cadences of his sermon (the details resemble those given in the final "Preface," but in pentameter couplets), it transforms the reader's opinion of him: "in spite of self, you fell / Under the primal magic of his spell" as "He roused in you emotions at his will," building toward the conclusion that no one could "dare belittle Jasper's place" and an invitation that the reader, in the following poems, "Hear for yourself the Reverend Jasper preach." The effect, in sum, is that "You thought him more the seer and less the clown."[45] Directly addressing his audience, this preacher's challenge cannot be mistaken for entertainment. He calls on the reader, no matter their religion or race, to imagine herself a member of this church congregation. The poems themselves come to speak as the preacher—not double-voiced, like Dunbar's, but calling out the

[42] TS synopsis in JWJ Papers, Box 74, Folder 436.
[43] JWJ Papers, Box 60, Folder 217 ("Memo – J.W.J. – W.E.B. DuB.").
[44] Lines from this poem are taken, unless otherwise noted, from the final, clean TS, c. 1927-8, JWJ Papers, Box 60, Folder 217.
[45] An earlier draft of the poem reads, "You wondered whether he were seer or clown," pointing toward a slightly more nuanced view of this poem's function: to plant doubts about stereotypes in the reader's mind, which would then be completely dissolved once they had "heard" him preach for themselves. (Original TS with author revisions in JWJ Papers, Box 60, Folder 217.)

readers as members of a shared community, like the mixed congregation of John Jasper's church Johnson describes in the published "Preface".

With this total rejection of a comic preacher, Johnson transforms the community created by the preacherly text by transforming its voice. Blount describes the way in which Dunbar's preacher "hides his real message under the guise of what is acceptable"—comic dialect, biblical exegesis—in order "to dupe those listeners who might be threatened by his real text."[46] Johnson's model, by contrast, is not the preacher forced by circumstance to speak in code, deliberately obscuring the meaning from a portion of those who might be present to hear, but the preacher whose eloquence drew in and created a multiracial congregation. His preacher accomplishes this by speaking in a voice unmarked by eye dialect, in a "high," literary register that nonetheless retains, according to Johnson, a vernacular cadence. As he explains in the "Preface":

> The old-time Negro preachers, though they actually used dialect in their ordinary intercourse, stepped out from its narrow confines when they preached. They were all saturated with the sublime phraseology of the Hebrew prophets and steeped in the idioms of King James English, so when they preached and warmed to their work they spoke another language, a language far removed from traditional Negro dialect. It was really a fusion of Negro idioms with Bible English; and in this there may have been, after all, some kinship with the innate grandiloquence of their old African tongues. To place in the mouths of the talented old-time Negro preachers a language that is a literary imitation of Mississippi cotton-field dialect is sheer burlesque. (839)

This literary register, importantly, is not identical with "standard" or "literary" American English, indistinguishable from that of educated white Americans—though it is, by implication, *equal* to them. Like Louis Zukofsky's prophetic "jargon" (discussed in the following chapter), Johnson describes a literary register that draws on both English literary heritage—the King James Bible—and that of another people and language, the "old African tongues." Whether this last point is accurate does not, in the end, matter as much as Johnson's framing of the preacher's

[46] Blount 589.

speech as an *alternative* register of literary American English, one which cannot be dismissed as mere mimicry of the cultural referents of white Americans—its roots, he claims, extend to Africa, well before the ancestors of black Americans had met (and been enslaved by) the ancestors of their white fellow-citizens.

Johnson establishes this alternate register and multiethnic fusion of literary patrimonies through practices now associated with modernist documentary poetics. He recombines documentary fragments: "the sublime phraseology of the Hebrew prophets," "the idioms of King James English," "Negro idioms," "the innate grandiloquence of their old African tongues." Just as Ezra Pound's documentary methods function by producing form from fragments (or, re-establishing the possibility of form in a fragmented culture), Johnson's poem fuses these idioms, rhythms, and images in order to create the "form" of the preacher's sermon. Like later documentary writers, Johnson's verse is informed by modern technologies of documentation. Yet, in place of mimetic recordings, as with John Dos Passos' newsreel, Muriel Rukeyser's newspaper and Senate hearing transcripts, or Zora Neale Hurston's tape recorder, he turns to that with which he was most familiar and documents following the methods of the sheet music industry. Rhythm, therefore, is as central to his documentary mode as to Pound's—but where Pound's partakes in the racialist and nationalist theories of rhythm that permeated modernist culture and modernist poetics, Johnson's rhythms work to subvert them. [47] He draws on the qualities of ragtime brass instruments when incorporating the rhythms of the King James Bible—

[47] Michael Golston's *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (2008) makes a compelling case not only for the preponderance of "[t]heories of rhythm as blood- and race-based, as stimulated by environmental factors, as integral to a 'primitive' layer of the world that Modenrism seeks to make available, and as 'a subconconscious possession'" during the first decades of the twentieth century, but that they also "were all part of the discussion involving what it meant to write Modernist poetry" (58). He further identifies a rhythmical "politics of form" as a major structuring factor in Pound's *Cantos* (63ff).

that is, of the touchstone of literary American English in particular.[48] At the same time he draws on the rhythms of the King James Bible when incorporating the qualities of ragtime trombones. Johnson twines the "folk" or "vernacular" forms of sermon, ragtime, and song into a "modern" art by deriving the vernacular from the high, the high from the vernacular.

Johnson creates the sound of an African American vernacular by scoring the preacher's language to the rhythms of the King James Bible. While he highlights repetition and syncopation as decidedly vernacular qualities in his "Preface," these are in fact precisely the formal qualities through which the KJV most clearly emerges. In the King James Version of Genesis 1, for instance, every verse except the first begins with the word "And"—in particular, the formulation "And God [+ verb]." In "The Creation," the "vernacular" repetition of Johnson's preacher follows the same syntactic patterns as the KJV's parataxis: of the first thirty-three lines (five stanzas), seventeen begin with "And," while four more begin with the syntactically and aurally comparable "Then"; eight of these instances are "And/Then God [+ verb]."

Syncopation is even more central than syntax or repetition. Johnson orients his preface's discussion of poetic technique around this concept:

> The tempos of the preacher I have endeavored to indicate by the line arrangement of the poems, and a certain sort of pause that is marked by a quick intaking and an audible expulsion of the breath I have indicated by dashes. There is a decided syncopation of speech—the crowding in of many syllables or the lengthening out of a few to fill one metrical foot . . . The rhythmical stress of this syncopation is partly obtained by a marked silent fraction of a beat; frequently this silent fraction is filled in by a hand clap. (840)

Syncopation involves not only the variation of long and short lines, but of stressed syllables and play on traditional meter within and across those lines. For example, the first two lines, "And

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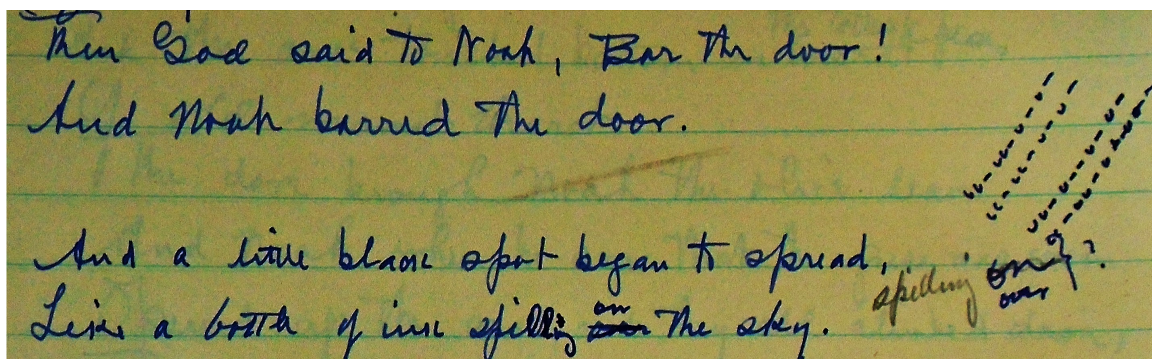
[48] Robert Alter has explored the influence and role of the Bible—the King James in particular—within American literature. In *Canon and Creativity* (2000), he argues that the KJV has received a "double canonicity," both religious and literary, taking the latter as his subject. *Pen of Iron* (2010) explores both the influence and afterlife of the KJV on American prose style, arguing that "the language of the Bible remains an ineluctable framework for verbal culture in this country" (3).

God stepped out on space, / And he looked around and said:" can be read as iambic trimeter. (It isn't, of course. The phrase "stepped out"—and audio recordings bear this out—should be read as a spondee, not an iamb, while the anapestic foot "And he looked" is, as we'll see shortly, a key to Johnson's syncopation and prosodic scoring.) The next two lines, God's speech, "I'm lonely— / I'll make me a world," break completely with iambs and traditional verse length, establishing the heavily-stressed quality of God's speech in "The Creation."

The beginning of the next stanza, however, appears to return to "standard" prosody: "And as far as the eye of God could see / Darkness covered everything." One could, if desirous, read them as iambic and trochaic pentameter (or, a little more messily, tetrameter), respectively. There is even the slant rhyme of "God could see" / "everything." And again, lines three and four break wildly from traditional meter: "Blacker than a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp." It's not simply the frequency of stresses in a line—there's actually a slight *decrease*, from 5/10 and 4/7 to 4/8 and 3/6—but their arrangement. Johnson runs long strings of unstressed syllables together before hitting a series of stressed words and, in the process, throwing an ear that has been prepared—both by training and by the poem itself—to read or listen for meter measured in conventional, iambic feet off into the variations of jazz trombones.

These are also the prosodic qualities of the creation as narrated by the King James Bible. Take its very first sentence: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Scanning prose, of course, is capricious, but the KJV's creation story actually scans remarkably well, even though the first stress does not come until the fourth syllable ("be*ginn*ing"). If these four syllables are marked off as a single foot—a fourth paeon (three unstressed syllables followed by a stress)—then the rest fall neatly into place: two iambs follow, then an anapest, and, to close the verse, another fourth paeon. If the reader listens for iambs, the result is something quite like the

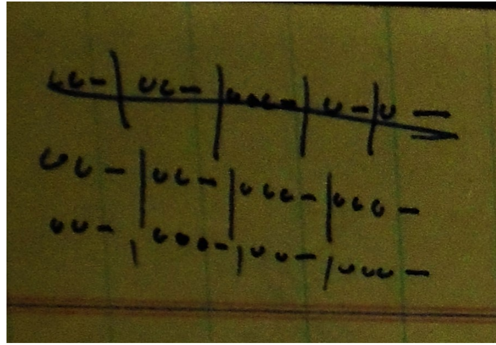
variations of Johnson's preacher. And if we further think of anapests and fourth paeons as variations on the iamb—as contemporary prosody sometimes asks us to think of trochees, spondees, and pyrrhics—then we find that such variations are embedded in the very parataxis which defines both the King James account and Johnson's: Genesis 1:2 begins "And the earth," an anapestic sentence-opening which recurs mid-verse throughout Genesis 1 and frequently at the beginning of verses in "The Creation."[49] (Something similar occurs as the preacher is transformed and dignified in "Jasper Jones": steadily iambic lines begin to end on phrases—e.g., "of his spell," "at his will"—that can be read as anapests.) Even the opening phrase "And God [+ verb]" can be read trisyllabically, as a bacchius (an unstressed syllable followed by two stressed): the point being that while "And God," as a phrase, is an iamb, "And God [+ verb]," as a *formula*, can be read or heard as a variation on the iambic "standard." Even the distinctively stressed speech of Johnson's God is present in the KJV. Genesis 1:3 presents the first instance of divine speech—"And God said, Let there be light: and there was light"—four stressed words framed in iambs (or six consecutive stresses framed by iambs, if "God said" is also counted). And, as Johnson's manuscript drafts reveal, he wrote with precisely these prosodic qualities in mind:


Then God said to Noah, Bar the door!
And Noah barred the door.

And a little black spot began to spread,
Like a bottle of ink spilling on the sky.

[Illustration 2: Johnson's scansion calling for lines of varying anapests and iambs on a draft of "Noah Built That Ark" (JWJ Collection, Box 60, Folder 212).]

[49] For example, three of five lines in the third stanza: "And the light," "And the darkness," "And the light." And so on throughout the poem.



[Illustration 3: Johnson's marginal scansion delineating lines composed of iambs, anapests, and fourth paeons on a draft of "Let My People Go" (JWJ Collection, Box 60, Folder 215).]

As Adelaide Morris notes in her entry on documentary poetics in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the category "is less a systematic theory or doctrine of a kind of poetry than an array of strategies and techniques" (372). *God's Trombones* represents one of these techniques—a practice of documenting and reproducing sound without recourse to emerging technologies of recording. Set alongside Johnson's career as a songwriter, his steady income from the sale of sheet music, and the projects that represent the bulk of his literary work of the 1920s, *God's Trombones* appears rather remarkably at home within Johnson's longstanding engagement with sheet music. Indeed, in his major literary enterprises of the 1920s, at which he labored at the same time he wrote *God's Trombones*, Johnson and his brother Rosamond produced the two *Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1925, 1931), in which they documented African American folk tradition and its cultural productions by, quite literally, editing, arranging, and scoring the texts in a volume that anthologized spirituals as sheet music with a scholarly introduction and notes.[50] Unlike the contemporaneous exploration of the form among the Anglo-American avant-garde, Johnson's documentary poetics are not fragmentary, insofar as his "original poetic voice" appears "almost totally subsumed by the sources from

[50] The third major anthology of this period—the *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922)—was likewise an endeavor in documenting African American literary and cultural productions by collecting, editing, and arranging texts.

which he worked": that is, the remembered documents of traditional sermons from his youth, the prosody (such as it is) of the King James Bible, and the phrases of idiomatic vernacular he includes.[51] In this, Johnson prefigures the later documentary style of Pound's Adams Cantos or Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, in which the poet is most present as an editor or arranger.

This perhaps unexpected alignment with the documentary poetics of high modernism also extends to the use of poetic form and technique (the scoring of the preacher to the rhythms of the KJV) rather than visual or auditory recording technologies in *God's Trombones*. Johnson makes no attempt to produce a mimetic record of African American folk culture, performance, or vernacular speech—a decision for which scholarship has criticized and, at times, condemned him.[52] Instead, David Ten Eyck's recent assessment of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* offers an apt description of Johnson's poems, which seek less to record than to "memorialise past occurrences in such a way as to give them a material form and, in so doing . . . reveal the ideas or concepts that cling to the form and that remain meaningful and useful in the present" (Ten Eyck 38). The idea of such documentary memorialization allows us to see how Johnson's documentary practice develops in continuity with the commemorative verse of earlier works such as "Fifty Years." While, by the 1910s and 1920s, commemorative verse would be seen as an ossified, outmoded form by modernism and the New Verse, in the middle of the 19th century, as Edward Keyes Whitley observes, commemorative verse offered an alternative form to poets dissatisfied with the

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[51] The quoted phrases are from David Ten Eyck's discussion of Pound's documentary practices in *Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos* (35). They refer to the change in Pound's documentary method from the early Malatesta Cantos, in which historical documents are framed by lyric and narrative verse, and the Adams Cantos, in which the documentary source serves as the poem to the exclusion of other modes or voices. I draw on Ten Eyck's words to note both the similarity and dissimilarity between Johnson's and Pound's practices. For Johnson, the conventions of 19th century forms, such as commemorative verse and the dramatic monologue, lead him to give the whole of his poem over to the remembered and reconstructed document: that is, the preacher's sermon.

[52] He "'translated' from the vernacular into standard English," writes Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (*Signifying Monkey* 251, scare-quotes his), while Eric Sundquist calls out *God's Trombones* for the absence of "dialectal invention" and of "the black folk voice" (*Hammers of Creation* 63). Both argue that because Johnson does not attempt to write a vernacular poetry that mimetically documents African American dialect, its use of standard orthography subordinates vernacular to standard, rather than affirming their equality.

limited possibilities of lyric address—particularly to racial, religious, and class outsiders. Instead of a lyric "posture of solitary isolation . . . commemorative poetry is instead characterized by direct address to an audience whose presence looms large in the poet's mind" (16).

Johnson's documentary poetry, this is to say, represents not an act of simple recording or reproduction, but of memorialization and commemoration. The occasion of "The Creation" and the other poems in *God's Trombones*, rather than the historically concrete commemoration of specific events or figures, is the nonetheless real, recurrent, and temporally-bound event of the Sunday sermon. Yet these poems function not merely to commemorate, memorialize, and document the event but also—and more importantly—the congregational community that the event created and recreated each week. Both the published prefatory poem, "Listen, Lord" and the unpublished "The Reverend Jasper Jones," with its second-person address and description of inward transformation cast the reader into the role of congregant. The poem directly addresses its readers not in isolation, but as members of a shared community—and, as we have seen, this occurs *regardless of the reader's race*. Drawing white readers into an African American church as congregants, Johnson binds them all under the terms of a shared covenant, at once expanding the breadth and sharpening the implicit threat that recurs within the typological language and rhetoric of American civil religious discourse—of, for instance, the Puritan jeremiad. "A nation under covenant," writes Gorski, "is not a nation under contract, but a nation *under judgment*. And the role of the prophet is to remind the nation of this, to preach an ethos of contrition and humility on the one hand, and to inspire acts of charity and justice on the other" (128). This reminder is part and parcel of the memorialization, the commemoration, the documentation at the heart of Johnson's poems. So, his preacher reminds the members of his congregation, creating it

out of the volume's readers as he does so, the United States is not the Promised Land and Americans are not the Chosen People, but "proud and dying sinners / Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell" ("Listen, Lord" 841).

III. The Congregation and the Mob

As we have seen, Johnson's supposedly "vernacular" sermons and the King James Bible's paradigmatically "literary" language draw on the same prosodic and rhythmic qualities. Although a "blind" test of scansion would leave them more or less indistinguishable, both popular opinion and literary convention would racially mark each text. "[W]hite audiences," as Ben Glaser observes, "had ideologically constructed expectations for black rhythms."[53] *God's Trombones* confronts those audiences with texts that are simultaneously and equally "literary" and "vernacular"—in which, indeed, the two terms are indistinguishable. The period's pseudo-science of race-specific vernaculars and rhythms do not hold water. Johnson insists instead upon the recognition of a variety of registers of African American English and "literary" English, thereby presenting a cultural-pluralist challenge to the period's bifurcation of "standard" English from a hodge-podge of supposedly debased and sometimes dangerous vernaculars. With a plurality of high registers that draw on particular cultural histories but also share literary heritage and form, each "high" or "literary" English can also be considered a vernacular voice, where we understand "vernacular" not as representing the tropes of dialect speech, but the historically contingent yet inevitable influence of the particular linguistic background of a given speaker on

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[53] Glaser's "Folk Iambics: Prosody, Vestiges, and Sterling Brown's *Outline for the Study of the Poetry of American Negroes*" (*PMLA* 129.3 [2014], 417-34) attends to Brown's poetry and critical writings (as well as his correspondence with Johnson) in order to show how they reveal Brown's "refus[al]" of the "demand for definitively raced folk form" (430); "rhythm, despite its 'dusky' appearances, is not raced until its audience marks it so" (418). Relevant to the present discussion, he observes that "Brown, counterintuitively, treats iambic pentameter as a vernacular African American form" (428).

his or her own speech. This would be equally true for Theodore Roosevelt (born in New York City), for Woodrow Wilson (born in Virginia), or for James Weldon Johnson. In this way, African Americans (but potentially any cultural or linguistic minority) can retain their own vernacular distinctiveness—asserting the presence and value of their own cultural contributions—while insisting that they be heard as full members of an American cultural congregation.

The development of the preacher's voice is not the only place, however, where Johnson's poems draw on documentary practices to establish a covenantal poetics. Documentary is equally important to the *what* of the preacher's direct address to his congregation, outlining, commemorating, and documenting a covenant that is cast as the congregation's governing law. The primary focus of each poem (each "sermon") in the collection is, ultimately, the ethics of community, telling stories of those who either enact or fall away from a governing covenant. Ultimately, Johnson's preacher depicts two alternatives for community and/or civic life: on the one hand, there is the congregation, a community governed by a shared law—what we might think of as a covenant. On the other hand, there is the mob, the dangerous, impulsive, and violent grouping of people governed not by law, but by passions. In this, the voice of Johnson's preacher is largely in agreement with the one sentence summation of the covenantal ethics given in Charles Reznikoff's "Israel," discussed in Chapter 4: "You are not to do each what is right in his own eyes" (*Complete Poems* 73). (Both poets, perhaps not coincidentally, trained as attorneys.)

This focus on a covenant may seem obvious. The stories Johnson's preacher tells in his sermons are Bible stories, after all. Johnson, though, was openly agnostic and secular from his college years forward; *God's Trombones* concerns itself with Biblical and Christian concepts of

covenant because they provide a typological model for the United States—one already in long use, culturally and rhetorically pervasive, and therefore deeply resonant. This is where documentary poetics once again take on a central, prominent role. *God's Trombones* regularly interpolates the images, themes, and phrases of both Johnson's earlier writings and of individual poems within the volume. This practice establishes a field of referents that allows the work to directly address its readers, both white and black, about the contemporary racial politics (and violence) of the United States. In many ways, it also casts the preacher as a deft modernist skilled in the source-based poetics of an increasingly allusive modernist scene.[54]

Noelle Morrissette, seeking to understand the interrelation of Johnson's various prefaces (to both his own works and those of others), observes his use of prose interpolation coming to a head between 1917 and 1927, during his work on the first and second *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, and a reissued *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, his 1912 novel. Within this "simultaneity of composition," she concludes, "Johnson's repetitions create a field of referentiality that significantly alters any understanding of these works as discrete entities" (119). Rather, "[e]ach work presents a reverberating continuum between author and artist, art and audience, enhancing Johnson's simultaneous composition practice" (124). What she terms a "theory of vernacular transcription" (124) should sound familiar: at the same time that Johnson was at work on poems that orchestrate the voice of the African American preacher to the rhythmic score of the King James Bible, he writes the "scores"

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[54] Johnson kept abreast of developments in the modernist avant-garde, reading Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Stein—and sending the latter a copy of *God's Trombones*. (This gift is noted in an undated letter from Stein [Box 20, Folder 459] and in a 1/20/35 letter from Johnson to Carl Van Vechten [Box 21, Folder 502]. Immediately after its U.S. embargo was lifted, Johnson ordered a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* [Box 4, Folder 58]). "Source-based poetics" is among the ways Ten Eyck describes Pound's documentary technique, though it would seem (usefully) to be somewhat broader in scope (33).

of new works, we might say, by drawing on the content, phrases, language, and ideas of his older works.

With this interpolation, this transcription, this orchestration of new text to prior document, Johnson develops a documentary technique associated with the burgeoning collage aesthetics of the modernist avant-garde that is, in fact, indebted to the supposedly passé and racially-determined forms of turn-of-the-century African American verse. Documentary interpolation is not simply a modernist practice. It is also present in the tradition of the African American preacherly text, which operates through double-voiced allusion, relying on the listener's/reader's knowledge of external sources. For a writer like Dunbar, the plantation preacher regularly interpolated, cited, quoted, and inserted other texts into his own sermons, creating a field of referents that, as with Johnson's preacher, allows a biblical story to speak about the present. Likewise, interpolation was characteristic of African American musical forms, particularly ragtime—and including Johnson's work as a lyricist for Cole & Johnson Bros. In this role, he demonstrated a marked predilection for interpolation—as, for example, in the use of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" in the song "Under the Bamboo Tree" (1902). (When, two decades later, T. S. Eliot interpolated "Under the Bamboo Tree" into "Sweeney Agonistes," we call the practice "modernist.")

Interpolation, then, can be understood as another way in which Johnson develops a documentary method from the conventions of both 19th century verse (crucially, one that was racially marked) and sheet music. *God's Trombones* develops its documentary referents by, in effect, sampling the other poems in the collection, Johnson's earlier and contemporaneous writings, and biblical touchstones. So, we might say, the "score" to "The Prodigal Son" is created by referencing and revising both the New Testament parable and *The Autobiography of*

an Ex-Colored Man. Johnson's preacher retells Jesus' fable, alternating between narrative and commentary while reframing it not as a parable of God's love even (especially?) for those who have strayed, but as the story of an individual and a community who have fallen away from the covenant, ultimately offering an image of its recuperation. This Prodigal Son, following the biblical narrative, takes his inheritance early and leaves his father's house, ultimately squandering it in a far-off city. Although a passer-by insists, "Don't you know? / This is Babylon, Babylon, / That great city of Babylon" (846), both Johnson's language and, especially, the Aaron Douglas woodcut that accompanies it in print make it clear that this "Babylon" is really New York City—and, to be even more precise, its nightclub scene from the early decades of the twentieth century. In the center of the image, the silhouettes of a man flanked by two women, all dressed in the style of the period, dance together beneath a ceiling lamp. Around the edges, a bottle of gin, trombones, a dollar bill, playing cards, and dice frame the scene. These woodcuts, reproduced in contemporaneous reviews and subsequent editions, also operate as part of the collection's documentary composite:

[Illustration 4: "The Prodigal Son"—Aaron Douglas woodcut illustration of Johnson's poem]

From the perspective of the reader, this Babylon is not characterized as the quintessential land of exile—it is, after all, the city Johnson proclaimed his spiritual hometown—but as the paradigm for a community that has fallen away from a kind of civic covenant. Such is certainly the case when this iteration of the Prodigal Son leaves his family home and comes to the nightclubs of New York's Tenderloin district. There, he falls into sin—drinking, gambling,

whoring—but, even more importantly, those around him not only make no effort to help him, but, as a nameless mass—a mob—take advantage of him:

> And he spent his days in the drinking dens,
> Swallowing the fires of hell.
> And he spent his nights in the gambling dens,
> Throwing dice with the devil for his soul.
> …
> And he wasted his substance in riotous living,
> In the evening, in the black and dark of night,
> With the sweet-sinning women of Babylon.
> And they stripped him of his money,
> And they stripped him of his clothes,
> And they left him broke and ragged
> In the streets of Babylon. (847*)*

This is a scene that could be drawn from the novel—indeed, it appears to have been. Johnson's Ex-Colored Man, like this Prodigal Son, departs his family home and, arriving in the nightclubs of the Tenderloin district, spends time among the same "Brass bands and string bands a-playing" ("Prodigal Son" 846) as he becomes a talented ragtime pianist.

Moreover, the novel's gambling den scene follows the same progression. Shortly after his arrival in New York, the Ex-Colored Man is guided by a new acquaintance to a gambling hall, and eventually to the upstairs high-roller room, where, playing craps for the first time, he wins two hundred dollars. On his way out, however, he notices a set of men begging for money to re-enter the game and wearing nothing but

> linen dusters, and as I looked about I noticed that there were perhaps a dozen men in the room similarly clad. . . . [My companion] told me that men who had lost all the money and jewelry they possessed, frequently, in an effort to recoup their losses, would gamble away all their outer clothing and even their shoes; and that the proprietor kept on hand a supply of linen dusters for all who were so unfortunate. . . . [S]ometimes a fellow would become almost completely dressed and then, by a turn of the dice, would be thrown back into a state of semi-nakedness. Some of them were virtually prisoners and unable to get into the streets for days at a time (*Autobiography* 60).

In the period before his career as a ragtime pianist, the Ex-Colored Man attempts to make a living at gambling and concedes that "I passed through all the states and conditions that a gambler is heir to. Some days found me able to peel ten and twenty dollar bills from a roll, and others found me clad in a linen duster and carpet slippers" (70). The primary difference is a difference of emphasis: in the novel's gambling scene, the gamblers themselves are responsible for the loss of their clothes and money. In the preacher's tale, the Prodigal Son loses money in the gambling halls—but "*they* stripped him of his money, / And *they* stripped him of his clothes, / And *they* left him broke and ragged / In the streets of Babylon" ("Prodigal Son" 847, emphasis mine). Here, the sin is communal, not individual.

This is not to say that there is no falling away from covenant in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; indeed, the novel's final line directs us to precisely the concept of the individual's rejection of the covenantal community for the satisfaction of individual desire. Having made the choice to abandon his people, the narrator "cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (127). He suspects that he is an Esau—Jacob's slightly older twin who, famished from a day of hunting, is desperate enough for Jacob's pot of lentil stew that he agrees to sell his birthright, the inheritance of the covenant of Abraham, for it. The interpolation of the *Autobiography* into "The Prodigal Son" allows readers, moreover, to see the story of Esau as another version of the Prodigal Son's, casting this parable within the context of the creation or falling away from covenantal community or congregation. The Ex-Colored Man is a Prodigal Son who does not return home: having identified African American folk art as his truest inheritance, he forsakes the projects of collecting spirituals and of transforming them into an opera after witnessing a

lynching in the South. Instead, for the sake of his children's safety and prosperity, the new widower chooses to live as a white man, a role in which he has always been able to pass.

Through documentary interpolation, Johnson establishes that "The Prodigal Son"—both the poem and the biblical text—is not a parable of divine love, but of how communities are established, broken, and, potentially, repaired. Here, too, the presence of the *Autobiography* sharpens Johnson's (and the preacher's) imagery. For we might read the Ex-Colored Man, on another level as a son who *does* return. His father is a white man; by entering white society, he has, in a way, come back to his father's house. He does not, on this reading, sell his birthright, but announces, like Johnson's Prodigal Son, "I will arise and go to my father" (848). But this return fails. In a Paris theatre, he realizes that he is sitting beside his father and a woman who must be his half-sister. "I knew I could not speak," he narrates, "but I would have given a part of my life to touch her hand with mine and call her sister" (*Autobiography* 82). But he does not even try: his father does not, like the Prodigal Son's, plead "with tears in his eyes" (846) for his return; he doesn't even recognize him. So, in silence, the Ex-Colored Man realizes any reunification with his father and his father's family is impossible: "What should I say to him? What would he say to me?" (81-2).

On such a reading, covenantal community is broken not by the Ex-Colored Man's decision to permanently pass, but, repeatedly, by his white father, who cannot (or will not) recognize the small birthright he has given his son: a gold coin the Ex-Colored Man wears on a chain around his neck. Even this, the physical symbol and reminder of their connection, has been damaged from the start, when, as a child, the Ex-Colored Man "sat upon his knee, and watched him laboriously drill a hole through a ten-dollar gold piece, and then tie the coin around my neck with a string. I have worn that gold piece around my neck the greater part of my life,

and still possess it, but more than once I have wished that some other way had been found of attaching it to me besides putting a hole through it" (6). In the New Testament parable, the son wastes an inheritance he does not value; here, the (white) father first damages and devalues and then does not acknowledge an inheritance which the (black) son nonetheless attempts to prize. This is, in many ways, Johnson's "Dilemma of the Negro Artist" recast in the language and imagery of biblical typology, a parable of the United States, concluding with a permanently broken covenant and a country in which the contributions of African Americans to American culture will never be acknowledged. Unrecognized, he abandons his duties to African American folk arts and, passing, renders both himself and whatever contributions he might someday make unrecognizable.

This is the scenario which Johnson's interpolation of his novel into "The Prodigal Son" inserts into the poem, and against which its ending must therefore be read. Here, as in the biblical telling, the father welcomes his son home—placing, as part of this welcome, "a golden chain around his neck" ("Prodigal Son" 848). This image, for the Ex-Colored Man a sign of permanent separation, a physical reminder of his own devaluation, rejection, and isolation, serves in the poem to symbolize reconciliation between the father and the son. He returns home and is welcomed *as himself*—not having permanently rejected his birthright for a mess of pottage, he can now draw on his experiences with dance and ragtime to add to the cultural store of his father's house. No longer, as Johnson puts it in "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," "a beggar at the gate of the nation, waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization" (as he might have been described, broke and in rags outside a gambling hall), "he is the possessor of a wealth of natural endowments and . . . has long been a generous giver to America" (764).

It's fair to ask precisely how Johnson's poem enacts this vision of the covenant restored even while avoiding starry-eyed idealism. (*God's Trombones*, it's worth remembering, was written while Johnson led the NAACP's lobbying efforts to pass anti-lynching legislation on the federal and state levels, and as he supervised legal aid to those arrested for trying to defend themselves from racial violence—work so tireless that doctors eventually forced him to step away, convinced he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and physical collapse. The poet, this is simply to say, was no Pollyanna.) Significantly, the poem does not end like the parable, in which the Prodigal Son's older brother objects to their father's lavish welcome, appealing to a sterner justice. Indeed, Johnson elides this figure, mentioning him only once, as the poem begins:

> A certain man had two sons.
> …
> And Jesus didn't call these sons by name,
> But ev'ry young man,
> Ev'rywhere,
> Is one of these two sons. (845)

The distinction between the sons is introduced only to universalize their experiences and allow them to blur into each other. While there are two sons, each is a potential prodigal, embedding a version of the parable in which the protagonist is *white* alongside the black son of the *Autobiography*. This is at once a call from the preacher to his mixed congregation of readers, to imagine themselves, both white and black, as siblings. Yet it also channels Johnson's earlier lynching poem, "Brothers—American Drama" (1917) which posits "The Victim" and "The Mob" as siblings. This model of broken sibling relations, of a fallen-away covenant, is taken up in another of the poems in *God's Trombones*, "The Crucifixion," in which Johnson turns to the phenomenology of racial violence—a poem that, both citing and cited by "The Prodigal Son," reveals the intratextual interpolation and documentary practices of *God's Trombones*.

"The Crucifixion," Johnson's telling of the death of Jesus, is far from the only use of this trope in the context of early twentieth century American racial oppression and violence. During the 1910s, 20s, and 30s, as Johnson's work at the NAACP put him at the center of the legislative campaign against lynching, literary and visual depictions of Jesus' crucifixion were regularly deployed by African American artists in precisely this context.[55] (They were not alone: the crucifixion was used as a trope for Jewish suffering among Yiddish writers and artists, most notably Marc Chagall; and for labor martyrdom, including, as we will see in Chapter 3, Lola Ridge's poetry.) Yet Johnson's emphasis differs notably from that of his contemporaries. The strongest connection between the violence of the crucifixion and the violence of American lynching is not the innocence, purity, or martyrdom of the victims—Johnson does not, like Langston Hughes or Countee Cullen, craft a "Black Christ." His Jesus remains white; the poem's point is not, as it was in W.E.B. Du Bois' dozen crucifixion tales of the same period, that white Americans are unable to recognize both contemporary black Christs and the biblical Jesus, a dark-complexioned Palestinian Jew. With an interest fixed on the phenomenology of lynching rather than its iconography, Johnson's poem insists that white Americans are, rather, unable to recognize their own participation in either the contemporary mob or the acquiescence of a Pontius Pilate. The crucifixion and American lynchings are analogous because they are both stories of the mob's triumph over the rule of law.

Depictions of lynching throughout Johnson's career, both before and after *God's Trombones*, turn to and explore the psychology of the lynch mob itself. These scenes invariably feature an amorphous white mob as their antagonist: for instance, "Brothers—American Drama," one of his earliest political poems, is structured as a dialogue between "The Victim" and "The

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[55] Goeser 228-43; on Douglas and Johnson, 216-8. See also Gorski's discussion of Du Bois' crucifixion tales, pp. 120-3.

Mob."[56] The man to be lynched, in these works, retains his subjectivity until the end while the consciousnesses of those who have come to kill him are depersonalized and combined into a collective entity: dissolving their selves, they all act and think as one. This is even the case in "A Texas Carnival," an unpublished work in free verse dialect written from the perspective of a member of a lynch mob. In it, the speaker can only recall the previous night's actions through the plural pronoun "we"—never "I."[57] Having thus lost subjectivity, they cannot be confused for a true community. In the lynching scene in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the narrator observes that, in the singular "crowd," "everything was being done in quite an orderly manner" (112). This orderliness is more grammatical than emotional. When the victim is brought forward, a burst of rebel yells indicates "the transformation of human beings into savage beasts" (113)—yet the passive-voice description of their proceedings continues to depict the mob as a single self that knows exactly what it is doing: "A railroad tie was sunk into the ground, the rope was removed and a chain brought and securely coiled around the victim and the stake. . . . Fuel was brought from everywhere, oil, the torch" (113). Johnson's account of his own near-lynching during the Jacksonville fire of 1900 again presents "the group" as a unified actor: "They surge round me. They seize me. They tear my clothes and bruise my body" (*Along* 315). Johnson is saved only when an individual re-surfaces within the mob, regaining his subjectivity not through the act of individual motion, but the recognition of Johnson's subjectivity: the provost marshal, a fellow member of the Florida bar, "breaks through the men" of "the rushing crowd." "We look at each other," Johnson writes, prefiguring, almost image-for-image,

[56] The development of this poem reveals Johnson's interest in the psychology of violence. In early drafts ("The Rapist" and "The Eternal Savage"), his primary concern is sexual rather than racial violence, attempting to debunk justifications of lynching by presenting the reality of sexual violence—that its potential exists in men of *all* races and that African American men cannot be uniquely blamed for it. These early versions of "Brothers" are among drafts of poems included for consideration in *Fifty Years*, which he compiled in/around 1917 (JWJ Papers, Box 59, Folder 195).
[57] A clean, apparently final typescript of this poem can be found in the JWJ Papers, Box 74, Folder 409.

Emmanuel Levinas' discussion of the recognition of the face of the Other as the decision not to murder, "and I feel that a quivering message from intelligence to intelligence has been interchanged." Upon recognizing his fellow attorney, the provost-marshall re-imposes the rule of law, transforming "the howling mob of men" back into "soldiers under discipline" who take Johnson into official custody (from which he will be released without charge) rather than murdering him on the spot.

In "The Crucifixion," Judas is likewise depicted "leading his crucifying mob" (856). As in Johnson's depictions of lynch mobs and in a grammatical echo of the actions of the crowd in "The Prodigal Son," they act and speak in a plural unity:

> But they cried out, saying:
> Crucify him!—
> . . .
> And they beat my loving Jesus,
> They spit on my precious Jesus;
> They dressed him up in a purple robe,
> They put a crown of thorns upon his head,
> And they pressed it down—
> Oh, they pressed it down—
> And they mocked my sweet King Jesus. (857)

Johnson's neutral depiction of Pontius Pilate emphasizes this mob's explicit rejection of the rule of law. He is "the mighty Roman Governor. / Great Pilate seated in his hall, — / Great Pilate on his judgment seat" (857). His authority as a representative of the Roman government goes unquestioned, while his perch upon a "judgment seat" equates him with both the God of "The Judgment Day" and the courthouse authorities of twentieth-century America. His verdict, announced without apparent irony, is that "In this man I find no fault. / I find no fault in him" (857). In contrast to the accounts of the Gospels, the execution that follows is not state-sanctioned: Pilate does not grant his proxy to the crowd and no Roman soldiers oversee it. Indeed, as he watches the mob steal Jesus from his jurisdiction after a verdict of not guilty, Pilate

resembles nothing so much as American legal authorities, self-convinced of their own inability to control or combat lynching. Seizing Jesus, the mob "nail[s] him to the cruel tree," transforming the standard Roman punishment for sedition and rebellion into the actions of a mob working, like those in Johnson's lifetime, from the instruments conveniently at-hand.

Johnson's "Crucifixion" is an account of mob justice, of the moment when the rule of law has broken down, overwhelmed by the mass passion that represents the antithesis of the legal basis for shared community. This is the same measured, attorney's case he relied on as he campaigned for anti-lynching legislation during the 1920s, pointing out, again and again, that if the rule of law is dissolved anywhere, for anyone, it undermines the law's ability to establish civic order for everyone, everywhere. In this way, lynching was distinct from simple murder—only one represented a fundamental threat to the civic order. This is precisely the case Johnson made in his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee during the summer of 1922:

> In lynching, a mob sets itself up in place of the state and acts in place of due processes of law to mete out death as a punishment to a person accused of a crime. It is not only against the act of killing that the federal government seeks to exercise its power through the proposed law, but against the act of the mob in arrogating to itself the functions of the state and substituting its actions for the due processes of law guaranteed by the Constitution to every person accused of crime. In murder, the murderer merely violates the law of the state. In lynching, the mob arrogates to itself the powers of the state and the functions of government. [58]

Lynching, he goes on to say, deploying one of the period's most charged political labels, is not simply murder, but "anarchy" (*Along* 534). Throughout the 1920s, in newspaper accounts, speeches about and against lynching, and in the case he presented while lobbying elected officials, Johnson repeatedly and consistently framed the issue as a question of upholding the rule of law against the rule of passion which threatens to totally overwhelm it.

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[58] Johnson quotes this testimony in his autobiography, *Along This Way* (543-4). His essay, "Lynching—America's National Disgrace" (1924), likewise describes the history of lynching as a particular, racially-driven subset of mob violence; it is, therefore, a question of "the maintenance of order, good government and civilized society" to stamp it out (729).

Lynching, in this account, is not only a matter of racial justice. Its most direct and palpable threat is directed, with violence, toward African Americans. But the disregard for the rule of law it represents, symbolizes, and enacts damages and will ultimately destroy the rule of law as a civic covenant—as a set of obligations, responsibilities, rights, procedures, and regulations that bind individuals together into a community. "The Crucifixion" asks readers to re-evaluate the crucifixion through this framework. Ultimately, it does not call on them to recognize (as in Langston Hughes' powerful poem), Christ in Alabama, but the *mob* in Alabama. The poem makes this connection explicit. As the mob marches Jesus to the top of Calvary, "they laid hold on Simon, / Black Simon, yes, black Simon; / They put the cross on Simon, / And Simon bore the cross" (857). Unsated, at-large, "they" turn toward new victims, actively transferring the cross to his back. Beyond a symbolic transfer of victimhood, this moment helps to clarify the *typological* transfer "The Crucifixion" enacts: within the frameworks of Promised Land, Chosen People, New Jerusalem, City upon a Hill, Light unto the Nations, and so on—the prophetic, typological associations connected with the idea of America since the early colonies—Johnson asserts the place of racial violence in the recurrence of the crucifying mob.

So as the preacher focuses his ire on the mobbing crowd of "The Prodigal Son," he does not merely deliver a sermon, but speak prophetically, asserting his own place in the typological discourse of Americanness. Although the "crowd in Babylon" (847) is not *as* violent (guilty of theft, but not murder), it nonetheless represents the typology of the collapse of community, of the absence of congregation. When the Prodigal Son first reaches Babylon, a passer-by entreats him to "Come on, my friend, and go along with me. / And the young man joined the crowd" (846). The preacher takes this narrative event as an opportunity to turn directly to his audience with a warning:

Young man—
Young man—
You're never lonesome in Babylon.
You can always join a crowd in Babylon.
Young man—
Young man—
You can never be alone in Babylon,
Alone with your Jesus in Babylon.
You can never find a place, a lonesome place,
A lonesome place to go down on your knees,
And talk with your God, in Babylon.
You're always in a crowd in Babylon. (847)

The sin of Babylon, in this telling, is not gambling, corruption, or prostitution: these are merely symptomatic. It is, rather, to relinquish the subjectivity on which covenant depends for the mindless passion that prevents it, the sin of subsuming the individual within the mass and joining the mob. The lonesomeness of which the preacher speaks is not the atomization of the modern city—*that* is precisely the experience of the members of the crowd—but the knowledge of one's own lonely, unique subjectivity—that which precedes true covenantal connection. The mob or crowd not only threatens society with violence, but also offers escape from this necessary lonesomeness. In "a lonesome place," speaking with God on his knees, is where Jesus is first encountered in "The Crucifixion," as he pleads with God in Gethsemane while his companions sleep. Meanwhile, the preacher describes Judas and the mob "Sneaking through the dark of the Garden," where they seize him, interrupting the encounter—with God; with prophecy; with conscience—that is necessary to civic- and self-transformation, to the recognition and reception of the "quivering message from intelligence to intelligence" within the crowd.

Participating in or acquiescing to such a mob is the sin of the white Prodigal Son. As in the New Testament parable, there are two sons in the preacher's sermon—but in place of the older son's ultimately rejected critique of forgiveness and divine love in the Biblical source, the preacher insists that "ev'ry young man, / Ev'rywhere" is a potential Prodigal Son. As we have

seen, the poem offers a variety of messages to different sons, commenting on the cultural potential of African Americans as it addresses a black son, and addressing all with a general critique of the sacrifice of the individual self to mob passions. But it directly calls out a white Prodigal Son for having become one of the crowd, confronting white reader-congregants with their unseemly position in a revised typological discourse. Within the collection's simultaneous field of documentary referents, this is a condemnation for having fallen away from the covenant, from respect for a basic, shared rule of law. As "The Prodigal Son" draws to a close, the preacher once more turns to directly address his audience, again in the language of the crowd:

> Oh-o-oh, sinner,
> When you're mingling with the crowd in Babylon—
> …
> You forget about God, and you laugh at Death.
> …
> But some o' these days, some o' these days,
> You'll have a hand-to-hand struggle with bony Death,
> And Death is bound to win. (848)

The condemnation for joining the crowd—for dissolving the individual conscience and becoming subject to dangerous passions that directly threaten the rule of law and human justice—pivots to the threatening reminder that what they dance with will eventually turn to consume them. Gutting the foundations of civil society will leave nothing in place to offer protection when these passions turn against even white citizens. But there is the possibility of repentance: to "come away from Babylon" and "Fall down on your knees, / And say in your heart: / I will arise and go to my Father" (848).

Johnson's preacher regularly closes by turning to directly address his reader-congregants, addressing them with similar reminders of the consequences of covenantal violations. In "Noah Built the Ark," God destroys the sinful crowd of humanity but promises, in an echo of the

spirituals, "No more will I judge the world by flood— / Next time I'll rain down fire" (855).[59] "Let My People Go" turns directly to "All you sons of Pharaoh" to ask, "Who do you think can hold God's people / When the Lord God himself has said, / Let my people go?" (864).[60] That the preacher regularly challenges and threatens them does not serve to exclude them from the covenantal audience. Quite the opposite is the case. Insofar as these poems are not merely dramatic monologues, but also grow out of the tradition of commemorative verse in which Johnson had been fluent, these moments enact the potential effect which Whitley argues racial, religious, and economic others found in the form during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The poem's audience experiences "a sense of discord as they are forced to admit that the poet who is addressing them does not represent them."[61] Such discord is the fundamental *poetic* prerequisite for fulfilling the typological role of prophet—the ability to condemn the community for falling away from the covenant, and, even while offering them a path of return, threatening them with a vision of the punishment and disaster that follow from not fulfilling its terms.[62]

This willingness to fully and distinctly include white readers within the audience of *God's Trombones*, to directly address and unsettle them, enables the preacher's voice to come to a prophetic crescendo in the volume's final poem, "The Judgment Day." Standing before his congregation, speaking with the vocal technique that the preface to the collection has already described in terms of jazz music and prosody has scored to the King James Bible, the preacher (playing "God's trombones") describes how the angel Gabriel will likewise follow God's

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[59] Here, the document interpolated is "O Mary Don't You Weep," which contains the couplet, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign / no more water, but fire next time." This is the same couplet James Baldwin cites in the title of *The Fire Next Time*.
[60] Here, the source is "Go Down, Moses."
[61] Whitley 16.
[62] "The prophet," writes James Darsey, "is an accuser and judge; he is called into being when the law has been violated, a critical time" (24). This dynamic serves as the foundation from which the rhetorical genre and performance Bercovitch calls an "American jeremiad" emerges, a tradition of calling back those who have fallen away from, or left unfulfilled, the typological promise of the nation. After all, as Gorski reminds us, to be a "New Israel" meant "being 'chosen'–although not for special blessings so much as for special judgment" (38).

command to “Blow your silver trumpet, / And wake the living nations” (865). These blasts, however, do not sound like alarms. Rather, they take on the variety of a virtuoso brass player (Gabriel) in a call-and-response with his bandleader (God):

> And Gabriel’s going to ask him: Lord,
> How loud must I blow it?
>
> And God’s a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
> Blow it calm and easy.
> …
> And Gabriel’s going to ask him: Lord
> How loud must I blow it?
> And God’s a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
> Like seven peals of thunder (865)

The Aaron Douglas woodcut that accompanies the poem reinforces both the documentary twining of “vernacular” and “high” literature and the text’s merger of preacher and prophet. Scholarship has discussed Douglas’ use of Egyptian and African visual styles in this period in conjunction with modernist technique, but his illustration also channels a canonical work of the European tradition, much as Johnson engages with the KJV.[63] Here, it is Michelangelo’s Vatican fresco *The Last Judgment* (1536-41). As lightning and earthquakes tear the earth asunder, penitents fall to their knees at the end of days—but not, here, in agony or terror, but as the ecstatic salvation of the Spirit falling upon them. At the center of the image, the immense figure of the angel Gabriel straddles two hilltops and raises a trumpet to his lips—a horn that, in length, resembles a modern brass instrument, but, in shape (it lacks keys and consists of a single, straight tube) resembles the trumpets blown by Michelangelo’s angels. (*Their* expressions, too, wouldn’t be out of place in a modern image of an eight-piece brass band.) Beam of prophetic light highlight not the destruction beneath Gabriel’s feet but, at the right side of the page, one of the saved on his/her knees and Gabriel’s left hand, holding, like Michelangelo’s St. Peter, the

[63] In her excellent discussion of Douglas’ work, Caroline Goeser proposes a concept of “in-betweeenism” to understand his navigation of these cultural, as well as commercial and formal, poles (17-56 esp.).

key to heaven. While these figures reveal the influence of Douglas' study of Egyptian art—particularly in head and facial structure—and are cast in dark colors, as silhouettes, they are nonetheless abstracted: Is this black shape a dark-skinned man, or a shadow? The beams of light, moreover, alternately lighten and darken bodies. The community into which Gabriel has landed is racially ambiguous, allowing even white readers to view themselves as depicted by Douglas' visual style (which sought out an African classicism to match Europe's neo-Hellenism), to perhaps imagine themselves as a dark(er) figure. We might read this visual grammar—the final document that the physical volume *God's Trombones* includes within its textual and paratextual range—as equating this key and the trumpet itself, casting both the literal trombone of God's Judgment Day band and the volume itself, *God's Trombones* as book, poems, and metaphor for the voice of Johnson's preacher, within the Judgment Day as a key to salvation, to the covenant restored. As the preacher delivers his sermons, he plays "God's trombones" with his voice. Now, enacting the Judgment Day through his description of it, he merges with the archangel who, on that day, will similarly place the instrument to his lips. [64]

[64] This dual enactment of the Judgment Day—by the storytelling preacher and the divinely-empowered Gabriel—dovetails with Theophus H. Smith's reading of "The Creation." There, he finds Johnson drawing on the imagery of African American folk conjurers as God and the preacher work through both verbal and "non-verbal theurgy" to create the world (see Smith, pp. 21-31).

[Illustration 5: "The Judgment Day"—Aaron Douglas woodcut illustration of Johnson's poem]

After his instrument has announced the advent of the end of days, the poet-preacher-prophet turns to address his congregation of readers directly:

> Oh-o-oh, sinner,
> Where will you stand,
> In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?
> Oh, you gambling man—where will you stand?
> You whore-mongering-man—where will you stand?
> Liars and backsliders—where will you stand,
> In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire? (866)

Not merely "liars and backsliders," they have fallen away from upholding the covenant in precisely the manner which the crowd-joining sinners of Babylon do in "The Prodigal Son." Indeed, the preacher interpolates fragments of this poem as he describes the sins of gambling and whoring. Moreover, the cry of "Oh-o-oh, sinner" repeats the preacher's cry in the earlier poem as, in each, he turns his attention back to his congregant-readers. The condemnation of sin—which we now know to read in terms of the passion-driven mob that destroys the congregational community—comes, in both poems, with the invitation to come down from the crowd and repent. The saved, we learn, do not move in crowds, but "two by two they'll walk / … / Singing new songs of Zion" (866).

Yet, significantly, this image of salvation is not that on which "The Judgment Day" and *God's Trombones* closes. Rather than the eternal (musical) life granted to the saved, the poem is structured such that it concludes with the punishment for sinners—a punishment described in language that recalls Johnson's descriptions elsewhere of the fires of lynching:

> And the wicked like lumps of lead will start to fall,
> Headlong for seven days and nights they'll fall,
> Plumb into the big, black, red-hot mouth of hell,
> Belching out fire and brimstone.
> And their cries like howling, yelping dogs,
> Will go up with the fire and smoke from hell,
> But God will stop his ears. (867)[65]

The preacher's attitude shifts dramatically, echoing the mockery of the crowd that crucified Jesus as he goes on to taunt the future damned:[66]

> Too late, sinner! Too late!
> Good-bye, sinner! Good-bye!
> In hell, sinner! In hell!
> Beyond the reach of the love of God! (867)

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[65] In both "Brothers" and "A Texas Carnival," the victims are killed not by rope but by fire, their cries and the sight, sound, smell, and result of burning flesh described graphically. Fire, there and elsewhere, is one of the central aspects of Johnson's discussions of lynching.
[66] And of the lynch mob in "A Texas Carnival."

But while Johnson's prophetic poetry acknowledges apocalypse as one possible outcome, it does not offer it as the *only* outcome—and certainly not the preferred one. Redemption, ideally, will be brought about by salvation, not cataclysm. So the final lines of "The Judgment Day" offer, one more time, the possibility of repentance. *God's Trombones* ends with a question targeting its white readers:

> Sinner, oh, sinner,
> Where will you stand
> In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire? (867)

The threat of apocalypse is not that which the prophet or the oppressed will bring about—but that which will be caused by the choices and actions of the (lynch) mob. Johnson's direct prophetic address calls out to the individual within the mob, hoping, perhaps, to exchange the same "quivering message from intelligence to intelligence" (*Along* 315) which had saved his life nearly three decades earlier in Jacksonville. This connection—the still, small voice of the prophetic encounter—makes possible the re-establishment of the rule of law, the expansion of political and cultural citizenship to outsiders, the restoration of covenantal community at-large, just as the volume has worked to model it through its engagement with the biblical and prophetic typology of American civil religious discourse, through its poetics and its form, and through the congregation of readers these work together to establish. Whether they will choose to stop up their ears to this voice or to hear its call is the question with which *God's Trombones* confronts its readers.

IV. Conclusion: A Covenantal Poetics

James Weldon Johnson's revisions of the typological frameworks that shaped discourses of American identity from the Colonial period forward suggest that America is not even a fallen

Israel—let alone a Promised Land or New Jerusalem. As "The Prodigal Son" helps to make explicit, the United States is Babylon itself. Yet life in Babylon—that cosmopolitan city, that pre-modern New York—is not something to be ashamed of or rejected. The solution is not to set out in search of some new, supposed Promised Land, but to call out the sins of the place in which one lives, to recognize it for what it is rather than masquerading, the unknowing butt of its own joke, as if one's nation really were a New Jerusalem. Congregations—covenantal communities—are not place-bound, but establish themselves through the recognition and codification of shared commitments, obligations, responsibilities, and procedures.

Johnson inverts one element of American civil religious discourse—the recurring, typological trope of an American Israel—in order to make possible another, the creation of or return to a covenant. So, too, are the typological space and figure of the religious community and the preacher-prophet revised: not the Puritan of the colonies nor the white American of the 19th century, the man of "Anglo-Saxon" descent Johnson's contemporary nativists insisted was the only truly *American* American. Even while allowing his critique of the United States to operate in the language that also offers frameworks for American chosenness, for American exceptionalism—the language of American consensus, as it were—Johnson frames the congregation that is America as a distinctively African American space, a church community developed by and for ethnic, religious, and political others. This, then, is the kind of dissensus-within-consensus that Sacvan Bercovitch's theorization of an American jeremiad, of American "rites of assent," describe: not assimilation or subsuming difference within the majority, but their conjoining. As Michael P. Kramer describes it, "consensus did not necessarily mean ideological uniformity or behavioral conformism but 'symbolic cohesion,' not uncritical allegiance but a shared rhetoric that could sustain a complex constellation of competing values and even

encourage dissent—as long as it was dissent in the name of America, as long as consent and dissent were made to correspond."[67]

Hence the creation not of poems that talk about covenant, but the development of a distinctly *covenantal poetics*. This is a process that James Weldon Johnson would share with, among others, the three poets discussed in the remainder of this dissertation: Louis Zukofsky, Lola Ridge, and Charles Reznikoff. By beginning with Johnson, we prepare ourselves to see how other American outsiders, "new" Americans, immigrants or (like him) the children of immigrants, write themselves into the American story by engaging with the biblical and prophetic typology of American civil religious discourse, by revising the community itself through the creation of a covenantal poetics that create a community of readers—that, recalling to them their mutual responsibilities and obligations, move them to recognize that the dimensions of American consensus and American difference are coterminous.

A similar movement occurs on the level of poetic form, both in Johnson's works and those of the poets to follow. A covenantal poetics functions because the newness of the poems operates in continuity with the "old," the "traditional," the symbolic pentameter the breaking of which, Ezra Pound would later claim, was the "first heave"—the first salvo in a war of poetic radicals against their immediate predecessors. For Pound, consent and dissent can have nothing in common—hence his insistence (his *over*-insistence; the poet doth protest too much) of the radical break represented by the formal strategies of his poetics. Yet, as this chapter has shown, he was not the only or even the earliest originator of a documentary poetics. Johnson himself works toward and develops a practice that could just as easily fit under this heading—and does so in explicit continuity with the genteel forms which Pound's account would insist had nothing

[67] Michael P. Kramer, "The Jews and the Jeremiad" in "Short Reflections on Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad*," *Common-Place* 14.4 (Summer 2014).

to do with it. This documentary form, for Johnson, allows him to map the relationship of "Western classics" and "ethnic/vernacular" onto the covenantal relationship between consent and dissent. Although not all of the poets to be discussed in the following chapters share Johnson's engagement with late-19th century forms (only Lola Ridge, closest in age to Johnson, shares his continued affection for them), they all engage with poetic form toward this shared end. And, indeed, all, from different vectors, arrive at versions of a documentary poetics as their formal practices build toward the creation of covenantal community among poet, poem, and the full breadth of their readership.

Chapter Two: Louis Zukofsky and the Poetics of Exodus

I. Introduction: "An Exodus"

Near the midpoint of "A"-1, the poem abruptly announces that "It was also Passover" (1.3).[68] The speaker of this long "poem of a life" is more or less autobiographical, the youngest and only American-born child of religiously-observant, Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Russia, an aspiring and experimental poet whose aesthetic sympathies follow from Ezra Pound and political sympathies from Marx, all qualities shared with the work's author, the then twenty-four year-old Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978). Uttered as he leaves an Easter-eve Carnegie Hall performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, the declaration that it was also Passover might well represent expected ambivalence as this poetic speaker, striving to enter the sacred chambers of Western culture, recalls that as he sits listening to Bach, his family sits listening to and reading from the Passover *haggada* on the holiday's first evening. The story of the *haggada*—of the biblical Exodus from Egypt—serves as a central structural and thematic motif throughout the poem's first ten movements, singing in regular counterpoint to the Christological framework of the *St. Matthew Passion*. In its critical, allusive, metaphorically-driven examination of history, *"A"* imagines its audience less as the "bediamond" (1.1) patrons of Carnegie Hall, then the country's most prestigious venue for musical performances, than as participants in reading and

[68] When quoting from *"A"*, the parenthetical citations refer to both movement and page number. So, the phrase "It was also Passover" appears in "A"-1, on page 3 of the 2011 edition, cited as (1.3). "A"-1, set on the evening of April 5, 1928, was written in that year and published as "A" (First Movement) in *Pagany* 3.3 (July-Sept. 1932): pp. 9-13.

discussing the *haggada*: art shapes the ethical imagination by creating a typologically-freighted historical consciousness.[69]

By engaging with and inverting the tropes of American biblical typology and the discourse of American civil religion, Zukofsky's poetry forges a role for both the Jew (or ethnic, religious or political outsider) and the avant-garde artist in the United States: as the poet-prophet who depicts America not as it sees itself, but as it is. Not a Promised Land, New Jerusalem, city on a hill, or light unto the nations—but as a combination of Egypt itself, the land of slavery and oppression, and the long wilderness traversed in the exodus story on the path *toward* redemption. Yet this typological revision of the Exodus does not cast the United States as beyond redemption. Rather, the nature of political life is like that of the Exodus, in which the act of (im)migration becomes the foundation for building an ideal state. The historical vision offered in *"A"* doubts that such an ideal can be achieved or maintained—but sees the slow, cyclical progress and backsliding toward it as the only available recourse.

In *"A"*, Zukofsky deploys the biblical Exodus as a framework for both the poem and American history, recasting both as immigration stories. The United States, in this telling, has been defined by the migration and immigration of peoples. The Exodus links this with political or philosophical migration—American history as the constant motion toward an as-yet and never-to-be-actualized ideal, whether the Israel of the Bible or Marx's workers' utopia. The role of the poet becomes the role of the prophet: to keep the people of the nation, the city, or even just the neighborhood from resting complacently, believing that they have accomplished all there is

[69] While scholarship has included no shortage of attention to biblical allusions in the opening movements of *"A"*, it almost exclusively attends to the Christological framework of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Barry Ahearn's 1983 *Introduction* to the poem, the first monograph devoted to Zukofsky, reads death and resurrection as the major themes of the first seven movements, prompted by the centrality of "the most important death in the history of the Western world"—that is, Jesus'—to the starting point of the poem (69). Others have followed suit, observing also that, in bringing a world to form out of darkness, "A"-1 retells the biblical creation; and that "the serpent molting" (1.2) on the poem's second page serves as an allusion to both Dante's *Inferno* and the expulsion from Eden. Passover and the Exodus, however, are unremarked except to illuminate individual lines or phrases.

to accomplish. Yet Zukofsky's poetry is at once rooted and cosmopolitan: it is deeply embedded in the specific place of New York City. Its exodus, then, cannot be strictly or even primarily the story of geographic movement. Instead, *"A"* offers a kind of *translational* exodus, in which the movement occurs linguistically: within and among languages, and within and among referents. Two relationships to language emerge through this. Translation and immigration are paired, each cast as a mode of circulation, one through geographic space, the other through the space of language(s). Translation, this is to say, serves as the poetic enactment of the (im)migrant relationship to place. Next to the cosmopolitanness of translation, we find the local embeddedness and radicalism—the rootedness—of the vernacular. *"A"* develops the vernacular through the act of translation, insisting that linguistic localism and cosmopolitanism are inseparable. Likewise, the poem implies, the rootedness of peoples emerges from their acts of migration and immigration.

Although its symbolism includes elements of the story of Eden—such as a "serpent" and references to "Arcadia" (1.2), the narrator's departure from Carnegie Hall in "A"-1 is no expulsion. The authorities, after all, seek to hold him *in*: trying to leave, the narrator is met with an usher's cry, "Not that exit, Sir!" And four lines later: "Not that exit!" to which he offers the frustrated response, "Devil! Which?" (1.2) Only after seven more lines does he manage to leave, his travails and frustrations growing to resemble those of the biblical Israelites as their freedom hinged on Pharaoh's ever-changing whims. Around him, the imagery also points toward that of the plagues which struck the Egyptians: "The lights dim[med]" and "Galleries darkened" while "blood" and "bleeding" appear, recalling the first and ninth plagues—and, perhaps, the tenth, as

"blood" is placed in proximity to the "boys' voices" just before the speaker manages, at long last, to step into the street.[70]

The description of this exit deserves to be quoted in full:

> And as one who under stars
> Spits across sand dunes, and the winds
> Blow thru him, the spittle drowning worlds—
> I lit a cigarette, and stepped free
> Beyond the red light of the exit.
>
> The usher faded thru "Camel" smoke (1.2)

He does not simply *leave*, but "step[s] free" following "the red light of the exit" to "sand dunes" "under stars" as the Israelites left slavery for freedom by following a cloud of smoke and pillar of fire. Both are found in his cigarette, the end of which glows red while emitting a stream of rising smoke. Spittle—water—comically drowns his antagonist while the narrator finally ignores the usher and leaves through the blocked exit; as he fades through the smoke, the usher perishes like Pharaoh's army in the sea. The "'Camel' smoke" refers to the cigarette but also strengthens the connection to Egypt and the desert—not merely through associations the animal carries with it. The cover of a pack of Camel cigarettes, even in 1928, depicted an Egyptian scene: a camel, pyramids, and palm trees standing on desert sands.[71] Even stepping free, he continues to carry Egypt with him in his pocket—a presence central to the cyclical and repetitive history of the poem.

As Zukofsky's works of the 1920s and 1930s seek to unite the roles of political and aesthetic radical, he comes to rely on a set of poetic practices shared with James Weldon

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[70] In this context, we might also read the "Ecdysis: the serpent coming out, molting" (1.2) as the staff thrown by Aaron at Pharaoh's feet when he and Moses first encounter him alongside references to the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve and the reference to Dante's *Inferno*. Such a tri-fold allusiveness is precisely the polyphonous reading of a single line that the poem itself demands.

[71] Ahearn's *Introduction* confirms that this image adorned the cover in 1928 (42). As we'll see below, the cover also helps bind *"A"* and its exodus to the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*.

Johnson: not merely a modernist documentary poetics (more explicit in the visibly avant-garde, Pound-influenced Zukofsky), but also the language and typology of prophecy and covenant. Zukofsky's poetry likewise resists mid-century modes of lyric reading, which cannot account for the covenantal forms and goals of his avant-garde epic.[72] Johnson, as we've seen, establishes a covenantal poetics by establishing a congregational relationship among readers (congregants), poem (sermon), and poet (preacher), engaging with the prophetic and biblical typology of Colonial (Puritan) and 19th-century rhetoric, poetry, and civil religious discourse by revising the figure of the African American preacher. Zukofsky's covenantal poetics emerge differently. He conceives of his role as a revolutionary, avant-garde poet within the framework of one charged with transmitting prophecy: as, in other words, not merely a "prophetic" calling, but an explicitly *pedagogical* one.

This pedagogical poetics constructs a relationship between poem and audience that seeks to develop an historical consciousness born of typology and metaphor, one that, in this way at least, resembles the Passover seder, in which guests are instructed by the haggada to recall that they, too, were once slaves in the land of Egypt. The result is that his major work—the career-long, *"A"*—turns its attention to what it refers to as "America's land of the pilgrim Jews" (8.83) as it offers a prophetic critique of American politics, economics, and history by challenging, revising, and re-writing the typology of America as "Promised Land" and the biblical Exodus as

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[72] Zukofsky's poetry further demonstrates that even the avant-garde anti-lyricism that developed in the 1970s and 1980s among poets and critics shaped by his work shares assumptions about how poems ought to be read that obscure the public, prophetic nature of experimental poetry. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins view such avant-garde anti-lyricism as simply "a later stage" (453) of the process of the lyriciziation of poetry, including, specifically, poets from the LANGUAGE movement, Charles Bernstein, and other poets, critics, and poet-critics who have been Zukofsky's contemporary champions. In essence, they were the audience for the abstracted notion of "lyric" that began to consume specific forms and modes of poetry during the twentieth century. Their "no-longer-lyric modernist and post-modernist textual tradition" developed as "miscellaneous verse genres collapsed into a lyricized version of poetry as a modern genre, so that modern lyricized notion of poetry blurred until it gave way to an idea of poetry that no longer needed the lyric as a generic placeholder, but that continues to need the lyric as the definition of the kind of poetry it is not" (452).

a framework for understanding both the American founding and present. American history is fundamentally a story of migration and immigration—of the constant movement critics have long observed within his poetry.[73] But, in his telling, the Promised Land is never fully achieved: his beloved New York City, the place in which he and his poetry are rooted and affectively committed to, is a kind of modern-day "Egypt"; the rest of the nation, meanwhile, comes to resemble the vast wilderness of Sinai.

The language of this exit is the language, ultimately, of a necessary exodus from reverie into the world. He steps into a world one might expect to be expelled, rather than freed, into—quite like the biblical wilderness of Sinai. The story of the Exodus is replete with complaints, mutinies against Moses, and the desire to return to slavery in Egypt—a life which, in comparison to the task of building a redeemed world, seems relaxed indeed. In the New York of *"A"*, the market has not yet crashed, but the city is already in desperate need of redemption. His bejeweled fellow patrons grieve for the octogenarian Thomas Hardy—"he had to go so soon" (1.3)—while ignoring the vision of "A tramp's face, / Lips looking out of a beard / Hips looking out of ripped trousers" (1.2) and news of a strike in Pennsylvania coal mines.

With his simultaneous attention to religious and class difference—the son of a Jewish garment-industry sweatshop worker who nonetheless travels in both avant-garde and more mainstream high culture (Carnegie Hall; Bach) —Zukofsky (and "Zukofsky," the poetic character) offers a counter-historical reminder that, at the same time it was hailed as a city upon a hill, a new Jerusalem, or Promised Land, the American colonies were also a dangerous wilderness, a waste land of high mortality rates that offered a suitable solution not only for religious refugees but also to England's concerns over the growing number of orphans, indigent

[73] Barry Ahearn's introduction to the 2011 New Directions edition of *"A"*, for instance, observes that, "The poem is full of things in motion, from the very beginning" (xii).

poor, and criminals (real and supposed) in their cities.[74] In the historical vision of his Exodus, America is never a Promised Land or Shining City—always either Egypt itself or the harsh wilderness through which the freed Israelites wandered (and in which, like most of those who encountered the Americas first as wilderness rather than New Jerusalem, they died).

II. The Radical Poet as Prophetic Radical

This is not to argue that the avowedly irreligious and secular Zukofsky was, in fact, a secret religious believer, whether in the orthodox Judaism of his parents or the nebulous discourse of American civil religion to which I regularly refer. (His most admired figure in Jewish history, after all, was Baruch Spinoza, excommunicated for heresy.) Nor is this an attempt to soften, mitigate, or write away his determined, if deeply idiosyncratic, Marxism and Leftist political commitments. Far from it. If anything, this approach helps to better contextualize both Zukofsky's poetics and politics within the Progressive Era of his youth and education. This moment—after the closing of the frontier; after the rise of capitalism, industrialization, and corporate power; after the arrival of non-Protestant, non-Western European immigrants (Jews and Catholics)—marked, Philip Gorski writes, a turning point for American civil religion: "could the civil theology of a geopolitically isolated society of small property-holders of WASP heritage be reformulated for a powerful and pluralistic nation of wage-earners?" (110). Between the twin poles of civil religious originalism calling for a return to the principles of the Founders and those to whom the founding documents seemed inadequate and irrelevant to the present, a third way emerged during the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson which sought "to revitalize the civil theology, not simply by returning to the founding documents . . . but by

[74] Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash*, p. 3 and Chapter One, "Taking Out the Trash: Waste People in the New World," pp. 17-42.

returning to the various traditions that stood behind them—to the Hebrew prophets, Greek philosophy, and the Christian Gospels. And they would find the moral, political, and poetic resources they needed to breath new life into it" (110-11).

By taking a step back, we can see that scholarship locates Progressive-era civil religious discourse within the same intellectual turn that defined high modernism: a return to the ancient and/or Classical past, with the belief that, by revitalizing it—by "making it new," in over-quoted Poundian parlance—culture-makers might revitalize the present. Zukofsky, too, turns to the Hebrew prophets, Greek philosophy, and Christian Gospels as frameworks for his poetry, which also take up the Crucifixion and Aristotle (in post-war portions of *"A"*, Zukofsky would cast himself as Aristotle and the poem itself as a new *Nichomachean Ethics*). Indeed, the latter reveals the influence of Zukofsky's Columbia professor, John Dewey, for whom "happiness" (a key term signaled by the letter "H" in the poetic acrostic BACH that organizes "A"-12—"Blessed," "Ardent," "Celia," "Happy"—in which the first two also refer to *Baruch* Spinoza and *Ar*istotle) signifies an Aristotelian flourishing rather than mere pleasure, as in Dewey's Progessive-era civil religious revisions.[75] The point is this: not that Zukofsky saw himself as actively revising American civil religious discourse with an eye toward its renewed efficacy, but that this project was "in the air," suffusing the intellectual projects of his contemporaries and his teachers, and that it offered both a way of understanding or shaping ideas of Americanness and another set of cultural images and intellectual frameworks that might be subjected to modernist play and revision. Celia Zukofsky's 1979 *American Friends* offers further support.[76] This short, self-published book dedicated to her late husband on the first anniversary of his death juxtaposes excerpts from Zukofsky's writings with quotations from figures throughout American history,

[75] On Dewey, Aristotle, and civil religion, see Gorski 112.
[76] *American Friends*. Celia Zukofsky, ed. New York, C.Z. Publications, Inc.: 1979. Available online at http://www.z-site.net/american-friends/. Accessed August 20, 2017.

including Colonial-era religious leaders such as Roger Williams, Anne Bradstreet, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards. Precisely the Americanness of these figures, her dedication notes, is why she believed her husband was drawn to them. Her suggestion that she has selected the excerpts based on his notes, manuscripts, marginalia, and reading habits indicates that we can think of these as documentary sources for his poetry. Why, knowing all this, would we say that Zukofsky's prophetic critique of the United States—which included its contemporary politics, economics, culture, and interpersonal ethics—did *not* also include a critical revision of the typological frameworks of its civil religion?

One answer (one that, until quite recently, has helped shape Zukofsky scholarship) is that he wrote strictly "for the desk drawer"—that is, without a public in mind.[77] In effect, however, this is an ahistorical reading of Zukofsky's poetics, a neutering of his early politics filtered through a preference for his later, post-World War II poetry, which turned increasingly to his domestic life for content. Cary Nelson, writing of many of Zukofsky's contemporaries on the literary Left, laments that, having repressed and forgotten them, we no longer know the history of early 20th century American poetry.[78] Zukofsky's case is indicative of a related but distinct phenomenon. By insisting that his poetry should be read as the overheard thoughts of the poet at his desk (or even the poet strolling through New York streets), we re-create that poetry as anti-social and apolitical. Contextualizing Zukofsky's poetry within a longer tradition of prophetic rhetoric and poetry and Progressive-era revisions to civil religious discourse *as well as* avant-garde poetics allows us to take into account the public and political functions of Zukofsky's

[77] The claim itself, frequently cited, originated with Eric Homberger's 1986 book, *American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-1939: Equivocal Commitments*. In its final chapter, "Communism and Objectivism," he concludes that, as Zukofsky's aesthetics began to clash with the politicized aesthetics of Leftist editors and magazines, "Zukofsky … wrote for the desk drawer" (182). The claim has been frequently cited since, and was re-printed, along with a revised version of the chapter, in the 1999 edited collection *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, a key scholarly starting point for those interested in Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, or others within the loose "Objectivist" group.
[78] *Repression and Recovery* 4.

poetry of the 1920s and 1930s—to see, that is, how his difficult, experimental poetry might serve the cause of labor, might teach its readers to recognize the covenantal bonds among them. By asking how Zukofsky's poetry engages with, critiques, and revises the typology of American civil religious discourse, we also ask how his poetry imagines and creates its audience in order to spur them to action, and how this might offer a model for reading the avant-garde more generally.

The 1934 sestina "Mantis" and the accompanying free-verse "Interpretation" (meant to be read together) explicitly call for such a "prophetic" reading of Zukofsky's poetry. This poem, indeed, depicts and theorizes the necessity of the radical poet assuming the role of prophetic radical. The setting of "Mantis" is almost comic: the poet waits in a New York subway station when, quite suddenly, a large and unexpected praying mantis flies directly into his chest. This sparks a moment of panic—the poet "can't bear to look, cannot touch" (4)—that shifts immediately into a twisting series of meditations ("thoughts' torsions" [3]) tracing both the role of the mantis in world folklore and Depression-era economic suffering.[79] As Zukofsky recovers from his fright and realizes the mantis' importance, he also realizes the insect's fragility; considerations of how she will survive in a crowded station where no one cares for her lead into myths of the mantis as a murdered and resurrected god; and, finally, Zukofsky's charge to the mantis itself: "Fly, mantis, on the poor, arise like leaves / ... / And build the new world in your eyes, Save it!" (37-9).[80]

This encounter is a revelatory one: a mundane event unveils larger truths about the world around him, prompting a call to action. The mantis, that is to say, is not a symbol for the poor—

[79] Parenthetical citations for "Mantis" refer to line numbers as found in *Complete Short Poetry*, pp. 65-66. For "'Mantis,' An Interpretation," they refer to page numbers.
[80] The etymology of "mantis" is also relevant here: it is derived, straightforwardly, from the Greek μάντις – the word for prophet or seer.

Zukofsky's "Interpretation" is deeply skeptical of the ethics of such symbolism—but a representation of the poet's *obligation toward* them.[81] This "indirect symbol" calls forth a further set of referents which tie together the causes of prophecy, labor, and poetry.[82] After an initial reaction of fright and demurral that repeats the time-honored tradition of the reluctant prophet, Zukofsky receives his charge: not to protect the subway's poor (whom he sees around him), but the mantis itself, as a creature, a referent, and a symbol.[83] This insect is "you whom old Europe's poor / Call spectre" (21-2)—clearly, that is, Marx's "spectre of Communism," the *idea* of a revolution. But this is only the first of the functions Zukofsky invokes as his thoughts track him through, as Michael Golston has observed, Roger Calliois' 1934 essay "Le Mante religieuse."[84] In folklore, the mantis is an unerring guide for the lost and, to some African tribes, "the supreme deity and creator of the world." The mantis functions, then, in a three-fold manner: as the prophecy itself; as a "prophetess" (27) to her people; and as a god to his/her prophet (i.e., Zukofsky).

Casting the English Romantic encounter with nature in the underground concrete of 1934 New York, Zukofsky tests its applicability to his own prophetic calling by positing Percy Bysshe

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[81] Discussions of Zukofsky's views of poetic form and the use of symbolism have dominated scholarly discussion of this poem. "No human being wishes to become / An insect for the sake of a symbol," Zukofsky writes in the "Interpretation," "But the mantis *can start* / History etc." (*CSP* 70). On the one hand, there is an ethical problem with symbolism—particularly with the reduction of a category of humans (those without power, at that) to *insect*. On the other hand, symbolism can *function*—a spur to history, if not poetry. Michael Davidson observes the complexity of the situation: while the sestina appears quite willing to the use the mantis as a symbol of the poor, and so to symbolically enact Zukofsky's ambivalent encounter with them, the "Interpretation" resists symbolism (118-19). This resistance, Michael Heller writes, works in the service of a larger political/aesthetic cause: resisting the party-line commandments of Socialist Realism from the position of a leftist avant-garde (148-9).

[82] This term is Ruth Jennison's, who argues that Zukofsky's poem "redeems the symbol as a mediation that bridges actors and events, and the present with the future" (197).

[83] Michael Golston argues for the term "referent" rather than "symbol," offering the important reminder that, *pace* Kenner, Zukofsky's works are not hermetically sealed but exist within a field of referents that extend outside of and beyond the poem's or poet's own words. Addressing the poem's context within 1930s experimental artwork, he sees the insect "not as a symbol, but as an incident in a complex visual field, a *fact* operating in concert with an ensemble of other facts" (337).

[84] See Golston 329-32. His evidence that this essay specifically is Zukofsky's source for the information on the mantis in folklore in "Mantis" is overwhelming and persuasive.

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1819/20) as an intertext. Like "Mantis," the "Ode" addresses the anxieties of a radical poet who wishes to make his work speak and act on behalf of the poor. Shelley calls on the wind to "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like wither'd leaves" (63-4) as the "prophecy" (69) which announces the coming of a revolutionary "Spring" (70) These leaves, too, appear in "Mantis" as one of the words Zukofsky emphasizes at line-ends. Two other end-words, "stone" and "lost," are among the referents pointing toward the prophetic encounters of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922). The mantis comes to guide those who are, like Eliot's wanderers searching for the grail, "lost"; while "stone" recurs like Eliot's rock. So, instead of Eliot's "Here is no water but only rock" (331), we find, "Here, stone holds only seats on which the poor / Ride" (10-11), while Zukofsky's "the myth is: dead, bones" (28) recalls Eliot's repeated invocation of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones.[85]

But it is not the case, in "Mantis," that the pessimism of Eliot's modernist prophetic encounter has supplanted Shelley's revolutionary beliefs. Although both are found wanting, Zukofsky salvages what is relevant from each and thus re-writes the terms of the prophetic encounter in poetry. Like Shelley, he is concerned with the "poor" (another emphasized end-word)—but, more importantly, Zukofsky chooses the stable self of the Romantic "I" over the fragmented identity of modernist poetry. Yet Zukofsky is as skeptical of Shelley's "dead leaf" (43) as he is of Eliot's "dead land" (2). "Mantis" rejects the placelessness of Shelley's "Ode"—and, by implication, the unmoored, expatriate cosmopolitanism of his commitment to

[85] The intertextual connections go further: The prophet/insect of the poem's title comes in place of Eliot's "crickets" and "cicadas" (24 & 353), and is tied, through the African myth which Zukofsky invokes, to the story of a god killed by men but then reborn. The two-part structure—the poem and then the long "Interpretation" which followed it in its periodical and book publications—recalls both Eliot's long set of notes which "attempt" to "explain" his poem *and* Zukofsky's earlier parody of those notes in the prefatory index to his 1928 "Poem Beginning 'The'"—a work which is clearly and openly a parodic critique of *The Waste Land*.

revolution.[86] The very radicalism of Zukofsky's poem—and prophetic orders—roots it in the space of 1920s New York; rather than floating free, like the West Wind, at 20,000 feet, he stands underground. Zukofsky's revolutionary commitments, like his cosmopolitanism, are rooted.

The speaker has received a three-fold charge from his encounter with the mantis: to reform his own behavior in response to the prophetess; to act, himself, as a prophet, and spread word of the mantis' revelations; and, finally, to ensure the safety of the mantis as the fragile insect that contains the idea of revolution within its referential breadth. To fulfill these roles, he turns first to the "leaves" of the press, but finds it is no use:

> Even the newsboy who now sees knows it
> No use, papers make money, makes stone, stone,
> Banks, "it is harmless," he says moving on—You?
> Where will he put *you?* There are no safe leaves
> To put you back in here, here's news! too poor
> Like all the separate poor to save the lost. (13-18)

On the one hand, newspapers and print media simply have no place for the prophecy of Marxist revolution. Whatever their business is, this is not it. As Zukofsky glosses in the "Interpretation":

> [...] the
> newsboy—unable to think beyond
> "subsistence still permits competi-
> tion," banking, *The Wisconsin Elkhorn*
> *Independent*—"Rags make paper,
> paper makes money, money makes
> banks, banks make loans, loans make
> poverty, poverty makes rags." (71)

Prophecy does not sell; even if it sold, it would not make money. Profit has won out over prophet. The devotion to the *business* of publication "makes stone"—perhaps extending the prophetic imagery, making stone of the newsboy's heart, like the biblical pharaoh's; both are

[86] Shelley, like Eliot, was an expatriate poet, and died in Italy in 1829. Even Byron, who died in defense of political revolution, did so abroad.

unmoved by the suffering of workers. But the poet also seeks a place to keep the insect itself safe from harm in the crowded and chaotic subway station. The "leaves" of the newsprint are unlike those of nature; they are not "safe" for the mantis and might more naturally be folded to swat at her. These leaves must also be unsafe for the full field of referents indicated by the insect. Print media not only refuses to take up its burden of passing on the insect's prophecies toward action, but even if they were to do so, they would not be safe there. Given the newsboy's economic calculations and Zukofsky's glosses on them, we can presume that they would either be neutered or perverted in the interests of profit and power.

A mantis—a living prophet or prophecy—can only survive among *living* leaves. Zukofsky must take it onto himself to fashion these, protect the mantis, and carry her prophecies forward. To keep her alive, he must keep alive the "thoughts' torsions" she has provoked in him—this is to say, ensure that they are continually expressed, whether in thought or in word. The poem itself is *also* a "Mantis," one that keeps alive the referential breadth and revolutionary prophecy of the encounter, and Zukofsky ultimately places it safely among leaves—among pages of poetry, first in *Poetry* (March 1935), then in the 1936 debut of James Laughlin's *New Directions in Poetry and Prose*, and, finally, in Zukofsky's own collections of poetry (*55 Poems* [1941, self-published] and *ALL: Collected Short Poems* [1965, Random House]).[87] Although Zukofsky posits himself as addressing both a prophetess and a god in this poem, this context, together with the closing lines, reveals the depth of the connection Zukofsky drew between the role of a poet and that of a prophet: "Fly, mantis, on the poor, arise like leaves / The armies of the poor, strength: stone on stone / And build the new world in your eyes, Save it!" (37-9). In

[87] Finding a place for his poetry—whether we wish to term it "prophetic," "revolutionary," or merely the tried-and-true "avant-garde"—was a source of lifelong difficulty, particularly for the placement of a book-length collection. Unable to do so with even a small press until the 1960s, Zukofsky took matters into his own hands: he paid for the publication of his own collections, marketed and distributed them with the help of his wife and friends, and increasingly wrote without expectations of or immediate plans for publication except through his own labors.

these lines, Zukofsky's attention has turned from the insect, as creature or symbol, to his own poem. As either charge or as prophet, he is not in a position to command that which has charged him. But as the poet to the work he has composed—the prophet to the scroll of his own prophecy—he can. While the spirit of revolution can "Fly . . . on the poor," to "arise like leaves" expresses the command (or hope) that the very pages on which the poem is printed will be numerous enough to serve as "The armies of the poor." The tasks of the revolutionary, avant-garde poet, that is, are analogous to those of the prophet fulfilling his call, charging the people with action. "Mantis" calls for, and *"A"* offers, a rooted, vernacular alternative to both modernist and Romantic modes of prophetic poetry, one that can draw on both the experimental techniques of the modernist avant-garde, while rejecting the avant-garde's apocalypticism in favor of Romantic poetry's vision of the poet's and poem's public voice and role.

III. History, Typology, and Pedagogy

The composition of *"A"*, Zukofsky's long "poem of a life," began before "Mantis" and continued well after the sestina was completed and published. In all, the poetic project stretched from 1928 through 1974; the first complete edition was in proofs when he died in 1978. Its composition, however, was not continuous. After a spate of revisions in the summer of 1942, the final forms of the first ten movements were set.[88] Chronologically and, according to scholarly consensus, thematically distinct from that which he wrote after World War II, this section of the poem is the focus of the remainder of this chapter. Zukofsky began to plan the twenty-four movements of *"A"* from the time of its inception. Indeed, he carried the original outline and notes in his wallet throughout the 1930s, preferring to layer ideas over one another in a visual

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[88] There is one significant exception: "A"-9, which consists of two parts, one written before World War Two and the other after. However, its early publication as the "First-Half of 'A'-9" indicates that this was always planned.

record of their development to erasing or starting anew. On one of these small sheets of notepaper, the words “an Exodus” stand out in clear, bold handwriting. Compared to the layers of palimpsests that surround it, this exodus is unobscured and constant. [89] Zukofsky maps the story of the exodus onto the repetitions and recurrences of a fugue, finding in this formal innovation a way to root the heritage of European culture and Poundian high modernism within the local affections and radical commitments found on the Yiddish-speaking streets of his childhood.[90]

The Exodus provides a nexus in which the history and symbolism of religion, class, nation, and immigration converge, allowing *“A”* to examine American history through the circulation of people across the years of its composition. The images and ideas that recur and shape this study make their first appearances in “A”-1’s exodus from Carnegie Hall. For instance, “the great Magnus,” who brags to other executives how he “ran ‘em [his workers] in chain gangs down to the Argentine” (1.5), reappears in “A”-6 conversing with Henry Ford (6.28 & 6.30), linking the type (a magnate) with the specific example—who is himself linked in “A”-8 with German and Italian Fascists (8.88), Japanese industrialists (8.95), xenophobic Congressmen (8.98), those who experiment on their workers (8.54), expelled the Jews from England (8.70), and enabled or defended African chattel slavery in the Americas (8.75).[91] If, from a Marxist perspective, the Bible’s Pharaoh is simply another powerful man who exploits labor for his own benefit, then we have found him here, during the Depression, in a constantly mutating form. The laborers and the oppressed—who are characterized above all by either being in motion or being

[89] The notes and outline can be found in the Louis Zukofsky Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, UT-Austin, Box 4, Folder 13. Scroggins notes that it was carried in Zukofsky’s wallet (*Poem of A Life* 87), while both he and Ahearn date the origin of the outline to 1927-8, with notes added through 1934-5 (Ahearn *Introduction* 38, “Adams Connection” 482).

[90] At the end of “A”-6, Zukfsky makes his formal strategy clear: *“A”* is meant to answer the question, “*Can* / The design / Of the fugue / Be transferred / To poetry?” (6.38).

[91] Magnus also recalls the wealthy Roman general Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus—Pompey the Great—who was a member of Caesar’s first triumvirate and is linked, either by pun or etymology, to the word “pompous.”

moved by others—are, moreover, explicitly transformed into "Old Egypt's children" (8.63) and those who willingly turn a blind eye to their suffering are characterized by "most likely never having been to Egypt" (8.86). This echoes the language of both the Passover seder, which calls on its participants to consider themselves to have once been among slaves in Egypt, and the biblical book of Exodus itself, which likewise utilizes this metaphor and the poetic imagination as it commands its readers to recall their own slavery while grounding its legal codes (frequently economically radical, as we'll discuss in Chapter 4) in the statement, "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt."[92] Zukofsky's history, pitting slavery, forced migration, and economic exploitation against a freedom established through immigration and revolution, demands a similar act of ethical imagination from its readers.[93]

In *"A"*, solidarity with the ostracized, the marginalized, and the oppressed requires affection for the people and space in which one lives: for, that is, the local.[94] In Zukofsky's case this is New York City and, on a wider scale, the United States. In "A"-7, for instance, Zukofsky's description of urban poverty affords as much respect and tenderness to the sights and sounds of the city, seen from his stoop, as it does the high cultural heritage of Bach, Pound, or Henry Adams. Completed in 1930, this movement consists of seven sonnets that recombine the

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[92] Deteronomy 15:15. The more common variant refers to being a "stranger" in the land of Egypt (e.g., Exodus 22:20, a verse that figures in Chapter 4's discussion of Charles Reznikoff). Refusing this role—which Zukofsky casts as that of both modernist poets and revolutionaries—one sides, in the seder, with the *rasha*, the Wicked Son who cuts himself off from his people by denying he was ever a slave in Egypt.

[93] To my mind, the best discussion of the literary and ethical importance of the commandment to see oneself as a slave in Egypt is Cynthia Ozick's, in her essay "Metaphor and Memory."

[94] The contemporary literary Left, with which he had a tense and ambivalent relationship, by contrast, falls into the same trap as Shelley and Byron, despite their laudable revolutionary impulses. In "A"-1, the Communist organizer "Carat" (commonly presumed to be a pun on Mike Gold) discusses a strike in Pennsylvania coal mines with his coterie, but only for the sake of using the event to produce formulaic propaganda meant to benefit, above all, an international cause that may be of no help to these miners specifically. Just like the wealthy patrons of Carnegie Hall, these organizers take no notice of the ragged panhandler Zukofsky confronts nearby. *His* commitments appear almost proto-Levinasian: he alone sees the working class and impoverished through their apparition of their individual faces; he alone feels obligated toward them not as part of a mass, but as individuals. Zukofsky, perhaps unintentionally, follows the Talmudic precepts of Bava Metzia 71a, that one is obligated to give charity to the poor of one's own city before the poor of others, applying them to revolution as well.

various images, themes, and sounds of the previous six. But it also depicts a scene: Zukofsky sits on the stoop of his building, watching a road crew work on the street, bracketed by wooden sawhorses that, to his eye, project the letter A onto the cityscape. As the sonnets progress, the sounds of this scene—tools on pavement, a "laundry to-let" sign creaking in the wind, a taxi driving on a wet road—recall and then merge with Bach's music, eventually climaxing in a call to "Run, light lights in air" (7.40), a line that will, in "A"-8, become the clarion-cry of his revolutionary anthem. The city remains an audience and a community to which he is obligated, rooting his self and his cosmopolitan commitments to labor and the avant-garde among the people who move within a specific space. For Zukofsky, despite his Communist sympathies and the eagerness with which he watched the Soviet project develop in Russia in the 1920s and early 1930s, this means the country—and, more importantly, the *city* of his birth. Even when "A"-6 takes the poet-narrator to northern California on an American iteration of the Exodus, he and his poem find no Promised Land there and are returned, in the span of a single line, to New York City.

"A"-6 casts the Exodus as the story of the American present. Written in 1930, this movement depicts the poem's longest and clearest departure from New York City; it is this narrative that creates an American Exodus.[95] However, instead of finding redemption or the land of milk and honey by San Francisco Bay, at the end of his long journey, the poem abruptly returns to New York City. There, amid the sound of "frogs sing[ing] all night on Belaire Road" (6.36), the cycle begins again. History, that is to say, does not end; the Promised Land is always

[95] By this, I mean the longest departure that the poet-narrator physically takes from the city in the movements considered in this chapter. His mind, of course, is always wandering through space and time.

in the process of being created. *"A"* is no jeremiad calling on society to repent and return, but to establish, for the *first* time, an ethical society.[96]

Setting out, he sees wasteland immediately:

> New York, and then desolation
> The steel works of Gary.
> At Lake Michigan in Chicago,
> Left a note he was going to Berkeley.
>
> Desolation. Brush. Foothills of the Rockies. (6.32)

The middle of America is like the vast desert of Sinai; rust belt industries, perhaps, make one long for the comparative luxuries of New York's Egypt. The narrator is accompanied on these travels by the voices of Pharaohs; multiple pages are given over to the words of Henry Ford. Yet, Moses' speech remains faintly audible alongside these. Voices begin, inexplicably, to stutter and stammer—to become, momentarily, "slow of speech and short of tongue."[97] Visions of water emerge from dry ground in a Nevada desert: "A roof, like a green sea" (6.32) rises into view immediately before, in Reno, "Zukofsky" is told,

> You see this road thru the desert,
> They call it a highway.
> The Lincoln highway. (6.33)

This is not Eliot's "dead land"—even in the desert, there is light, and life, and a path to be followed. The voice of Moses persists, while the desert path he follows is named for the Great Emancipator. The Exodus is physically and historically embedded within the United States: travelling the land recalls the past experience like musical themes, while analogies are drawn

[96] In this, Zukofsky's depiction of political time finds an analogue not in Marxist dialectics, but the writings and rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and American civil religious discourse in their wake. As Gorski observes, "Lincoln and Douglass *transformed the revival cycle into a progressive spiral*: the point was not to return to the eternal social order of a bygone golden age, nor even to recover the original meaning of the founding principles; rather, it was to more fully realize the moral meaning of those principles, even when that meant abandoning established interpretations" (96, emphasis original).
[97] Exodus 4:10. This occurs at 6.24, 6.29, 6.30, and 6.34, reappearing at 8.63,

between the biblical Exodus, the history of American slavery, and the American present in which a select few remain wealthy even while the nation's populace suffers during the Depression.

Yet, as "A"-8 notes, "History never *quite* repeats itself" (8.74); its structure, like the poem's, is fugal. So, just as progress from slavery to freedom was not, in American history, without backsliding, so Zukofsky finds himself again in New York City. Completing the journey that maps the Exodus onto the American continent does not signal the end of his labor—indeed, it is only the beginning. New York is an Egypt infested by the plague of frogs whose voices fill the night. But it is also "Springtime when the energy under yoke freed" (6.36). It is the season, that is, of Passover and the biblical exodus. They are freed by energy—their own, perhaps, or from divine origin—but this freedom comes "under yoke." This is the idiomatic expression of the establishment of the Israelite covenant with God at Sinai: they were freed to receive the yoke of the Torah. But neither Sinai nor New York is the Promised Land. For Zukofsky, New York offers a view of exploitation as well as the possibility of revelation and redemption: it is also "Egypt" in his letters and, on the narrator's return, the land of "adequate distribution of Camels" (6.36).[98] Just as "A"-6 has rooted the Exodus in American history and the American present, it roots the labor toward establishing a promised land in the local: the covenantal yoke of which the poem speaks. For Zukofsky, this obligation is toward New York City in both its sanctuaries of high culture and—perhaps more importantly—its vernacular-filled streets.

Similarly, "A"-8 maps the Exodus onto the histories of early immigration to and within the United States, establishing its connections with the nation's past and present, while also rooting Zukofsky's experiences and labors in a history local to him: his own father's immigration story. This movement is the poem's first crescendo, threading together the notes, themes, and images of the previous seven over the same span of pages those movements had required

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[98] See Scroggins 12 on Zukofsky's correspondence.

altogether. Together with these stories of immigration, of religious persecution (of early Protestant dissenters among colonists and Europe's Jews), striking miners, the works of the Yiddish poet Yehoash, and many others are combined around a mock dialogue between the voices of Henry Adams and Karl Marx that considers the history of the United States by juxtaposing the histories of labor and migration.[99] Learning to understand and navigate history is a necessary component of Zukofsky's Exodus, and in order to do so, he takes his place among this multitude, the ostracized in whose motley voices he hears the clear music of prophetic jargon. So it is unsurprising that the same light that first glowed at the tip of Zukofsky's cigarette, leading him out of Carnegie Hall/Egypt, continues to guide him throughout "A"-8.[100] Indeed, it is bound closely with the cause of labor, which is commanded to "Light lights in air, / on streets, on earth, in earth" (8.43) at the movement's beginning and, with slight variations, in the closing line of the final four stanzas (8.104-5). Initially published in an anthem-like form in *New Masses*, these closing stanzas work in "A"-8 to establish labor as a light in the air and throughout the earth, guiding the people through the wilderness of history.[101]

Transferred from narrative to the fugal poetics of *"A"*, the story of the Exodus ceases to be diachronic. "History never *quite* repeats itself" (8.77), but becomes, like the poem itself, allusive, repetitive, and recurrent: a "progressive spiral."[102] Casting it as the recurring tale of

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[99] Ahearn's "The Adams Connection" is the most detailed discussion of how to read this unexpected combination. He puts it concisely in his *Introduction*: the history of the Adams family becomes one of productive, artistic, labor thwarted by capitalism (178). Further, as Stanley notes, that family's importance to and writing of American history offers Zukofsky a way to enter it through his poem (28).

[100] General references to light appear at 8.44, 8.49, 8.51, 8.58, 8.76, 8.96, and 8.97; and a mobile light appears at 8.44 and 8.99—at the movement's beginning and end.[100] At 8.55, "a firm Cloud" is juxtaposed with the conclusion of "The 300 years banishment of Roger Williams / from Massachusetts." The length of time, the cause of banishment, and the cloud itself connect him with the Exodus while his status as "the outspoken / Radical of his day" (8.55) ties him to contemporary radicals—to the cause of labor.

[101] See Scroggins' discussion of "A"-8's publication history in *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge*. Decontextualizing portions of the movement, he concludes, ultimately diminishes them (161).

[102] This is Gorski's description of the understanding of political time offered by Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, who, like Zukofsky, sought not a *return* to founding ideals, but, for the first time, the actualization of an ethical state. Zukofsky's understanding of history was shaped by Marx, Henry Adams (the subject of his Columbia

gradual, arduous progress and failures, Zukofsky's poem at once offers an alternative to the apocalyptic tendencies of his high modernist contemporaries, the perhaps overly-optimistic idealism of his fellow-travelers on the Left, and the prophetically-tinged typology of American self-imagining from the Colonial period through his own day, which too often took linear progress and a one-to-one correlation between the United States and the new/old sacred state of the Israelites for granted. Yet these recurrences do not exclude the possibility of progress or reform. Rather, the poem critiques the methodology presented in the Easter story, where redemption comes through divine, rather than human, action.[103] Zukofsky's story, by contrast, is one of the slow, difficult labor of simultaneous self- and national improvement, one prone to constant setback but never lacking in purposeful determination—a story not of redemption, but of an ongoing, self-undermining, never-completed, yet fundamentally necessary revolution.

The fragility of progress is, in fact, characteristic of the uses to which the voice and tropes of Hebrew prophecy were put by the rhetoric of the American radical tradition. Even in the best-case scenario, such rhetoric recognizes that its reforms or revolutions will not end history. "The escape it provides," James Darsey writes in his history of the role of prophecy in American radicalism, "is not a stable state. The natural entropy of the world constantly assails the fragile mythos . . . each new event must be evaluated and the people held to account" (115). Such are the progressively spiraling recurrences of Zukofsky's Exodus as it strives to nonetheless call on a particular nation and people to reform and redeem itself in the name of justice. Whatever changes are made are necessarily fragile and fraught; history, rather than

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master's thesis), and (after 1950), Edward Gibbon. Even as the relative weight of each influence shifted, he sought patterns and cycles in history. This culminated in a 1969 talk, "About the Gas Age," in which he proposed history's governance by regular cycles of solid, liquid, and gas states. Scroggins discusses the influence of Adams' phases of history throughout Zukofsky's career in an interchapter to his biography, pp. 37-47. See also Stanley 28.

[103] Looking back at the poem's opening lines—"A / Round of fiddles playing Bach" (1.1), scholars notice their connection to circular patterning within Zukofsky's vision of history. Both Easter and Passover, according to their respective religious traditions, are events that recur *again* every year as the calendar of sacred time repeats itself despite mundane time's linearity. (See Comens 138, Scroggins 85).

ending, drifts again and again into new and different iterations of the Egyptian slavery from which the community continuously struggles to free itself. In "A"-8's sweeping consideration of American history, the freedom offered by "America's land of the pilgrim jews" (8.83) devolves into armed conflict over African chattel slavery, echoes of which recur in the blue and grey of striking coal miners.[104]

Thus, labor's progress is not unimpeded. Old capitalist Pharaohs and the striking miners who oppose them are pushed aside by "Fascisti" who labor to kill men "As fast as you can breed them" (8.88). Only Henry Ford, who publicly sympathized with Nazi Germany, remains relevant: "Which of you knows Ford of this town?" the Fascists ask; "He hath a legion of angels." As they supplant the capitalists, Fascists assume their role as "Pharaoh." The narrator attempts to fit the Spanish Civil War into a paradigm that includes the "steel helmet and flashlight blue" (8.99) of trapped miners abandoned by their company and the Civil War that freed America's slaves while holding out hope that even as Nazis become "super-Nazis," they will "destroy the regime by their own excesses" (8.100).

These attempts to understand Fascism are ultimately in vain; as the 1930s draw to a close, *"A"* begins to express suspicion that both sides involved in the Spanish Civil War are aligned against labor. Losing faith with the Soviet Union in the aftermath of show trials, the anti-modernist aesthetics of socialist realism, and the Hitler-Stalin pact, the poem observes drily that, "The 'left' really / Thinks, the International is a faithful Penelope" (8.91). While the narrator was, earlier, able to crack jokes about how "The Great Boot [. . .] pinches" and Fascist leaders

[104] Darsey's understanding of apocalyptic rhetoric is also one that is decidedly anti-formalist. In this, too, Zukofsky resists the condition of modern and post-modern American radicalism, whether on the left or the right. Zukofsky wrote non-traditional verse—but of a decidedly, even obsessively, formalist nature, turning to music and engineering to offer ways to "make new" old verse forms. In addition to sonnets, sestinas, and fugues, he also invented complicated mathematical formulae to govern the recurrence of particular consonants—for example, *n* and *r* in "A"-9. For a detailed discussion of "A"-8, "A"-9, formalism, and Zukofsky, see Scroggins, *Poem of a Life* (183-9).

who cry out, “I am lost in these trousers / And empire” (8.88), as “A”-8 closes, the Exodus has changed. “[S]hrapnel haunts,” “blood reads the wounds,” and, as the people try to exit into freedom, “bullets pursue” (8.105). Pharaoh’s army now consists of Fascists with submachine guns, and anyone who resists, flees, or stands against them has become an Israelite.

IV. Prophetic Jargon (“A”-4, Yiddish, and Translation)

For Zukofsky’s poem, the importance of the Exodus lies not so much in the arrival in the Promised Land as the ways in which this traversal of geography (Egypt to Canaan; England to New World; Eastern European Jewish immigration) can be mapped onto history, language, and forms of local belonging. The emphasis falls on the act of transit itself—through history, but also through and among languages. In this way, Zukofsky establishes the Exodus as an act of translation, one that is necessary for both local belonging and cultural creativity in a new, immigrant-filled, multilingual, and “motley” United States. By the end of “A”-8, resistance to Fascism has begun to translate American belonging into a different kind of typological Jewishness: not as a “light unto the nations,” but as a reviled, oppressed outsider. This also operates on the level of language, and it is only through attention to language, translation, and Yiddish that the prophetic paradigms and covenantal poetics of Zukofsky’s writing become fully apparent. “A”-4 aligns vernacular Jewish language, the modernist avant-garde, and forms of local belonging in the modern, urban United States. Running through the pages of the New York Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*, this translational Exodus ultimately lays the foundation for and forms the referential symbology of the typological Exodus we’ve just discussed, transposed to the historical imagination.

In "A"-4, acts of translation merge with and inform acts of migration.[105] This movement suggests a solution to the problem raised by Zukofsky's joint commitment to both the local and the Exodus as historical paradigm: how does one perform an "exodus" while staying in the same place, whether on the level of neighborhood, city, or nation? "A"-4 offers acts of linguistic circulation in place of geographical movement. Through acts of translation, of carrying across borders, Zukofsky's incorporation of the American Yiddish poet Yehoash establishes the poem's (im)migratory, cosmopolitan nature. At the same time, Zukofsky utilizes Yiddish to cast the avant-garde as vernacular—as, that is, a local language or dialect. Zukofsky, to summarize, roots *"A"* in the local/vernacular (here, New York's Yiddish press and poetry) through the (cosmopolitan, [im]migratory) act of translation. This derivation of vernacular rootedness through seemingly cosmopolitan acts of migration and translation in turn models the vision of American history offered throughout *"A"*.[106]

At its most basic, "A"-4 is Zukofsky's elegy for the recently-deceased Yiddish poet Yehoash, in conversation with elegies for his mother ("A"-5) and his friend Ricky Chambers ("A"-3); it is also his argument in verse with the established American Jewish literary press.[107] The specificity of these contexts allow Zukofsky to at once root his Exodus in New York's Yiddish press and poetry, and to universalize it—to posit it as applicable beyond just Jewish history and society. Zukofsky eliminates Arnoldian distinctions between the Jewish and the European, flattening them into a version of James Joyce's "jewgreek is greekjew." Pairing translation and immigration, "A"-4 depicts them as modes of circulation—one through space, the

[105] "A"-4 was written in July of 1929 and first published, along with "A"-3, in *The New Review* 2 (May-June-July 1931): 83-88. It was later revised into its current, final form over July and August of 1942.
[106] It also links him with the aesthetics of Lola Ridge and Charles Reznikoff, whose poetries likewise place the act of (im)migration at the center of the creation of "Americanness" and "American" poetry.
[107] Specifically, the *Menorah Journal*, which had rejected Zukofsky's writing (*Poem of A Life* 86-7, 109). Finkelstein (40-45 esp.) discusses Zukofsky's relationship to the *Menorah Journal* alongside his correspondence with Pound.

other through language. The Ur-myth of the modernist avant-garde—the wanderings of Odysseus after the Trojan War—becomes, in this telling, yet another translation of the Exodus: the same story, reshaped by the act of migration.

Considered visually, the opening of "A"-4 can be read as a re-enactment of the pivotal moment of the biblical Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea. A narrow stretch of words, oriented at the center of the page divides (or perhaps provides dry land at the middle of) the page's sea of white space as the narrator gazes across a harbor. The words that stream through it depict a "Tide" among a series of lights—even "Lanterns swing behind horses" as they cross the sea—or at least the page (4.12). As the words themselves provide dry land through the water, they continue to be guided by the same points of light that led the narrator from Carnegie Hall at the beginning of "A"-1 and through his American and historical travels in "A"-6 and "A"-8. On the other shore, the mechanical horses of a carousel repeat their journey, reviewing in recurrent, circular transit the city changing around it. These images—central to the symbology and historical vision of Zukofsky's Exodus—prompt the poem's reflection on the history of Jewish immigration. Over the course of the movement, however, these stories are translated and re-translated. The paradigmatic desert-wanderers of the biblical story become the seafarers of both twentieth century immigration and Greek mythology. Indeed, "A"-2 first introduces seafaring with the image of Agamemnon, while the narrator's assertion, "My father's precursors / Set masts in dinghies, chanted the speech" (4.15) echoes the opening of Pound's depiction of Odysseus' voyage to Hades in his first *Canto*.

Like Pound and other modernists who turned to a paradigmatic (daresay typological?) Odyssey, Zukofsky incorporates his paradigm through engagement with translation. But this translational remove from the original does not serve as a source of anxiety over belatedness, as

in the works of Pound, Eliot, or Joyce. Drawing not on Homer's Greek, or its mediation through Renaissance Latin, Zukofsky's poem encounters the exodus/Odyssey through the act of translating a poem about a wandering samurai written by a Yiddish-speaking, immigrant New Yorker, itself possibly a translation from Japanese. This summary sounds like the epitome of cosmopolitanism—but careful reading of "A"-4 reveals, in fact, the opposite: that Yehoash's poetry acts as the branching roots which ground *"A"* in New York City and its Yiddish press, allowing one to enact the Exodus translationally while remaining in—and committed to—local spaces.

This is the conceit of the argument between the voices of Jewish "elders" and "youth" which dominates the poem's reflection on immigration and assimilation. These elders are "aged" (4.12) and weary; "Even the Death has gone out of us," they lament, "we are void" (4.13). Idealizing exile and diaspora, they are never able to arrive in time to settle. By contrast, the younger generation—Zukofsky's—lets Yehoash's poetry speak for them. "Heavier from day to day / Grow my limbs with sap of forests," his voice announces for a generation whose "Deep roots hammer lower" (4.14) as they long for a future in which "of every hostile see / never a memory remain" (4.16). In this last line, Zukofsky translates Yehoash's *falshe tronen* ("false thrones"—that is, treacherous governments) into a more wide-ranging pun that also dreams of a future in which the hostile *seas* which his ancestors had traversed would be forgotten. Inverting expectations, the traditional elders are condemned for their mobility while the younger, politically and culturally cosmopolitan generation is praised for its rootedness. This order of events is even more surprising in Zukofsky's poetry, in which *motion* is typically singled out for praise while the stationary demonstrate resistance to necessary change. The difference here lies in the attitude each group takes toward their motion. The elders are condemned not because they

are in motion, but because they fetishize the state of continual dispersal. The younger generation seeks out a home—a place where they can develop "deep roots" and let them "hammer lower." This aligns with the observation, by scholars of both modernist and American Jewish literature, that Zukofsky's poetry resists the language of exile.[108] Yet it suggests something more: a way in which we might discuss his poetry—and, indeed, American Jewish and modernist culture—without recourse to the language of exile.[109] Cosmopolitan in behavior and speech, this younger generation is rooted but not stationary. Their motion is embedded within specific places: the United States writ large, New York City in particular, or the pages of their literary cultures.

Onto this debate about *spatial* exile and rootedness, the elders and youth transpose their linguistic differences. Indeed, it resides at the heart of the elders' complaint. Where they "had a Speech, our children have evolved a jargon" (4.12), a charge that they repeat immediately before the movement shifts into translations from Yehoash's Yiddish. On the one hand, this points toward a cross-cultural trope: the tension between an official, elite, or literary "standard" (capital-S "Speech") and local, dialect, or vernacular languages ("jargon"). This lament, too, strikes at the story of modern Jewish culture—and not merely as a complaint about the kids these days, their poetry, their assimilation. Rather, the Speech/jargon dichotomy roots "A"-4 in the history of Yiddish language and cultural production, specifically. The language, even by those who advocated for its use as a literary language, was regularly referred to as *zhargon*—jargon.

[108] For instance, Zukofsky appears in Maeera Shreiber's *Singing in a Strange Land* (2007) as a figure who "complicates" (124) questions of exile and Diaspora, which she sees as essential for the creation of both identity and meaning among twentieth-century American Jewish poets. Ultimately, she concludes that he "proposes an end to exile, suggesting perhaps that it is time for Jews to claim America as home" (123). Yet many scholars ultimately fall back on the very language they concede does not fit. Steve Shoemaker reads "Poem Beginning 'The'" as a critique of high modernism as "unequipped to understand the true hardships, and terrors, of the Diaspora"—yet concludes that this model is replaced by "a larger story of exile, contact, and survival" (36, 42). Comens, contrasting Zukofsky with Williams and Pound, sees a rejection of apocalyptic exile for the proposal of a leisurely exile in which the journey, rather than the destination, is the purpose (143, 187).

[109] As Barbara Mann observes in *Space and Place in Jewish Studies*, "the condition of exile has historically been mediated by an attachment to local place." Indeed, the condition of exile is not, in her reading, coterminous with that of Diaspora, but "usually predates even anticipates, the condition of diaspora," which, although it "often emerges from a displaced or uprooted situation, it also endures as a practice of putting down roots" (98).

This distinction between a capitalized Speech and a lower-case jargon is also that made in the competition between languages, whether that of Hebraists against Yiddishists, or the attitudes of non-Jewish German linguists against Yiddish speakers.[110] Jargon is not, that is to say, a sign of assimilation, but that they have "passed over to the ostracized" (4.13): with Yiddish speakers against Hebraists and broader European culture—and, more importantly, with those like the bearded, rag-clothed beggar in "A"-1, who are economically or politically cast aside, who become significant as individuals only with consideration of a given stoop, street, or alleyway.

"A"-4 makes clear that this can also refer to *cultural* ostracism, perceived by Zukofsky to be the fate of avant-garde modernism and his own unsettled position within it. The high modernists whom Zukofsky admired were increasingly well-known—but as objects of bemusement, newspaper parody, or scandalous vulgarity.[111] Early drafts of "A"-4 explicitly position its author within this context. In these, the elders' generational critique excerpts a rejection letter Zukofsky received from the *Menorah Journal* (a leading periodical of American Jewish intellectual and cultural life, which frequently published Zukofsky's friend and fellow poet Charles Reznikoff) as well as an article—published in its pages—in which a former Columbia professor dismisses him as "inarticulate."[112] From its position among the ostracized, jargon—Yiddish—enables Zukofsky to unite the concerns of the working class and the avant-garde. This ostracism helps to establish Zukofsky's avant-garde poetics as a *prophetic jargon*—that is, a variation on dialect and vernacular that is able to resist ephemeality of periodical and

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[110] At the turn of the 20th century, a contentious debate developed over whether there was a "national language" of the Jewish people—and, if so, whether this language was Yiddish or Hebrew. The beginning of a full-blown "language war" between the two camps is typically dated to the 1908 Tzhernovits (Czernowitz) Conference, at which European Jewish intellectuals and writers debated precisely the question of such a national language.

[111] See Karen Leick, "Popular Modernism: Little Magazines and the American Daily Press" (*PMLA* 2008), 125-39.

[112] *Poem of A Life* 86-7. The article is Mark Van Doren's "Jewish Students I Have Known." Typescripts of early drafts can be found in the Louis Zukofsky Collection at the Henry Ransom Center at UT-Austin (Box 1, Folders 4-5). Several years later, Zukofsky would revise the rejected article (an assessment of Reznikoff's poetry) for publication in the 1931 *Poetry* special issue he guest-edited, as "Sincerity and Objectification: with Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff."

"topical" literature. As the language of Zukofsky's poetry, it places the avant-garde in the language of the street: that is to say, it roots and thereby radicalizes it.

By proclaiming modernism the language of the powerless, Zukofsky's prophetic jargon re-imagines modernism's use of dialect and vernacular speech, resisting the objectifying power dynamic between "standard" and "dialect." For writers like Eliot and Pound, dialect served two purposes: through appropriating the voices of racial and ethnic others, they were able to find creative "newness" and "energy" while also "masking" their own status as outsiders in London and Europe.[113] Although this is most extensively the case with African American dialect, Yiddish also played this role for Pound, as in "Der Yittischer Charleston Band," a poem he sent to Zukofsky for inclusion in the 1931 *"Objectivists" Anthology*:

> Red hot Mary of Magdala
> Had nine jews and a Roman fellow
> Nah she'z gotta chob much swellah
> Mit der yiddisher Charleston Band.
> Mit der YIDDISHER
> Charleston BAND.[114]

And so on. Still, Pound's intention—or at least not his primary intention—or at least not his *only* intention—does not seem to have been giving offense to the three Jewish editors of the volume. Rather, he sets out to capture the qualities he noted in a 1929 letter to Zukofsky that suggests "all [German's] idiomatic energy [is] being drawn off into Yiddish," a claim which Zukofsky's reply does not contest.[115] Pound sees in Yiddish a language with the messy, perpetually-transgressed

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[113] Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism* discusses this concept at length; with respect to Pound and Eliot's use of dialect in letters and poetry, see especially pp. 77-99.
[114] *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, 44-45. By contrast, Eliot consented to the inclusion of "Marina"; William Carlos Williams, of "The Botticellian Trees."
[115] *Pound/Zukofsky* 26. EP to LZ, Dec. 9, 1929. During the time he was writing the first movements of *"A"*, Zukofsky corresponded regularly with Pound, who was as much his intellectual adversary as mentor and friend. They clashed regularly over politics, economics, and the nature of history.

boundaries he idealizes—possessing the energy necessary to make staid language new.[116] What this looks like in practice, however, is an offensive actualization of everything that James Weldon Johnson feared about the use of dialect verse.

On the other hand, Yiddish brings to Zukofsky's covenantal poetics what the voice of the preacher brings to Johnson's: the ability to establish a literary register capable of drawing on both English or high-cultural heritage and that of a vernacular people and language. Yiddish, this is to say, doesn't bring ragtime to Zukofsky's poetry, but enables it, like the fugal master Bach, to remain "motley" (1.1) while composing "Clear music" (2.6). Yiddish was the language of Zukofsky's home life, in which he spoke to his parents and older sister throughout their lives (and in which, not believing he would marry a Jew, they tested Celia Zukofsky when first introduced)[117]—but it was also the language in which he first encountered *literary* culture, going with his brother to see performances of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Ibsen in the Yiddish theatre, and memorizing swaths of Yehoash's translation of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.[118] It is at once the voice of a corner of Manhattan and also a *cosmopolitan* voice—one with outposts in Vienna, Warsaw, Moscow, Berlin, Israel. Like the structure of *"A"* itself, Yiddish is not *hybrid*, but contains fugal multitudes.[119] To write modernist poetry is to write in something that resembles (in everything but the words themselves), the Yiddish of the Zukofsky family home—

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[116] George Bornstein, for instance, notes that the lines "extend Pound's efforts to break standard patterns of meter and diction in his search to make them new. Either way they display the mixing of groups and levels characteristic not only of melting pots and popular cultures but of modernism in general" (161).

[117] She passed—"I speak Yiddish as well as I speak English," she would recall along with this story. (Terrell, "Conversations with Celia," 591-2).

[118] *Poem of A Life* 18; *Autobiography* 33.

[119] Such multiplicity is a defining feature of Zukofsky's poetics. The poem declares itself ot be "One song / Of many voices" (5.18). These are the voices of the texts, narratives, and individuals Zukofsky draws into the poem—all of them in counter-point, creating "[t]he song out of the voices" (2.8). Words and phrases, likewise, can indicate multiple references at once—sound chords as well as single notes. The fugal structure of *"A"*, this is to say, is not an element that works alongside or in conjunction with the casting of his poetic language as a Yiddish-derived "jargon," but precisely its structural iteration.

where, as of 1930, Zukofsky still lived as he began the first movements of *"A"*.[120] He writes from a position among the "ostracized," in a "jargon"— poetics cobbled together from snatches of language the poet-narrator discovers or overhears during his peregrinations: street talk, music from Carnegie Hall, speeches delivered on the radio, the words he reads in newspapers or volumes of poetry, the manifestos of striking laborers.[121]

For Zukofsky, the figure through whom these qualities are channeled—the analogue to James Weldon Johnson's preacher—is the American Yiddish poet Yehoash (1872-1927). Yehoash's poetry was regularly read to and then by Zukofsky beginning in his childhood; he recalled reciting portions of Yehoash's translation of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* as a way of amusing and warding off Italian bullies otherwise intent on beating him in retribution for the crucifixion.[122] Born Solomon Bloomgarden in present-day Lithuania (then part of the Russian empire), Yehoash immigrated to New York City in 1890. In many respects a boundary-breaking transgressor, his reputation was founded on his incorporation of the foreign and "exotic" into Yiddish. Zukofsky described the arc of his career in a 1974 letter to Hugh Kenner: "starting out in the 1910's or earlier sounding like Heine, he ended up with "freer" American forms, western subject matter & Japanese, Chinese, Palestinian travels etc (had lived in Colorado etc to cure (?) his TB)."[123] These translations and verse adaptations of folklore appeared regularly in New York's Yiddish newspapers. His best-known and most influential works were translations into

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[120] *Poem of A Life* 61.

[121] The antecedents of *jargon* in Middle English and Old French refer to the noise of overlapping talk, of chatter—precisely that which an untrained ear might hear as a multitude of voices speaking at once, quite like both vernacular English, slangy and foreignized in the minds of its critics, and toward the simultaneously sounded notes and overlapping voices of a fugue.

[122] LZ to Hugh Kenner (1/30/74). Hugh Kenner Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, UT-Austin, Box 50, Folder 5; and *Poem of A Life*18. *Dos lid fun Hiavata* was published in 1910, when Zukofsky was six years old.

[123] LZ to HK (1/30/74). Hugh Kenner Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, UT-Austin, Box 50, Folder 5. Beyond what Zukofsky listed in his letter, Yehoash's works also drew on the conceits of English Romanticism, Tamburlaine, the Buddha, and others.

Yiddish: *Dos lid fun Hayavata* (1910) and a translation of Hebrew Bible into Yiddish, published serially in the pages of *Der Tog*, the same paper Zukofsky acknowledged was his working source for the Yiddish materials in *"A"* and "The," between 1904 and 1927.[124]

These Biblical translations proclaimed both the necessity and the legitimacy of transforming the "Speech" of Zukofsky's Jewish elders into the "jargon" of modern Yiddish poetry. At a moment when the Yiddish- and Hebrew-language movements among Jewish literati were increasingly divergent and antagonistic (the tension between "Speech" and "jargon"), Yehoash believed that a translation of the great literary work of both Jewish tradition and Hebrew literature into Yiddish might serve as a foundational document for that language's future literary culture. [125] (Quite like, in this respect, the role of the King James Bible in English.)[126] The aesthetic quality of this translation distinguished it from earlier Yiddish versions of the Bible: it could stand as literature, seeking to create, as Yiddish scholar Shlomo Berger writes, "the basis of a new common Yiddish high language" by bringing the diction and cadences of Biblical Hebrew into Yiddish (627). [127] At the same time, it mirrors James Weldon Johnson's use of a "jargon" or vernacular voice whose dialect and biblical origins are coterminous as the means to bring biblical or prophetic frameworks into his poetry. When Zukofsky's own own "jargon" poetry does so, it follows the model of his first great literary model.

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[124] At the time of Yehoash's death in January 1927, he was an editor at *Der Tog*. The last installment it published ran on May 6, 1927—the books of Zechariah and Malachi. His Yiddish Tanakh was also published as a book in 1926 (and again in 1938 and 1941).

[125] See Gilman 48-50 and Berger, "On Yehoyesh's Preface," which considers the Bible translation in the context of the quest for a Jewish national literature, in both Hebrew and Yiddish (pp. 627-9 especially).

[126] This, of course, also recalls the confluence of a mythical African vernacular with the King James Bible that James Weldon Johnson described in the "Preface" to *God's Trombones*—and enacted in its poetry. (See pp. 39-40.)

[127] Reading the preface to the 1941 edition of Yehoash's Bible, Shlomo Berger sees that the poet's project is also deeply preservationist. Yehoash set himself the task of "help[ing] in fixing the words and idioms that would otherwise disappear, words that the מלמד [*melamed*, teacher] used in the חדר [*kheyder*, schoolhouse] and which are no disappearing, along with the חדר itself" (627). This preservationist instinct resembles Johnson's motivations—in *God's Trombones* and as the editor of the *Book of American Negro Verse* and *Book of American Negro Song*—while also presaging Zukofsky's and Johnson's attempts to capture a vernacular voice without making use of the disparaging power dynamics of dialect verse.

Indeed, Zukofsky's career as a poet appears to have begun with an attempt to bring Yehoash's biblical Yiddish into English modernism. In 1920, still a sixteen year-old Columbia freshman, he submitted translations of Yehoash's works to *Poetry*, announcing in his cover letter that Yehoash "is, as you may know, one of the greatest Yiddish poets."[128] Harriet Monroe demurred, but these translations are among the few pieces of his juvenilia which were not eventually disowned as the work of "Dunn Wythe."[129] Incorporating them into "A"-4, Zukofsky does more than continue to claim a place for Yiddish within American modernism. He pulls the poem from the staid confines of Carnegie Hall and into the lively, literary pages—the "leaves"—of the Yiddish daily *Der Tog*—the newspaper which Zukofsky acknowledged he both used as his working source for the Yehoash translations and read through 1928, while he was still living in his Yiddish-speaking father's home.[130]

The two poems translated at greatest length in "A"-4 are "Shimone-san" and "Tsu der zun" ("To the Sun"). They first appeared in the January 19, 1919 and September 26, 1920 editions of *Der Tog*. As was almost always the case for Yehoash's works, they appeared on the paper's middle sheet, on the left-hand page typically reserved for coverage of arts and culture, set apart from the rest of the text in larger font and framed with a stylized border. On the right-hand side of the fold was the paper's editorial page and a political cartoon. Yehoash's poems,

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[128] LZ to HM 9/1/20 (*Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* Records 1895-1961, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Box 43, Folder 3). A stamp in the margin of Zukofsky's cover letter indicates that the enclosed poems were returned to him on 10/15/20; they do not survive in the Zukofsky Collection at Texas but could plausibly contain early versions of the poems he translated in "The" and "A"-4, which appeared in *Der Tog* throughout 1919-1921.

[129] Rather than destroying or discarding these works, Zukofsky prepared them as a self-deprecating typescript, sending a copy to Lorine Niedecker, his correspondent and fellow "Objectivist" poet. Holograph and typescript are in the Harry Ransom Center Louis Zukofsky Collection at UT-Austin (Box 15, Folder 2).

[130] In a letter to Hugh Kenner, Zukofsky explained: "Yes passages in 'A-4' double quotes beg. p19 "Rain blows, light," thru p.22 are all translated from his work (various quotes from one of his late volumes, I'd say about the time I did them, '28 or earlier from the original newspaper publication—a daily called The Day (in American)." They corresponded several times about this poem in the 1970s; a transliterated manuscript of Yehoash's "Shimone-san," apparently dictated by the grandmother of one of Kenner's students, can also be found in his papers. Hugh Kenner Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, UT-Austin, Box 50, Folder 4.

including those not incorporated into *"A"*, were surrounded by works of literary criticism, political essays, and serialized novels. Luminaries of Yiddish literary culture and political activism—Avrom Reysen, Chaim Zhitlovsky, Nahum Syrkin, H. Leyvick—all appear. On the days that "Shimone-san" and "Tsu der zun" were printed, adjacent literary essays link them with the Yiddish avant-garde. A column by the writer and critic Shmuel Niger appears directly above "Shimone-san," discussing the new *Inzikhist* movement of Yiddish modernist poetry. Niger objected to the movement's pure aestheticism, insisting, like Zukofsky, on poetry genuinely committed to both politics and aesthetics, sacrificing neither for the other. The *Inzikhistn* and their eponymous journal, *In Zikh*, were a decidedly American school of Yiddish modernism influenced by Pound and Eliot—on occasion, they have been compared to Zukofsky and other "Objectivist" poets. This is not without cause; arising in roughly the same time and place, their modernisms resemble one another in many ways. One of the central figures of this movement, an editor of its journal and co-founder of its manifesto, appeared regularly in *Der Tog* during this period as a literary critic and cultural commentator. A. Glantz (known among *Inzikhistn* as A. Leyeles, and alternately in scholarship as A[ron] Glantz-Leyeles) also sparred regularly with Niger on questions of aesthetics and politics over the course of the 1920s. These columns appeared frequently on the same page as Yehoash's poetry—and directly below "Tsu der zun."

If this roots Yehoash's poetry—and thereby Zukofsky's—in the avant-garde, high-cultural contexts established by the paper's ambitious literary editors, the newspaper itself roots these very aspirations within the noisy, everyday life of immigrant New York—just as Yehoash and later Zukofsky insist on rooting cosmopolitan, translational aesthetics within a local, vernacular language—Yiddish's *zhargon*. Founded in 1914, in the years immediately following the First World War *Der Tog* re-imagined itself as a newspaper for educated, intelligent, literary

readers. Major literary figures were among its contributing editors (Yehoash, Niger and Leyeles, among others, all held the title.) High literary culture existed alongside coverage of strikes, the lampooning of tycoons, name- and off-brand product advertisements, parenting columns, children's stories, and the perpetual back-page ad for Ex-Lax, proclaiming each day to *Mames!* ("Mothers!") how much easier it is to silence children at bedtime after they've been fed a spoonful.

So we might read "A"-1's declaration that "It was also Passover" (1.3) not merely as marking Zukofsky's outsider status, but as insisting on *Der Tog*'s rooted aestheticism as the the appropriate (and perhaps truest) grounding for works of "high" literary culture. *"A"* begins with an Easter-eve performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at Carnegie Hall, in which Zukofsky, the aspiring son of an immigrant pants-presser, looked on by the usher as an interloper who does not know the proper etiquette of concert-going, gazes on the "bediamond" upper class audience in its "full black dress." His thoughts trail immediately to the first, very different performances of the *St. Matthew Passion*, its harried composer and chatty, lower-class audience, and prompt him to wonder, "Dead century, where are your motley[?]" (1.1). By establishing this motley, patchwork poetics—a blending of high and low, "Speech" and "jargon," where jackhammers and Bach's music coexist—*"A"* depicts a *translational* Exodus: not merely from Carnegie Hall to city sidewalks, but from Western high culture to the vivid, vibrant, and prophetic "jargon" of Yiddish culture (which, Zukofsky implies, is closer in its "motley" to the original setting and spirit of the "great" works and books than their contemporary performances).

The images which come to define Zukofsky's Exodus appear throughout the daily issues of *Der Tog*. For instance, light—a major conceptual point of reference throughout the poem as a whole and especially for its Exodus motif—is also an important image in *Der Tog*'s self-

fashioning.[131] Its masthead at the time that the Yehoash poems translated in "A"-4 were first published offers two distinct English and Yiddish slogans. The English—"The National Yiddish Daily"—is a claim of credibility. The Yiddish, on the other hand, is an idealistic yet concise statement of purpose: '*Der Tog' brengt likht—Der Tog* ("The Day") brings light. This guiding light recurred every day in the paper's logo—a globe bracketed by two lit torches—and throughout the poems Yehoash regularly published in its pages.[132]

When first encountered in "A"-1, this guiding light takes the form of the flaming tip of Zukofsky's cigarette. It is, notably, a Camel. The image of its 1928 packaging—a camel, a desert, and three pyramids—also proliferated in ads on the pages of *Der Tog* over the course of 1919-1921. Indeed, one version of this ad seems to presage the recurrence of Zukfosky's guiding cigarette in "A"-5, when it also contains an image of the New York cityscape: "A cigarette, / Leaf-edge, burning / obliquely urban" (5.17). As the disarranged cigarettes peek out from the open packaging, they cast a shadow on the page. This shadow, however, does not match the even cylinders of the cigarettes: it is, indeed, "obliquely urban," looking more like a cut-out of an urban skyline than an accurate representation of the shadow the package should have cast.[133] Camels, it wants to say, are a *New York* cigarette. (As they were. Beginning in 1941, as Zukofsky made final revisions, Camel's famous smoke-blowing Times Square billboard

[131] In Zukofsky's index, "light" receives roughly one-hundred entries.
[132] Studies of the poetry of Emma Lazarus suggest that her works both associate the image of the lamp or torch with "Jewish consciousness" (Wolosky 114) and "America's historical advantage of over the 'ancient lands' . . . attained through its use of the Hebrew's immortalizing lamp of truth as a basis for its own political and social vision" (Marom 248). See, e.g., Max Cavitch, "Emma Lazarus and the Golem of Liberty," *American Literary History* 18.1 (Spring 2006), 1-28; Daniel Marom, "Who Is the 'Mother of Exiles'? An Inquiry into Jewish Aspects of Emma Lazarus's 'The New Colossus'," *Prooftexts* 20.3 (Fall 2000), 231-61; and Shira Wolosky, "An American Jewish Typology: Emma Lazarus and the Figure of Christ," *Prooftexts* 16.2 (May 1996), 113-125. This re-Judaized/Hebraicized lamp of truth enters American thought especially, they argue, through "The New Colossus." There is circumstantial evidence, this is, that in the United States a torch or lamp carried connotations beyond a generalized "truth" or "knowledge" even without considering *Der Tog*'s masthead.
[133] Compare this image, for instance, with the New York skyline of George Grosz's 1934 painting, *Lower Manhattan*.

became part of the New York City landscape, its most notable ad.)[134] In the ad's foreground, the torn foil wrapper crinkles like the desert—this is, indeed, Zukofsky's New York as Egypt, embodied in the Camel cigarettes he smokes.

[134] "Fading thru Camel smoke," as Zukofsky puts it in "A"-1, took on a more literal meaning as this section of the poem was finalized. The billboard stood until 1966.

דאָנערשטאג, 13טער נאָוועמבער, 1919 — דער טאָג — 8 — THE DAY and THE WARHEIT — THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1919

וואָס מענער זיינען

א ראָמאַן פון היינטיגען לעבען, ספּעציעל געשריבען פאר דעם „טאָג" פון ראָזאַ לובין

דעם משומד'ס קינדער

פון לעאָן ליפשיץ

אינפלוענציע
HILL'S CASCARA QUININE BROMIDE

Camel CIGARETTES

קעמעלס זיינען פול-קרעפטיג, אבער אזוי געשמאַק מילד און גלאַט דאס איהר'ט זיי רופען א סיגאַרעט ענטדעקונג! זיי זיינען א שטענדיגע פערגעניגען

א יהר'ט פאַרציעהען קעמעל סיגאַרעטס עקספּערט געמישט פון געקליבענע טערקישע און געקליבענע היגע טאַבאַקען צו יעדען-סאָרט געראַוכערט ניט געמישט. אייער געשמאַק וועט דאָס אָפּשאַצען.

קעמעלס זיינען אזא אויסנאַהם אין טעם, ריח און אין זיסקייט, דאס איהר וועט שנעל בעגרייפען זייער וואונדערבאַרע קוואַליטי.

איהר קענט נאָכגעבען אייער שטאַרקסטען וואונש זיי צו סמאָוקען ליבעראַל — קעמעל סיגאַרעטס וועלען ניט פערמאַטערען אייער טעם!

אייער פערגעניגען ווערט גרעסער וואס מעהר איהר בעקענט זיך מיט די קעמעלס — זיי געבען אייך אזוי פיעל סיגאַרעט צופרידענהייט.

קעמעלס פּאַסען זיך צו אייער געשמאַק פּונקט ווי זיי וואָלטען געווען געמאַכט ספּעציעל פאַר אייך!

קעמעלס זיינען אַנדערש ווי וועלכער סיגאַרעט וואס איהר האָט וועלן געראַוכערט. צום ביישפּיעל, זיי לאָזען ניט איבער קיין אונאנגענעהמען סיגאַרעט נאָך-טעם אדער סיגאַרעט ריח.

אין אמת'ן איז קעמעלס אין א בעזונדער קלאַס פאַר זיך! דאַרום הייסען מיר אייך פערגלייכען קעמעלס מיט וועלכע סיגאַרעטס אין דער וועלט צו יעדען פּרייז!

איהר וועט ניט זוכען אדער וועלען פּרימיומס, קופּאָנע, אדער מתנות, איהר וועט בעסער וועלען קעמעל קוואַליטי!

R. J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO CO.
Winston-Salem, N. C.

פאַרליערט אייער פּעטס, האַלט אייער געזונד

דאַרפט איהר עפּעס אין וואשינגטאָן
אלפרעד קליין
ALFRED KLEIN
Cavanaugh Courts
Washington, D. C.

[Illustration 6: "Obliquely urban" Camel ad. Der Tog*, Nov. 13, 1919]*

Advertisements from this period reveal that cigarettes and Egypt were firmly connected in the minds of both readers and advertisers. While occasional ads by the likes of Prince William Cigarettes tried to make a pitch for the high-class elegance of British tobacco, the overwhelming majority of those appearing in *Der Tog* seek to capitalize on the exoticism of their brand—and that exoticism, no matter the origin of the company or product, seemed to be best highlighted through Egyptian imagery, sometimes taking up half a page. Consider this ad (Figure 2) for Helmar Cigarettes, variations of which appeared in *Der Tog* from 1919-20: It promises, in both English and Yiddish, that these cigarettes are made from "100%" Turkish tobacco. To reinforce this, they adorn their packaging with—the profile of a pharaoh and pillars of hieroglyphics?

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18, 1919. THE DAY and THE WARHEIT — 9 — דער טאג

HELMAR

15¢

TURKISH CIGARETTES

באטראכט עס גוט אליין-

מאנופעקטשורערס פון באנדעל סיגארעטס מאכען א גאנ־
צען טאראראם וועגען דעם, וואס זיי לייגען אריין א „לאקש"
אמת'ען טערקישען טאבאק אין זייערע ברענדס.

ווי באלד אזוי, דענקט איהר ניט אז העלמאר דארף קלא־
פען מיט פויק און טאצען ווייל ער איז 100% ריינער טערקישער
טאבאק

איהר האט דעם ענטפער — ריכטיג ווי „דער גאווערנאר" זאגט — טערקי־
שער איז דער מילדעסטער און בעסטער טאבאק פאר סיגארעטס.

Quality-Superb

WRIGLEY'S

געהאלטען בעהאלטען
און ספעציאל און פערזענ־
ליך פאר דיר איז

ריגלי'ס

אין דעם וואקס־געוויקעלטען
לופט פערשלאסענעם
פעקעדוש.

א גוטע זאך וואס איז ווערט
זאלסט עס לאנג געדענקען
ווייל די קוואליטי געדויערט
לאנג.

[Illustration 7: Ads for Helmar Cigarettes and Wrigley's Chewing Gum. Der Tog*, 6/18/19]*

Egyptian pharaohs are not the only ones depicted in this newspaper. Zukofsky's modern pharaohs are alternately critiqued and lampooned—tycoons and magnates—on the editorial pages opposite those containing Yehoash's poems and discussions of modernism, as in this August 13, 1919 cartoon, which first appeared on the page directly opposite Yehoash's "Af di khurves," which Zukofsky translated at length in "The":

[Illustration 8: Der Tog*, 8/13/19]*

Here, we see a man who might as well be Zukofsky's Magnus, the wealthy tycoon who figures prominently in "A"-1 and "A"-8. Rotund, gleeful, and bursting from his vest and suit pants, he has been placed on a pedestal so that he will be taller than Uncle Sam, even when the symbol of America stands erect. The label on his belly, *yekires*, can alternately refer to famine/scarcity, high prices, or the one who insists upon them—implying, in this case, that his demand for high prices has caused scarcity and hunger—and the profits have gone straight to his belly. On

September 9, 1919, the same figure appears again, labeled as *koilen magnat*—coal magnate—the exact role Magnus plays in "A"-1. Meanwhile, Uncle Sam lambastes a hapless miner. Opposite the fold—the poetry of Yehoash. On the front page—news that immigrants were being arrested as "radicals" nationwide in connection with the advent of a major United Mine Workers strike.

As these images and others recur throughout *"A"* and its re-imagining of the typology of the Exodus, they establish *translation* as its backbone.[135] By embracing the claim that Yiddish is the jargon language of outsiders, aligning it with the true meaning of the avant-garde, and embedding acts of translation to and from Yiddish throughout his exodus, Zukofsky makes a second—and crucially important—revision to the typology of American civil-religious self-imagination. The United States, as we've seen, is cast not as Promised Land, but rather a wilderness to be traversed or an Egypt to be reformed. What "A"-4's prophetic jargon asserts is not that the typological association of "American" with "Israelite" the Exodus establishes should be rejected, but that the second term should be translated, so to speak, into Yiddish: Americans as Jews, as *yidn* (simply the Yiddish word for "Jews") and, especially, the perjorative "yids." The typological revisions of *"A"* proclaim that the true meaning of being a "chosen people" is not greatness, power, or election. (Those who believe this are those "Who most probably will never read a line of verse / And who most likely never having been to Egypt" [8.86].) It means, rather, to take one's place among the demeaned, marginalized, and oppressed—to think of oneself as a slave in the land of Egypt.

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[135] For example, beyond the images and motifs already discussed, *Der Tog* also contains versions of the idyllic Wrigley's chewing gum ads Zukofsky would include in the early movements of *"A"*. Embodied in the various iterations of Zukofsky's "wriggly Wrigley boys," these images are associated with cross-country train travel and the passage out of urban as the poem enacts its American exodus. One advertisement in *Der Tog* (placed beside the half-page "Egyptian" Helmar's ad in Figure 2) presents the image of a grandfather holding a child in one arm and the gum in another. It promises intergenerational unity, an American product for the older, Yiddish-speaking readers to share with their American offspring. Wrigley's builds bridges: between generations, languages, and cultures. Like Camel, Wrigley's was an unavoidably prominent Times Square advertiser, where, from the 1920s through 1960, it placed a 250' by 70' electric billboard that it advertised as "The largest electric sign in the world."

V. Conclusion: The Rise of Fascism and "A"-10's Typological Imperative

"A"-10, one might say, is the most explicitly prophetic portion of the poem. This does not derive from what hindsight tells us—that, in the summer of 1940, Zukofsky saw the inevitability of something startlingly like the Holocaust which did follow—or from the claim to any supernatural vision or conversation. But the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and other Hebrew prophets are, above all, tremendously difficult and highly stylized poems that also function as calls to action—or, failing that, revolution. "A"-10 deploys a revision of American typological self-imagination, relying on the knowledge that Americans utilize the exodus to understand their own nation's founding and purpose. Through its reliance on the typology of American civil religious discourse, the poem recalls and revises an American covenantal community, seeking to spur Americans to action, despite the buffer provided by the Atlantic Ocean. Germany and fascist ideology offer existential threats to the United States—perhaps militarily, but more importantly, by undercutting the acts of migration and immigration at its core. By the time of "A"-10, Zukofsky's re-imagining of the biblical and prophetic typology of American civil religion and political rhetoric has become explicitly political. He has recast Americans as "pilgrim jews" and insists that to understand American history and its role in a world where France has fallen, it is necessary to see oneself not as a happy denizen of the New Jerusalem, but as a refugee who was once a slave in the land of Egypt.

The crisis of Fascism in *"A"* culminates in "A"-10, written in the summer of 1940. As it opens, the poem is again planted on familiar New York City streets as its narrator listens in impatient horror to radio updates on the Nazi invasion of France. The formal structure of this

movement is that of an inverted, or "black" Mass.[136] But just as "A"-1's formal structure is not only Christological, neither are "A"-10's reversals.[137] What he listens to depicts a reversal of the Exodus paradigm his poem has relied on to this point. "All the people of Paris" have become "Mass, massed refugees on the roads" (10.112), seeking desperately to escape into freedom from the coming onslaught. The poet freezes in horror, muttering only that, "The song passed out of voices / As freedom goes out of speech" (10.112). Having crossed the Red Sea into their freedom, the first thing the Israelites do is stop their march and sing. Until now, Zukofsky's song has never stopped. The advent of the Second World War is a turning point in the poem—but at the moment of its composition, with the future still uncertain, Zukofsky sees a Fascist threat that understands history as well as he does—but has the power necessary to manipulate it to its own ends.[138]

Where, in "A"-4 and "A"-8, America's history of immigration holds forth the promise of Exodus and revolution, "A"-10's Fascists use forced migrations to impose their own order. Immigration promises multiplicity: of ethnicity, language, history, culture—a city, that is, always in motion. When Hitler speaks in "A"-8, he and his people are weary and desire to settle—Jews are to blame for their inability to do so. To accomplish this demands a destruction of any possibility of Exodus. They must, that is, kill Jews. Hitler's speech pins the motion of Exodus on Jews alone: it is *the* Jewish condition, and one in which they attempt to immerse the world. Magnus and Henry Ford exploit laborers, but Hitler demands that humanity come to a full stop—

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[136] This is as noted in a handwritten comment at the end of a 1940 TS of "A"-10. Box 3, Folder 4 LZ Collection.

[137] "A"-10 also draws on the liturgical tradition of Judaism—and inverts this as well. Consider for example, "The Giver of life makes the dying come" (10.120), an allusion to, inversion, and compression of the "Mkhayei Meitim" section of the daily Amidah prayers: "You give life to the dead and have great power to save. He sustains the living with loving-kindness, and with great compassion revives the dead. He supports the fallen, heals the sick, sets captives free, and keeps faith with those who sleep in the dust. Who is like you and to whom can you be compared, O King who brings death and gives life?"

[138] Comens considers this turn the "pivotal" moment of *"A"*'s twist (153); Scroggins calls it a "striking turn" from the style of earlier movements (200); and Ahearn claims it shows the war's "strain on its author" (*Introduction* 102).

that history end—that, motionless, nothing but death exist. Nazis are "the sailors who mistook their planet / for a light / And took the wrong soundings" (10.123).

Their threat manifests itself in an ability to co-opt the symbols central to Zukofsky's Exodus. The guiding lights become part of their "lightning attack" (10.118) while civilians huddle "in the blackout" (10.115) in fear of "the / stringed lights of the bombers" (10.120).[139] Likewise, Fascists do not simply prevent an exodus into freedom, but seize and transform it into its opposite. "Battered France halts her railroads / To freeze the flight south of her millions" (10.113-4), while in Germany, "Feet trap all / Air traps all" (10.119). Escape is impossible because the borders are controlled—but also because the direction of migration is forcibly reversed: "Return return," proclaims Petain's government, "Men women children of France / ten million / Troop back to your occupied north" (10.114). Germany's war strategy is more than just blitzkrieg:

> Driving both aliens and citizens under dive bombers
> Herding peasants into firing onslaught of tanks
> Plotting plebiscites migrations
> Hunger for all but themselves
> Moving entire cities to certain death (10.117)

The Nazis do not merely kill—they deliberately drive, herd, move, and force migrations of people *from* freedom into "Slavery Penury Ruin" (10.116).

Nazi crimes take two forms in "A"-10: the closing of borders that halts both refugees and e/immigration, as well as the murder of Jews. They offer a two-pronged threat to the vision of America that *"A"* presents. As in the poetry of Lola Ridge and Charles Reznikoff, to which this dissertation will soon turn, Zukofsky insists that "Americanness" is established through the actions of migration and immigration. The poem itself is constantly in motion, and offers the

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[139] The earth that, in "A"-1, had opened to swallow the new idolaters here consumes the city of Rotterdam in its entirety. Jews, meanwhile, are thrown "into middle Europe's rivers" or, on Kristallnacht lynched in effigy (10.119).

Exodus—the account of a people in the act of migration—as the biblical metaphor most suited to the United States; “A”-4, as we saw, insists that the language of modernism is like Yiddish, the language of the Jewish diaspora and, in New York, the language of immigrants. To close borders, to stop in place, settle—well, even before “A”-10, when the poem’s targets were still the Jewish elders of the rabbinate and the *Menorah Journal* editorial board, this was the action that undercut self-making. The difference is one of scale: it is a shame when other individuals stop themselves in place and attempt to persuade others to do so. But they never had the power to do this a nation—to effectively un-make America.

Zukofsky’s poetry serves as a limit case in sketching the a covenantal poetics in American modernism. At the same time, his poetry allows us to broaden its formal and contextual possibilities. For James Weldon Johnson, framing poetry within the discourse of covenant allows his works to presuppose a broader, all-encompassing American citizenship, both legally and culturally. His works seek to establish a covenantal community among readers not as a plea for the establishment of full citizenship, but to assert that African Americans, because they are and have always been members of this shared, covenantal congregation, have always been full members of the group. As A.J. Levine puts it in her comparison of covenant and law, “Covenantal stipulations . . . do not earn one standing or election: standing or election are presupposed.”[140] Zukofsky’s *“A”*, by contrast, is by far the most “difficult” and avant-garde of the works discussed in this dissertation. His poetry is also the most private—even when cast in terms of covenant.By far the most “difficult” and avant-garde of the poets discussed in this dissertation, Zukofsky’s poetry is also the most private—even when cast in terms of covenant. The covenantal community *“A”* works to develop is pedagogical: the poem teaches an individual reader to see himself or herself as a member of a covenantal community, and, at the same time,

[140] *Covenant and Law*.

re-writes the terms and literary tropes of that community through his translational Exodus. The end of his poetry's pedagogy is the power of metaphor, the inculcation of a moral imagination.

"A"-10, as the most explicitly public-facing portion of *"A"*, allows us to see the pedagogical creation of a covenantal community—the practices this chapter has traced over the previous forty-five pages—in explicit action. In doing so, it provides a framework for reading the modernism of Lola Ridge (discussed in the following chapter) as part of a communal, public discourse of poetry and labor activism. To put it most plainly: "A"-10 was written and intended, quite openly, as part of the war effort against Nazi Germany. In the months after the fall of France, the United States instituted a peacetime draft, increased defense spending, and Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed America the "Arsenal of Democracy and began the push for Lend-Lease. At the same time, Zukofsky was spearheading the bilingual modernist quarterly, *La France en Liberte*, "the review of free France," a cultural response to the Nazis.

I make this juxtaposition because it is easy to read *La France en Liberte* as an effort in defense of Paris as the citadel of modernism—yet the timing and urgency aligns this effort with that of the Roosevelt administration, the culmination of a belief in the public and prophetic efficacy of experimental poetry. Its advisory board signaled the public appeal, reaching far beyond Zukofsky's "Objectivist" circle to include prominent academics and artists, ranging from Ernest Hemingway to Albert Einstein, perhaps the time's most famous refugee from Nazi Germany.[141]

"A"-10, originally titled "Paris," was intended for this review: no longer, this is to say, the anthem of the workers' revolution, but as part of the Allied effort. That *La France en Liberte*, despite the initial burst of commitments from artists and funders, soon foundered, never

[141] *Poem of A Life*, 199-202.

publishing an issue, should not obscure the public and political nature of Zukofsky's poem.[142] If not the performative, dramatic poetry of Johnson's *God's Trombones* (which was performed in churches, schools, and theaters) or the labor rallying cry of Lola Ridge's "Stone Face," waved on broadsides and distributed by unions (discussed in Chapter 3), "A"-10 nonetheless locates its individual readers in a typologically-charged covenantal community. Casting its analysis of the events of the Nazi blitzkrieg in the typological language of the Exodus, "A"-10 insists even more intensely—certainly more vividly—than "A"-6's or "A"-8's studies of Depression-era labor on the moral imperative of the Passover seder: for the readers to see themselves as having been slaves in the land of Egypt and perform the act of ethical imagination borne of this historical consciousness: to see themselves, because as Americans they are "pilgrim jews," as French refugees or Europe's imperiled Jews.

[142] Zukofsky's effort to put literary and linguistic talent to work on behalf of the United States did not cease here; he attempted to join both the FBI and the U.S. Army as a translator in 1941 and 1942. Both applications were ultimately rejected (*Poem of A Life* 206).

Chapter Three: "Out of the Passion Eternal": Lola Ridge, Counter-history, and the Challenge of Form

I. Introduction

Lola Ridge's poetry, from her first published book (*The Ghetto*, 1918) to her last (*Dance of Fire*, 1935) documents and witnesses the lives of America's poor, its immigrants, its labor radicals, and the cityscape of urban modernity. Her career offers an alternative vision of the loose collection of artists known as the Americanist avant-garde. Ridge distinguishes herself from figures like Jean Toomer, Waldo Frank, and William Carlos Williams by eschewing the search for indigenous culture altogether. Instead, her poetry counters the claims of established elites to American culture by placing the act and experience of immigration itself at its center. Revising the typology and motifs of the American civil religious tradition, her works re-imagine American literature as ethnic literature—cultural products of an *ethnos* established as transient, immigrant individuals and groups respond to the conditions of the Americas and, in particular, the modern United States. Put typologically, immigrant and ethnic Americans stand in relation to Anglo-Americans as early (pre-Pauline, let's say), Jewish Christians did to the non-Christian Jews of the 1st century CE.

By employing the language of supersession, I realize that I walk a fine metaphorical line. The point I seek to make—because it is the point which the typological language and imagery of Ridge's poetry seeks to make—is not that "old," "Anglo" Americans are cut off from a "new" covenant. Rather, it is that, the old American covenant was particular: an Anglo-American covenant, we might say, providing only for an Anglo-American community. According to

Ridge, Americanness emerges "out of the Passion eternal" (as she puts it at the end of "The Ghetto")—out of the experiences of immigrant and ethnic communities, of exploited laborers and put-upon others. In place of a particular covenant, her poetry sets out to provoke and enact feelings of solidarity.

As with the works of James Weldon Johnson and Louis Zukofsky, these covenantal poetics shape and are shaped by the twin demands of political awareness and aesthetic expression. For Ridge, sincerity fuels solidarity, the idea, as she would put it in a late-life interview, that the poet must "Let anything that burns you come out, whether it be propaganda or not."[143] Poetry's witness, response, and sense of obligation drive her vision for American modernism. They also mirror and prefigure Kwame Anthony Appiah's description of a "partial cosmopolitanism." One of several terms he uses, almost interchangeably, with "rooted" cosmopolitanism, this is the idea that

> A citizen of the world can make the world better by making some local place better, even though that place need not be the place of her literal or original citizenship. This is why, when my father told us we were citizens of the world, he went on to tell us that we should work, for that reason, for the good of the places where–whether for the moment or for a lifetime–we had pitched our tents. Still, given my father's sense of loyalty to Ghana, to the Asante, and to his matriclan, among other ties, he would have expected others to be loyal to their national, ethnic, and familial identities: and such loyalty could not be a cooly cerebral decision, an impartial calculation as to how one would best make the world a better place. … On the contrary, he knew that many of these sorts of relationships could not exist without a feeling of special obligation. (*Ethics of Identity* 241-2)

This obligation, almost ineffable, preceding and external to the establishment of law, describes the bonds of a covenant that makes a claim, at once, to reject nationalism and exceptionalism and to bind universally, while also emphasizing the importance of living among and taking action to improve the lives of those nearby. In its distinction from "a coolly cerebral decision, an impartial calculation as to how one would make the world a better place," it echoes, in far more

[143] Quoted in Svoboda 104.

tempered language, the importance of *passion* in Ridge's writing and thought. (She casts poetry, in particular, in the language of fire, a passionate expression that burns and must come out.) The universality of Ridge's political and aesthetic commitments, like the universal breadth of the covenantal community she imagines, are also rooted in a specific place—America and the United States.

This chapter begins with a reading of one of Ridge's earliest and best-known works, "The Ghetto" (1918). I argue that "The Ghetto" is indicative of Ridge's oeuvre in two key ways: charged with the tropes of biblical prophecy and martyrdom, it works within the imagery and typology of an American civil religious tradition in order to revise what it might mean to become or live as an American in the wake of mass immigration and the need for labor justice. This operates as poetry by crafting a publicly-oriented prophetic verse. Ridge's poetry thereby resists norms of both modernist writing and the methods of poetic reading that grew up around them. Drawing on Ridge's articulation of a particularly American modernist aesthetics during her rocky assembly of *Broom*'s 1923 "American" issue, I explore how Ridge distinguishes herself within an Americanist avant-garde by rejecting the quest for the "indigenous" and replacing it with the experience of immigration. Even Ridge's seemingly lyric poems, I demonstrate, cannot be read as private or individual communication. Rather, the political demands she places on poetry—to aid the cause of labor—require that we read her poetry in the context of labor and immigrant solidarity. During the 1920s and 1930s, her poetry would serve as both a literal and imagined conduit for establishing such solidarity—the "new" covenant toward which the typologically and biblically charged language of her poetry points. The poetics of solidarity are bound up with those of sacrifice and martyrdom. This chapter closes, therefore, with a reading of her book-length retelling of the crucifixion, *Firehead* (1929). At first glance an ethnically-

unmarked poem, *Firehead* is, in fact, the work in which her prophetic approach to both modernist form and American biblical typology merge most fully with each other and with her vision of a post-immigration Americanness. These new, labor gospels resist the monologizing impulses of both U.S. nationalism and the documentary and epic forms of modernist poetry by developing a narratively and prosodically polyvocal poetry that is at once "ethnic" and "national." *Firehead*'s "gospel," such as it is, asks its readers to read in new ways—and through this, offers a roadmap to solidarity.

In merging collectivist politics and avant-garde poetics, Ridge does what even Louis Zukofsky and James Weldon Johnson either could not or would not: de-center the narrative and history of American life from a "great man" (or several). Just as she asserts the essential Americanness of immigrants by democratizing the imagery and tropes of westward expansion, so she achieves this de-centering by democratizing the prophetic and biblical typologies that had helped to shape and define the civic self-imagining of the United States. The typological "Passion eternal," with its centrality to various forms of American self-identification and civil religion, is to be found not in Congress, the frontier, or Civil War graveyards, but in the Lower East Side's immigrant slums.

II. Immigrant Supersessionism? "The Ghetto," ***Broom*****, and the Americanist Avant-Garde**

Lola Ridge's life and poetry suggest a revision of the ideas of both ethnic and national literature. Born in Dublin in December 1873, she immigrated with her mother, Emma, to Australia in the summer of 1877, where they lived in Sydney for several years. By early 1880, they had moved to the New Zealand mining town of Hokitika, where Emma (claiming to a widow but still married to Ridge's father) wed Donald MacFarlane. Ridge began to write and publish her first poems here, as a teenager—in traditional forms, they are overwhelmingly concerned with the

landscape and life of the New Zealand bush.[144] In 1895, she married Peter Webster; in 1896, a son died at two weeks; in 1900, another, Keith, was born. But her family life was no more settled than her mother's had been: with her stepfather consigned to an asylum, Ridge, Emma, and Keith left for Sydney in 1903, where they stayed as Ridge pursued her career in poetry and painting until, shortly after Emma's death in 1907, Ridge and Keith set sail for the United States, arriving in San Francisco in September.[145]

In some respects, Ridge was born three times: in Dublin, as Rose Emily Ridge; in 1903, when she took the name "Lola Ridge" rather than the various combinations of "Rose," "Emily," or "Dolores" paired with "MacFarlane" or "Webster"; and in March of 1908, when she arrived in New York City, entering, like a new immigrant, through Ellis Island. Ridge was alone: she had deposited the eight year-old Keith at an orphanage in Los Angeles.[146] In New York, she would immediately insert herself into literary, anarchist, and feminist circles, accompanying Emma Goldman on national speaking tours from 1914 to 1917 and serving as literary editor of Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review* in 1918. She was an editor at *Others*, *Broom*, and *The New Masses* and was active in—and arrested for—agitation on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti. Her poetry attended to revolution and unrest in Ireland and Russia as well as the United States.

That Ridge was herself born in Ireland and raised in Australasia does not prohibit her from writing what she conceived of as a decidedly (and distinctively) "American" literature.

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[144] Michelle Leggot's article, "Verses and Beyond: The Antipodean Poetry of Lola Ridge" (*Ka Mate Ka Ora: A New Zealand Journal of Poetry and Poetics* 12, March 2013) and Part I of Terese Svoboda's biography of Ridge survey this early, formally traditional poetry. They reveal an early interest in questions of national self-definition, geography, and the experience of encountering a specific place.

[145] For the biographical details in this paragraph and the next, I draw on the work of Terese Svoboda's biography, *Anything That Burns You: A Biography of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet* (2016). Ridge's deliberate obscuring—at times, outright fabrication—of her biography makes this work a central resource for my own contextualization of Ridge's career, as well as for readers of Ridge in the 21st century.

[146] She would reunite with him in New Orleans in 1914, as she and her second husband, David Lawson, traveled with Emma Goldman. They would remain together for most of the next three years, until, leaving Goldman's circle, Ridge and Lawson left Keith, abruptly, in Detroit on their return to New York City.

This sets her apart not only from the self-definition of expatriate modernists such as Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, but also from those modernists who stayed at home—e.g., Jean Toomer, Waldo Frank, and William Carlos Williams. The works of Williams, writes Michael North, embodied the "cultural project of the Americanist avant-garde." Yet this project was "derailed" when it "attempted to phrase its language as a dialect of rebellion but also as a national language of unity" (162). Ridge's poetry offers an alternative imagining of an American(ist) avant-garde. Replacing the tension between native/indigenous and colonizing/conquering with a vision of new, transient races/peoples passing through the Americas, she presents American literary culture as, at its core, defined by the act and experience of immigration: the immigrant response to the place of America *is* the defining feature of an American literature in which there are *only* outsiders. Her poetry strives to articulate this multiplicity of responses to the encounter with America by continually seeking new and more effective means to establish polyvocality. In her writing, to be a national or American poet *is* to be an ethnic poet. America, for Ridge, is a kind of contingent cultural *ethnos*, a nation defined by the shared acts of witness, response, and obligation that create solidarity.

The result is that Ridge's poetry rests uncomfortably within the categories most readily available for describing American modernism, as "Skyscrapers," a short poem from her second collection, *Sun-Up* (1920), reveals:

> Skyscrapers . . . remote, unpartisan . . .
> Turning neither to the right nor left
> Your imperturbable fronts. . . .
> Austerely greeting the sun
> With one chilly finger of stone. . . .
> I know your secrets . . . better than all the policemen like fat blue mullet along the
> avenues. (55)

The first five lines offer a politically-neutral, Imagist depiction of Manhattan's new, rising skyline. Its final line, in both form and content, breaks from the Imagist norm, with the poetic speaker inserting herself into the poem (while, *horribile dictu*, employing Pound's proscribed "like") and asserting that the neutrality of the buildings is a pretense. They have "secrets," an agenda which may be "unpartisan" but which aligns them with institutions of political and economic power. Art that makes the same claim to neutrality—Imagism, the poem's structure insists—are likewise implicated. "Skyscrapers," by contrast, insists on retaining the ability to comment critically on the image it presents. As she asks in the same collection's "Scandal" (possibly a sardonic response to T. S. Eliot's "Morning at the Window"),

> Aren't there bigger things to talk about
> Than a window in Greenwich Village
> And hyacinths sprouting
> Like little puce poems out of a sick soul? (53)

Whether actively or passively, a "neutral" depiction of urban life works only to conceal, rather than call out, its failings—to render them "secrets." Such poetry subordinates the political to the personal, the communal to the private. The shifting political winds give us a sense of those "bigger things to talk about." Ridge entered the U.S. during a period of open immigration; the poems included in her first collection were written as World War I dredged up anti-immigrant sentiment and fear of radicalism. In 1919, after two years of imprisonment, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, Ridge's former mentors and traveling companions, were deported. In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act closed off immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

Ridge commits herself to talking about these things—and political violence in Ireland, Russia, and against African Americans in the U.S., where the KKK had recently re-formed—rather than the inner anxieties of Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock or Gertrude Stein's wordplay, Ridge's frequent targets. Yet these poems go beyond the legacies of Imagism or the poetry of witness as

she describes labor and urban poverty.[147] Ridge's concern is, always, chiefly the moment of encounter itself rather than a retrospective description. Depiction is never enough: she is, rather interested in the experience of *being* a housemaid, or an immigrant seamstress, or a factory worker, a morning commuter, a young girl, or a fellow radical in the act of beholding Emma Goldman. Even as Ridge's poetry documents urban poverty, immigrant ghettos, political violence, and the suffering of radical activists, its focus is never primarily on the thing or event in itself. Instead, her poetry aims to document the experience of witnessing that event in order to establish solidarity.

"The Ghetto," Ridge's first major poem, was published in *The New Republic* on April 13, 1918 and gave its title to her first collection. Through the voice of a boarder in the Sodos family apartment in the Lower East Side, she depicts the lives and struggles of immigrants (mostly East European Jews) in the crowded tenement slums. (Ridge herself lived briefly in a Lower East Side tenement [Svoboda 101].) The poem opens with a depiction of city life that recalls the visual and sensory focus of T. S. Eliot's early poetry, in which technological modernity and human physicality intersect in surreal imagery. "Cool, inaccessible air / Is floating in velvety blackness shot with steel-blue lights" but is blocked by "The heat . . . / Nosing in the body's overflow, / Like a beast pressing its great steaming belly close" (3). Within this opening section, life remains on the level of abstraction as individuals are transformed into metaphorized masses:

> The street crawls undulant,
> Like a river addled
> With its hot tide of flesh
> That ever thickens.

[147] Cary Nelson, for instance, sets her alongside Charles Reznikoff in adapting Imagist technique to speak of labor and urban poverty (see, e.g., *Repression and Recovery* [U of Wisconsin, 1989] pp. 25, 82-3, and 87-8). Nancy Berke (33-4) aligns Ridge's visuality with what Carolyn Forché's "social poetry" or "the poetry of witness," which forges a third space between "personal" and "political" poetry. Together, these ideas, perhaps, lead Svoboda to call Ridge's poetry "proto-objectivist" (110).

Heavy surges of flesh
Break over the pavements,
Clavering like a surf— (4)

The remainder of the poem, however, works to subvert this image of urban life as abstract and alienated. Ridge's desire to capture the subjective experience of encounter is central to this subversion. Through this, the figures and speakers in her poetry retain their individuality—their status as subject. Indeed, "The Ghetto" ultimately presents urban modernity as an experience that *heightens* the experience of subjectivity, rather than abstracting and alienating the individual into objecthood. As the poem's closing litany proclaims, it is the site of "LIFE! / *Startling, vigorous life, / That squirms under my touch, / And baffles me when I try to examine it*" (24).

After "The Ghetto" opens with an Eliotic depiction of the abstracted, surreal, barely-human modernist masses, the second section opens with a pronounced change of tone as the speaker—a whole, unitary self, neither divided nor fragmented—inserts herself into the poem:

I room at Sodos'—in the little green room that was Bennie's—
With Sadie
And her old father and her mother,
Who is not so old and wears her own hair. (5)

This speaker appears to be an outsider: she is not Jewish (the natural metaphors of her language are decidedly Christian) and she does not, like Sadie, work in the garment industry but (like Ridge) her labor appears to consist of writing at night in her room and meeting radical activists in cafes. As the poem shifts back and forth between clearly personal narration and bird's-eye-view abstractions, the effect is to align the alienated masses of the latter with the particular (and modern) individuals of the former—and this, in turn with the speaker's. The fifth part of the poem, for instance, offers a description from the speaker's window of the cry of a nearby parrot ("*Vorwärts* . . . *Vorwärts* . . ." 16, 17) and a neighbor, "A little old woman, / With a wig of smooth black hair / Gummed about her shrunken brows" (16). The section's frame, however,

makes it clear that the loneliness of German- or Yiddish-speaking parrot and the ethnically-marked woman (she wears a *sheytl*; she lights Sabbath candles) is an experience shared with that of the narrator.

Elsewhere, the experiences of the immigrant poor are aligned specifically with the mythology of American nationalism. Amid the crowd of children, Talmud scholars, peddlers, and mothers with infants on Hester Street, the poem singles out a "young trader" at his cart who

> Looks Westward where the trade-lights glow,
> And sees his vision rise—
> A tape-ruled vision,
> Circumscribed in stone—
> Some fifty stories to the skies. (15)

His talent and ambition as a merchant direct his gaze in a refiguration of Manifest Destiny's defining slogan—to "Go West, Young Man." Rather than gazing westward at the open frontier, he gazes toward downtown Manhattan, where skyscrapers are beginning to rise, and imagines himself going west to erect his own. On one level, this is Manifest Destiny for the twentieth-century, where capitalism has replaced the frontier as the seat of desire. On the other, it situates a recent immigrant—a peddler hawking goods on a street corner—as driven by a quintessentially "American" desire. And, indeed, the polyglot, multiethnic community of the Lower East Side appears "Like an ancient tapestry of motley weave / Upon the open wall of this new land" (13).

Combined with her vision of a distinctively American modernist aesthetics, formed not by cultural nativism but the life and culture of a rooted cosmopolitanism, "The Ghetto" re-imagines American citizenship itself. The experience which establishes both the idea of "America" and its literature is to be found in the act of immigration. Grounding the act of documentation in the subjective, often passionate, experience of encounter, she establishes the multiethnic, multilingual milieu of the Immigration-era United States as foundationally

American. Both what Ridge's poems witness and the poetic speaker's experience as a witness present the United States and American literature as multiethnic, multilingual composites.

Ridge vividly articulated this American(ist) modernist aesthetics during her work in organizing the January 1923 "American" issue of the avant-garde little magazine *Broom*. This issue brought together Jean Toomer's "Karintha" with William Carlos Williams' "The Destruction of Tenochtitlan," the second part of Hart Crane's "The Marriage of Faustus and Helen" (here titled "The Spring of Guilty Song"), along with works by (among others) Kay Boyle and Kenneth Burke, and Matthew Josephson's ambivalent review of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*.[148] Although scholarship, like *Broom*'s contemporaraneous readers, has long recognized the importance of this issue—Michael North, for instance, reads it as marking the arrival of an "Americanist avant-garde"[149]—Ridge's central and shaping role in its development has, until recently, been obscured. The idea for an "occasional all-American number" originated with the letter in which Ridge laid out the terms on which she would agree to serve as an editor; her resignation came after the magazine's expatriate publisher, Harold Loeb, overruled her objections and included Gertrude Stein's "Wear" in the "American" issue.[150]

---

[148] Indeed, Svoboda's research indicates that it was Ridge who first introduced Toomer and Frank, setting their idiosyncratic and productive collaboration and mutual promotion in motion. She was, moreover, one of the earliest advocates for the works of both Toomer and Crane; both were included prominently in this and other issues of *Broom*.

[149] See *The Dialect of Modernism*, esp. Chapter 6, "Race, the American Language, and the Americanist Avant-Garde" (127-46).

[150] Letter, Lola Ridge to Harold Loeb, 1 February 1922 (as reproduced in "Lola Ridge's Pivotal Editorial Role at *Broom*," ed. Belinda Wheeler, *PMLA* 127.2, 2012, p.287). The correspondence Wheeler edits and includes traces the arc of Ridge's time at *Broom*, focusing on her arguments with Loeb over the nature of American literature—and the "American" issue.

BROOM

AN INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF THE ARTS PUBLISHED BY HAROLD A. LOEB.

EDITOR, HAROLD A. LOEB. ASSOCIATE EDITOR, MATTHEW JOSEPHSON. AMERICAN EDITOR, LOLA RIDGE.
ASSOCIATE ART EDITOR, LADISLAS MEDGYES.

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[Illustration 9: Table of Contents, Broom *"American" issue, Vol. 4.2, January 1922]*

Ridge's tenure, from February 1922 to April 1923, as American editor of *Broom* was bound to be tumultuous: Loeb was an exponent of the internationalist, expatriate modernism which her aesthetics explicitly eschewed. In her letters to Loeb, Ridge stridently objects to the "French influence" on American literature in general, and to Gertrude Stein as a vector of its transmission in particular.[151] Stein, in Ridge's view, is "a tricky craftsman whose highest attainment is an occasional flippant cleverness of presentation" (290); "her literary reputation—a bladder blown up by many breaths" (289). "I object to her work in BROOM," Ridge wrote, "not because of the missing substance in her work, not because she merely plays with words, but because she does not do it well enough. If you must play with words, as such, with no impetus

[151] Ridge to Loeb, undated letter ("Ridge's Pivotal Editorial Role," p. 288).

or passion behind, then you must do it skillfully as a swordsman plays with rapiers—as Marsden Hartley, Amy Lowell, Wallace Stevens have done it. G. Stein's words—house-wife's canning plums—peanuts rattling in a straw hat—at best, corn popping in a skillet" (289).[152] Stein is both without passion and insincere, the direction that "French influence" inevitably leads American culture: "what real growth shall we foster if we squeeze the feet of this giant child into a French shoe?"[153]

Yet the objections contained in Ridge's letters are only able to offer a kind of photo-negative of her vision for American literature. Illuminated by "The Ghetto," however, the December 1922 advertisement for the forthcoming "American" number re-imagines the relationship between "national" culture and immigration—and, in turn, illuminates Ridge's later poetry. This advertisement, strikingly designed, occupied a full page:

[152] Ridge to Loeb, 2 January 1923 ("Ridge's Pivotal Editorial Role," pp. 288-91).
[153] Ridge to Loeb, undated letter ("Ridge's Pivotal Editorial Role," p. 288).

why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now?

why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now?

The Oldest and Newest Art of America

in the January Broom

Maya Sculpture and Architecture

Contemporary American Prose and Poetry

The Art of the Mayas was the earliest American Art. Conceived some ten centuries ago, it remains the magnificent expression of one of the noblest races which inhabited America. Since then, many races, many cultures have come and gone. All but the topography of North America has been altered. But the new races which populate the transformed continent are also creating a new art which mirrors as faithfully the astonishing environment they have made for themselves. Why not read them now?

BROOM from old Europe will present in the JANUARY number an array of AMERICAN writings such as no magazine in America has yet ventured. Why not read them now?

PRIZE CONTEST

Which prominent American does this portrait-statue represent.

P R I Z E S for best answers!

1 st. PRIZE Subscription to B R O O M for Life.

2nd. PRIZE One year's subscription to B R O O M

3rd. PRIZE One year's subscription to B R O O M.

BROOM has never lacked faith in the Artistic future of America. Here are **new writers,** some known, most unknown, whose work is as varied, as fertile, as powerfully muscled as anything being written in England France or Germany. Here is Comparative Literature. Here are writers who will be studied in Courses in Comparative Literature twenty years hence. Why not read them now?

KAY BOYLE · MARIANNE MOORE · KENNETH BURKE
ROBERT SANBORN · MALCOLM COWLEY · GERTRUDE STEIN
MARGARET EVANS · JEAN TOOMER · CHARLES GALWEY
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

and others who are not to be had in book form. not to be found on library shelves. In them is the clamor of a young culture. The JANUARY number of BROOM is a challenge to Americans to recognize a national art as profoundly American as

BASEBALL **THE CINEMA**
THE JAZZ BAND **AND THE DIZZY SKYSCRAPER**

while fundamentally in harmony with the Art of the ancient Mayas. The best way to be sure of reading them now is to

SUBSCRIBE AT ONCE Five Dollars ($ **5**) to BROOM
3 East Ninth Street, New York.

why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now? why not read them now?

why not read them now? why not raed them now? why not read them now? why not read them now?

Beach 1901

[Illustration 10: Advertisement for forthcoming "American" issue, Broom *4.1, December 1921]*

North reads this advertisement as the "manifesto" (147) of the Americanist avant-garde, an "effort toward an indigenous American cultural renewal" (128) that was nonetheless hobbled by "a persistent inability to understand how race fit into its conception of modern America, or how the language of African America fit into its conception of 'plain American'" (129). North's critique, with its focus on the quest for multi-racial American indigeneity, is defined by the visions of Frank, Toomer, and Williams at the expense of that actually depicted in Ridge's advertisement and editorial labor. Indeed, he all but ignores the first, pivotal paragraph of this manifesto/ad:

> The Art of the Mayas was the earliest American Art. Conceived some ten centuries ago, it remains the magnificent expression of one of the noblest races which inhabited America. Since then, many races, many cultures have come and gone. All but the topography of North America has been altered. But the new races which populate the transformed continent are also creating a new art which mirrors as faithfully the astonishing environment they have made for themselves. Why not read them now?

The point is not to claim that American culture and literature are or must be indigenous—but something rather the opposite, that none of the "many races, many cultures" that have made up and continue to make up America and the United States can make any claim to being indigenous. They "have come and gone"; they are "new races"; "All but the topography of North America has been altered." The "American" quality of such writing is defined not by the author's claim to be indigenously "of" America, but by the work's (im)migratory response to the place and situation of the Americas. The Mayans are a model or starting point for American modernism because of the example they offer for original, sincere, and decidedly new responses through art and culture to the experience of being in the Americas.

The contrast this strikes with William Carlos Williams' Americanist vision, as articulated in *In The American Grain* (six sections of which appeared in *Broom*) is instructive. For

Williams, quintessentially American figures achieve this status by rubbing against the American grain—by choosing to assert themselves as outsiders within their own country. Yet Williams' work establishes, in essence, an aristocracy of outcasts that at best collapses but more likely subsumes the democratic into the aristocratic, "as," he writes, "it has been pointed out recently, since an aristocracy is the flower of a locality and so the *full* expression of a democracy" (231). So we find that, counterintuitive and revisionary though it may be, Williams retells the history of America through the familiar historical aristocracy of its "great men": Red Eric, Columbus, Cortez, Ponce de Leon, Sir Walter Raleigh, Cotton Mather, Daniel Boone, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Aaron Burr, Abraham Lincoln.

The central dynamic, throughout, remains the tension and violent encounter between the native and indigenous on the one hand and the colonizing and conquering impulse on the other. This plays out in expected forms: Cortez's defeat of Montezuma, as described in "The Destruction of Tenochtitlan," which appeared in the *Broom* American issue. Yet it also inheres in the struggle between the outcast's self-assertion and the subsequent hatred of "[t]he whole crawling mass" (143): the native, indigenous self under colonizing assault by the mass: Washington, "the typical sacrifice to the mob" (143), stands in simultaneous alignment with both Montezuma and Cortez, "[c]ourageous almost beyond precedent, tactful, resourceful in misfortune . . . a man of genius superbly suited to his task" (27) nonetheless "traitorously attacked [by Velasquez] from the rear," a man whose "own captains would have deserted him, so hard was he to follow" (28). Williams aligns the assertion of oneself as an American outsider with both nativity and aristocracy—to be an aristocrat is to remain outside the mass of the local community in which one resides. Hence, perhaps, the significance of Montezuma, both native and king.

Williams, like Ridge, James Weldon Johnson, and Charles Reznikoff, rejects the passions of the mob. But where Ridge and others defend not merely the individual, but the individual bounded by covenant—the individual within community—Williams prefers the individual in isolation. His political and aesthetic disgust with the "whole crawling mass" of common men could not stand farther apart from Ridge's ability to find, as "The Ghetto" draws to a close, the definition of Americanness in immigrant experience:

> *Life—*
> *Pent, overflowing*
> *Stoops and facades,*
> *Jostling, pushing, contriving*
> *Seething as in a great vat . . .*
>
> *Bartering, changing, extorting,*
> *Dreaming, debating, aspiring,*
> *Astounding, indestructible*
> *Life of the Ghetto . . .*
>
> *Strong flux of life,*
> *Like a bitter wine*
> *Out of the bloody stills of the world . . .*
> *Out of the Passion eternal.* (25-6)

The final lines of "The Ghetto" find that the "Strong flux of life" throughout the Lower East Side's tenements flows "Out of the Passion eternal" (26), emanating not from moments of historical note, but from the mundane, everyday details of lonesomeness within crowds, of squalrous urban poverty, of peddlers' capitalist ambitions, of parents crushed by the piling up of life's minor disappointments, of children waving toy flags on the street, of heavy summer heat, of furtive sex, of tea rooms and sweatshops. Tenement houses are recast as Nativity scenes: "this room, bare like a barn" (18), "this shut-in room, / Bare as a manger" (21) hosts a meeting of immigrant radicals. At night, when "Life mak[es] the great Demand . . . / Calling its new Christs," this role includes but exceeds radicalism, landing on "the great lovers linger[ing] in

little groups, still passionately debating, / Or one may walk in silence, listening only to the still summons of Life" (22-3). This application of a Christological framework to Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side does not suppress this difference. Ridge acts similarly to James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois, who, at roughly the same moment, revise a typological motif in which Americans cast fallen leaders (Lincoln in the North; Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in the South) as Christ figures through whose blood the sacred American state was redeemed.[154]

Grounding prophetic typology in immigrant experience, Ridge explores, we might say, the immigrant and ethnic (rather than Puritan) origins of the American self. In Ridge's verse, martyrdom is no longer a matter of blood sacrifice (too often associated with nativism), but what occurs when suffering and witness are transformed by the prophetic—when the political poem comes into contact with the sacred. By casting the life of the ghetto in Christological terms, Ridge proclaims continuity between the everyday suffering of the Sodos family and their neighbors and that of Jesus, connecting both the political and the prophetic with the poetry of everydayness.[155] This discovery of prophetic potential in every moment—not only those narrativized into greatness—culminates, as we'll see later on, in *Firehead*'s quest to de-center epic form and national myths.

III: Martyrological Poetics and Prophetic Typology

The witnessing Ridge's poetry engages in is perhaps best described as *martyrological*. The word *martyr* combines the straightforward "witness" of Classical and Hellenistic Greek (μὰρτυς) with the experiential connotations that have since accrued: a martyr suffers or even dies for her cause.

[154] See Gorski, *American Covenant*, pp. 99 (on Lost Causers) and 120-3 (on Du Bois).

[155] This is as distinguished from the reading Nick Halpern offers in *Everyday and Prophetic*, that the two most often work against each other in poetry, but "a tremendous excitement gathers in poems in which the prophetic and everyday voices work together" (3-4).

Whereas to "witness" is a secularized activity, "martyrological" retains a religious valence: the martyr as one who bears witness to a divine truth through her suffering (and possible death). To describe Ridge's poetics as martyrological rather than witnessing or testimonial emphasizes that they frequently seek a sacralized mode which is both verbal and embodied, which establishes a point of contact between the earthly and the prophetic.

Where the biblical and prophetic typologies with which the other figures in this dissertation engaged are primarily drawn from the Hebrew Bible—the Exodus, the Israelite kingdom's establishment of a sacred state, the encounter at Sinai—Ridge engages primarily with another, no less important, typological framework for American culture and politics: New Testament accounts of Jesus' crucifixion. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to refer to this as Ridge's Ur-myth, much as Odysseus is for many high modernists and the Exodus serves for Zukofsky. Poems such as "Frank Little at Calvary" (from her first collection) and "Three Men Die" (from her last) cast radical activists as Christ figures. A parenthetical on the first page of the latter expresses her use of the story succinctly:

> (old myth
> Renews its tenure of the blood
> Recurrently; in a new way
> Reforms about an ancient pith
> With all the old accessories) (61)

This process, however, does not take place solely in moments where "great men" (even if of the left) risk death. Rather, she deploys the symbols, types, and imagery of this Christological framework precisely in order to de-center it, placing even the seemingly singular event of Jesus' crucifixion in the service of poetic and political polyvocality: the purpose of martyr stories—even of the crucifixion—is not to worship or deify the martyred, but to build solidarity among

those who witness it. The crucifixion serves as a focal point: through the passion of Christ, others are joined through their own experience of passion.

Ridge's poetry, deploying a martyrological witness in order to establish solidarity, rests uncomfortably within both mid-century norms of "lyric reading" and their primary critical alternative, avant-garde antilyricism. As "poetry was reduced to lyric" (8), writes Virginia Jackson, "the lyric emerged as . . . indisputably . . . independent of social contingency" (7). Developing, like James Weldon Johnson, a mode of direct (prophetic) address to her readers as early as "The Ghetto," Ridge's poetry does not pursue the "expressive privacy" (White 6) of a poem "ideally unmediated" by its audience and historical moment (Jackson 7). Just as Ridge's vision of American literature is one mediated by the encounter with the place itself, so her poetry is always mediated by the encounter between poem and reader as it seeks to establish a more broad-based solidarity. This is made explicit both in the closing litany of "The Ghetto"—from the moment the poem exclaims "LIFE!" and turns, directly, toward its readers—and in the opening poem of *The Ghetto and Other Poems*.

"To the American People" is at once a dedication and an epigram, casting the entire collection within the framework of direct poetic/prophetic address.[156] Like Johnson's use of the technique, it operates by inverting the familiar and expected imagery of the United States, here, the typological vision of America as Promised Land:

> Will you feast with me, American people?
> But what have I that shall seem good to you!
>
> On my board are bitter apples
> And honey served on thorns,
> And in my flagons fluid iron,
> Hot from the crucibles.
>
> How should such fare entice you!

[156] It appears on an unnumbered page between the copyright page and the table of contents.

This dedication instructs the volume's readers to see themselves not as individuals interested in poetry, but as members of a wider American people about to be confronted with the reality of their country: not a land of milk and honey, but one of bitter fruit and torture. "To the American People" constructs a role for the collection's readers that is less concretely imagined than Johnson's church congregation (Chapter 1) or Reznikoff's jurors (Chapter 4), but the result of this typological revision, nonetheless, is the invitation to join the poet and poem in solidarity with and as an active and activist audience.

The martyrological witness such poetry offers intends to enact a change or effect a call to action within the reader. If one pillar of the mid-twentieth century's lyric ideal was John Stuart Mill's articulation of lyric as private, overheard utterance, another, equally important, came from the pen of W. B. Yeats, the belief that, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."[157] Ridge's poetry, by contrast, seeks out the quarrel with others, sees in it the *sine qua non* of poetic purpose. By quarrelling with these, one stands in solidarity with those; by standing in solidarity, one quarrels—or, at least, signals a willingness to do so.

This quality has not been without consequence for Ridge's reputation as a poet, particularly with regard to her later works, *Firehead* and *Dance of Fire*. These, as described in Daniel Tobin's introduction to *Light in Hand*, a recent volume of her selected poems and the only edition of her work currently in print, are "highly romanticized" (xxxiii), "melodramatic" (xxxvi), "operatic and hieratic" (xxxvi), and "baldly didactic" (xxxiii).[158] Invoking Yeats' oft-quoted dictum, he deems these works largely failures: "Despite her passionate convictions, or

[157] "Per Amica Silentia Lunae: Anima Hominis," *Per Anima Silentia Lunae*, The Macmillan Company (New York), 1918: p. 29.
[158] Tobin's assessment reflects the attitude that other scholars of Ridge's work—and partisans on her behalf—have expressed to me in conversation.

perhaps because of them," he writes, she "gradually substituted the hyperbole of political and religious rhetoric for *the genuine quarrel with self* by which a poet advances both in the craft of making and in the achievement of *a sensibility that continually tests itself against its own convictions*" (xxxi, emphasis mine).[159] I single out Tobin not because his assessment of Ridge's later poetry is wholly without merit—during the last decade of her life, she was increasingly dependent on painkillers, and this *does* frequently show through in the quality of her poetry—but because he so clearly expresses the way in which one method of poetic reading has come to dominate our idea of poetry more generally and allows us to see how this practice affects our readings of Ridge specifically. Judged by the standards of a Yeats, Ridge's late, prophetic poetry could not help but fail. The problem, put flatly, is that Ridge's poetry—especially but not exclusively her late works—simply does not desire to play the same game as the poetry and criticism which has taught us how to read the poetry of the twentieth century.

Even the poems which scholars of Ridge "know how" to read offer resistance to normative ideas about lyric poetry. Three of Ridge's early poems, published in *Sun-Up* (1920), align her prophetic challenge to readers with questions about the role, forms, and purpose of poetry. "To Alexander Berkman," "Emma Goldman," and "To Larkin" speak of and to their subject in the second person, asking us to re-read and reconsider the role of direct prophetic address within poems that present as seemingly lyric. Not simply descriptions or meditations on the figure beheld, they strive to capture the act of beholding itself. "Emma Goldman" asks,

> How should they appraise you,
> who walk up close to you

[159] His critique entails a long list of attributes found within *Firehead* and *Dance of Fire* which might indeed seem without merit for the sake of expressing the quarrel of self with self—but need not be dismissed as mere rhetoric with a different understanding of her poetics: the poetry is "a staged oracle for the poet's visionary proclivities" (xxxvi); her "tone is strident, bombastic, full of self-regard" (xxx) and employs "an antiquated mode of address" (xxxvi), "grandiose diction . . . syntactical inversions . . . hyperbolic imagery" (xxx), "a series of stylized gestures" (xxxiv), and "archaism and bathos" (xxxv).

as to a mountain
each proclaiming his own eyeful
against the other's eyeful.

Only time
standing well off
shall measure your circumference and your height. (90)

Distinguishing between the documentation of the thing or event in itself and the experience of witnessing, the poem's perception is limited. It recognizes that Goldman is a symbol, but refuses either to articulate what that symbol means or to employ it in service of its own ends. Goldman, it says, cannot be known; only the encounter with her can.

"To Alexander Berkman" and "To Larkin" likewise open with uncertain, tentative visual encounters. Berkman, Goldman's lover and partner in anarchist activism (and the editor of *Mother Earth*, to which Ridge had contributed) had been imprisoned from 1917 to 1919 and, on December 21, 1919, was deported along with Goldman. He appears to Ridge as a ghostly imagining:

Can you see me, Sasha?
I can see you. . . .
A tentacle of the vast dawn is resting on your face
that floats as though detached
in a sultry and greenish vapor.
I cannot reach my hands to you . . . (88)

The subject here is not merely Berkman, but the ability to perceive his continued presence in the United States. Through this, *what* is witnessed is subordinated to the political importance of the act and experience of witnessing itself. "To Larkin" elaborates on this idea. The poem opens by wondering about the Irish socialist and labor leader who, by 1920, was serving time in Sing Sing on charges of criminal anarchism:

Is it you I see go by the window, Jim Larkin—you not looking at me nor any one,
And your shadow swaying from East to West?
Strange that you should be walking free—you shut down without light,

And your legs tied up with a knot of iron. (92)

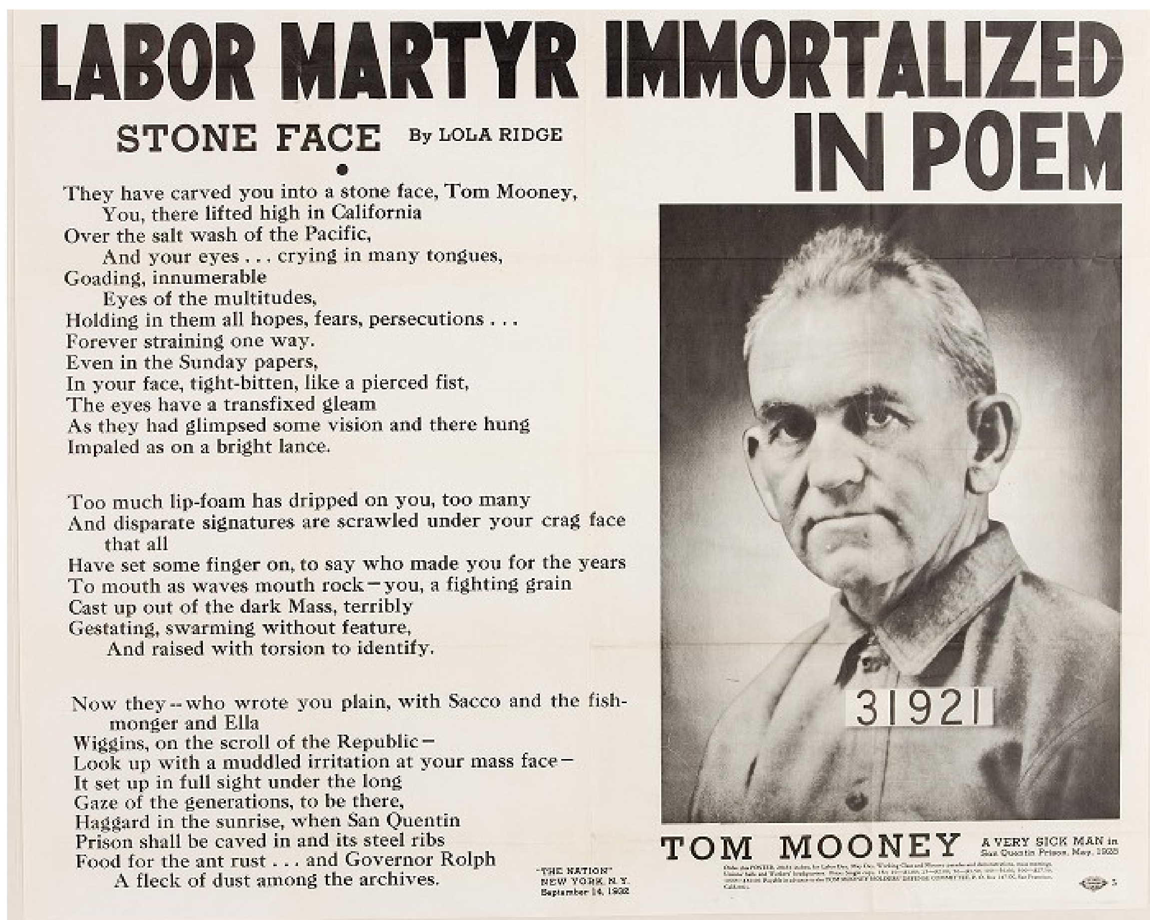
This poem also exceeds simple descriptive lament for the suffering of a fellow radical committed to the Ireland Ridge continued to watch from afar, who had come to her New York only to be prosecuted there. After all, she's not even certain that this *is* "Big Jim" Larkin. It can't be: just as Berkman and Goldman are in exile, Larkin is in prison at the time of the poem. Its second stanza turns from the subject of a labor leader "shut down without light"—Larkin as a symbol of the suppression of activism—to the exploration of what it means to be able or unable to see this phantasm of Larkin wandering New York's streets while his body is in prison:

> One hundred million men and women go inevitably about their affairs,
> In the somnolent way
> Of men before a great drunkenness. . . .
> They do not see you go by their windows, Jim Larkin,
> With your eyes bloody as the sunset
> And your shadow gaunt upon the sky . . .
> You, and the like of you, that life
> Is crushing for their frantic wines. (92)

Casting Larkin in language *Firehead* will repurpose to describe the crucified Jesus, the poem now turns expressly visionary. But by documenting not merely his presence (or Goldman's, or Berkman's) but the experience of witnessing, casting it as an act of political resistance, Ridge invites her readers to join their voices to the poem's, to share in the act of imagined—or perhaps prophetic—beholding, an action that establishes *solidarity*: with Goldman, Berkman, or Larkin, or among the readers themselves.

"Stone Face" is the most significant work of such beholding, and the poem that most clearly demands historically-attuned modes of reading account for the ways in which it establishes covenantal solidarity within its audience. This poem was and remains among Ridge's best-known works; certainly, it had the largest distribution of any of her works at the time of its publication, appearing first in *The Nation* in 1932 and then collected in 1935's *Dance of Fire*.

But it was most widely distributed—and read—in a dramatically different, decidedly public, collective, and political context: as one side of a large poster used at rallies on behalf of the socialist labor organizer Tom Mooney as he prepared to appeal his conviction for a 1916 bombing to the California State Supreme Court. Over two feet tall and nearly three feet wide (28 by 34 inches), both sides presented images of Mooney, whose cause had become central to the labor movement in the 1920s and 1930s. One demanded "FREE MOONEY," proclaiming him "A CLASS WAR PRISONER FOR 19 YEARS" and a "Victim of Monstrous Capitalist Frameup"; the other, under the heading "LABOR MARTYR IMMORTALIZED IN POEM," presented the full text of "Stone Face":



[Illustration 11: "Labor Martyr Immortalized in Poem"]

There can be no doubt about it: the purpose of this poem is to establish solidarity among its readers. Distributed by organizations ranging from the Tom Mooney Molders' Defense Committee of San Francisco to the Chicago Federation of Labor, the poster was used as a fundraising mailer for Mooney's defense fund, displayed in union halls, and at demonstrations on Mooney's behalf as well as for May Day, Labor Day, and labor parades generally; interested parties, smaller text indicates, could order it in bulk orders ranging from ten to 1,000 copies.[160] In precisely this public, political function, Ridge's poetry serves as a locus where the project of recovering poetry suppressed or marginalized because of difference or radicalism intersects with that of offering historically-attuned readings of poetic form and theory.[161]

Virginia Jackson observes that, in its total independence from history and society, the idealized lyric of mid- and late-20th century criticism was "perhaps not intended for public reading at all."[162] Nothing could be farther from the case with "Stone Face." As with Johnson's *God's Trombones*, Ridge situates her poem outside the confines of isolated, silent reading. (That a 1927 publicity mailing for Viking Press advertised *God's Trombones* in a full-page ad adjacent to to one for Ridge's *Red Flag* looks far less surprising in this context.) The audience this broadside publication constructs and participates alongside—real, flesh and blood—is neither that of the individual reader nor Tom Mooney himself, whom the poem appears to address.

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[160] See Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory*, pp. 51-3. The image of the poster included in this paragraph is from "Radical Responses to the Great Depression," a collection within the University of Michigan Special Collections Library: "Large poster. "Labor Martyr Immortalized in poem". Stone Face, by Lola Ridge, with photo of Tom Mooney." http://quod.lib.umich.edu/s/sclradic/x-sce00669/sce00669.tif. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed: April 24, 2017.

[161] Where the recovery scholarship of leftist critics like Cary Nelson and feminist critics like Nancy Berke and Caroline Maun attribute the precipitous decline of Ridge's reputation after her death to, respectively, the suppression of radical political and radical women's voices, there is also an historically-informed formal explanation: the initial forgetting of her poetry aligns with the rise of a particular set of assumptions about what a "good" poem is and how to read it. Berke herself has pointed toward this, writing in 2002 that Ridge "sets herself against the female lyric tradition and its emphasis on the private life and the private couple, and what Genevieve Taggard refers to as the 'decorative impulse'" (34-5). This footnote, I suppose, is my response to Berke and Nelson as they wondered aloud at a 2016 MLA panel devoted to "Recovering Lola Ridge" why the rediscovery and recovery of her work in the 1970s by feminist critics and the late 1980s/early 1990s by scholars of American radicalism failed to take hold.

[162] *Dickinson's Misery* 7.

"Stone Face" speaks to and is spoken by the labor activists who carried it and surrounded it, talking not *to* Mooney but *of* him, turning its voice, as well, to the larger local, state, and national communities in which its activist role was performed as the shared encounter of the poem joined these groups together in solidarity as they beheld the martyred Tom Mooney.

This encounter asserts Mooney's immortality by aligning the martyrological with the American aesthetics presented through Ridge's work as editor of *Broom*'s January 1923 issue. Through his labor martyrdom, she writes, "They have carved you into a stone face […] / […] lifted high in California / Over the salt wash of the Pacific" (57). This "face tight-bitten like a pierced fist" (57) is "clenched" (58) and

> set up in full sight under the long
> Gaze of the generations—to be there
> Haggard in the sunrise, when San Quentin
> Prison shall be carved in and its steel ribs
> Food for the ant-rust . . . and Governor Rolph
> A fleck of dust among the archives. (58)

Nancy Berke rightly notes that the stone imagery in this poem aligns Mooney with "the rocks worked by San Quentin prisoners" (63). Yet there's something more going on here: he's not merely transformed into broken rock, but a stone face made permanent, one that will still stare out onto America after the passing of the United States, when, as the *Broom* ad put it, "many races, many cultures have come and gone." Tom Mooney's clenched stone face, this is to say, is also that of the stone faces of Mayan statuary that populated the pages of *Broom*'s American issue, and which Ridge set up as the foundational works of American art:

[Illustration 12: Mayan statuary included in Broom *"American" issue]*

These images, particularly the figure on the right, illuminate Ridge's poem through their resemblance to Mooney's prison photo: the slight downward angle of the head, lips pressed into a thin line, the prominent ears. But where the gazes of the Mayan figures turn away from the readers of *Broom*, Mooney's stare directly at the reader in, as the poem puts it, "a transfixed gleam / as they had glimpsed some vision and there hung / Impaled as on a bright lance." This is the same language which Ridge will use in *Firehead* to describe the crucifixion, in which Jesus' eyes are the site of his prophetic energy and the light that streams from them resembles the Roman spear that pierces his side. "[P]ierced like a fist," stigmata appear on Mooney's face. "Stone Face" simultaneously and with overlapping imagery doubly transforms Mooney into a quintessentially American figure: as Mayan statuary and in the typology of the crucifixion. This intersection (as we'll see shortly) opens *Firehead* as a work of ethnic modernism and solidarity-building covenantal poetics.

Such martyrological witnessing contrasts sharply with simple documentary method, of the sort that characterizes Ezra Pound's *Cantos* or John Dos Passos' novels. In "Morning Ride" (included in 1927's *Red Flag*), Ridge depicts modernist documentary poetics as a kind of ossified witness, one incapable of establishing solidarity. Set ten years after the lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory manager accused (falsely) of raping and murdering a fourteen year-old employee, the poem does not—it cannot—claim to witness or document the event itself, only the "Headlines chanting— / y o u t h / l y n c h e d t e n y e a r s a g o c l e a r e d—" (67). Mimicking the style and manner of Pound's early documentary technique through its framing of incorporated documentary material with a "lyric" voice, it combines newspaper headlines with the sensory experience of the morning commute, "the soft blarney of the wind."[163] Yet Ridge's poem highlights the shortcomings of both the contemporary document and documentary poetics. The headlines may chant at the speaker, but her attention is never wholly on them; her eyes wander continually out the train's windows, to the "Skyscrapers / seeming still / whirling on their concrete / bases, / windows / fanged—" and "milk-clouds oozing over the blue" (67). The newspaper itself guides her second turn from the document, as it leads her attention to smoothly glide from news headlines to advertising headlines:

l e o f r a n k
l y n c h e d t e n
s a y i t w i t h f l o w e r s
w r i g l e y ' s s p e a r m i n t g u m
c a r t e r ' s l i t t l e l i v e r— (67)

The newspaper speaks directly to its readers, but not with the prophetic intensity of Ridge's martyrological poetics. The only action it demands of her is to consider whether to "s a y i t w i t h f l o w e r s" or freshen her breath with name-brand gum. "Morning Ride" aligns the

[163] This is to distinguish, following David Ten Eyck, between the early documentary form of the Malatesta Cantos, in which the document is framed within lyric and narrative modes (44-51), and the "late" documentary of the Adams Cantos, in which lyric and narrative are suppressed (54).

interests of advertisers, the newspaper, and the wider cityscape (ominously “fanged” and “oozing” despite the day’s pleasant weather) with the forces of economic and political oppression: the distraction of modern documents serves the interests of the builders of “unpartisan” skyscrapers.

Documentary poetic technique is implicated as well, drawing in material that turns the poem away from the event at hand toward “fooling with your hair.” By documenting a text that seeks to distract from covenantal obligations and undermine solidarity, a documentary poem becomes complicit in these activities. Only when the train—and the poem—stops can she break from the reverie the newspaper (and poem) induces. As the conductor’s voice shouts, “Step Lively Please / Let ’Em Out First Let ’Em Out,” her thoughts turn abruptly from an appreciation of the breeze to wondering,

> did he too feel it on his forehead,
> the gentle raillery of the wind,
> as the rope pulled taut over the tree
> in the cool dawn? (67)

In these final four lines, Ridge finally establishes the poem’s social consciousness as the speaker’s rhetorical question at once specifies the details of and universalizes Frank’s lynching. Here, too, she turns away from the fragmented single-word lines and incorporated documents of the poem’s form (atypical of her oeuvre). Only by rejecting the documentary material provided by the newspaper can Ridge “witness” and “document” the event of Frank’s lynching, a decade in the past. True witness is *passionate*—matryrological. Both the newspaper’s documentation and poetry that re-assembles the event from documents are insufficient in this regard; the supposedly objective witness the document offers cannot build solidarity.

“Morning Ride” turns to a Poundian documentary technique—the only time in her career Ridge utilized this method—in order to express skepticism of the private, individual reading it

requires. Precisely by absorbing the news of miscarried justice, documentary and other avant-garde forms are able to neuter its social critique. The documentary yoking of a variety of voices into one—the headlines and ads together—serves to distract; only the interruption of a secondary voice turns the commuter's thoughts outward again. The skepticism of the "new" that Ridge's poem expresses stems not from its newness, but from its effectiveness. The encounter with America it presents, ultimately, tends toward the monologic. The refusal to see the "new" as a panacaea for all that ailed the "old" forms offers an important foundation for reading *Firehead*, to which this chapter now turns. This book-length poem, perhaps an epic, perhaps an "anti-epic," highlights Ridge's career-long utilization of both experimental forms and traditional prosody as it critically explores the adequacy or inadequacy of both conventional and modernist poetic forms to capture the encounter with America. Ultimately, she develops a poetics that is polyvocal both in its *content* and in its *form*, the poetic enactment of the universalized American covenant that, through immigration and the cause of labor, supersedes the limited and particular one which came before.

IV. Polyvocal Poetry and Multiethnic Solidarity

Ridge spent the summer of 1929 at the Yaddo artists' colony in a self-created competition with Robinson Jeffers, racing to complete *Firehead* before he could publish his own lengthy poetic retelling of the crucifixion narrative, *Dear Judas*. Even after Ridge's six furious, amphetamine-fuelled weeks of writing, it would still precede hers.[164] In contrast to Jeffers' poem, which focuses on its title character, *Firehead* re-imagines the New Testament's crucifixion narratives

[164] Svoboda discusses Ridge's time at Yaddo on pp. 247-55. Ridge's drug use was not abusive, but prescribed for various medical ailments—though, Svoboda implies, the side effects of the very drugs she was instructed to take correspond with many of the symptoms she described. She was very likely addicted to both Gynergen and Corax (librium) during her time at Yaddo, each of which could cause sleeplessness and hallucinations—the former during use and the latter during withdrawal (Svoboda 250-1).

through the perspectives of multiple witnesses to the event and its aftermath. Like her poems of the Lower East Side and labor martyrs, *Firehead* is less concerned with the moment of Jesus' death than with the experience of witnessing it: so it follows the disciples John, Judas, and Peter, Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, and peripheral figures imagined and elaborated by Ridge: the Babylonian parents of the apostle Thaddeus, a merchant from Joppa (most likely Jaffa), and Tiro, "image maker of Sicily / Who was slave of Saius, captain of Pilate's guard" (200). Traumatized, uncertain, and desperate, they all lay claim to the mantle of prophecy, pitting their own desires against the interests of solidarity with the movement Jesus founded. In its prophetic exuberance and desire to push to (and at times beyond) the limits of formal conventions as well as sprawling passages of Whitmanian free verse, the style and tone of *Firehead* resemble, we might say, what would have happened had William Blake and Allen Ginsberg defied the laws of time and come together to retell the story of the crucifixion.

The December 1929 publication of *Firehead*—in time for Christmas—was met with acclaim. Its sixty national reviews were, Svoboda notes, "almost twice as many as any of Ridge's previous three books" (256); they placed her work on par with that of Countee Cullen and Edna St. Vincent Millay. In many ways, *Firehead* marked the crest of Ridge's literary reputation: her poems were lauded, selling, and solicited for anthologies. The New York *Times* offered a typically glowing review: "forceful and beautiful, a work in which imagination and intelligence fuse in a white flame," *Firehead* stands out in a time of "generally circumscribed lyric accomplishment in poetry" and demonstrates "more poetic daring than is usual with modern poets."[165]

[165] Percy Hutchison, "Religious Fervor and Beauty in Miss Ridge's Poem." *New York Times*, Dec 08 1929.*ProQuest.* Web. 21 June 2016.

Ridge's late works and *Firehead* in particular met with acclaim precisely because of the ways in which they challenged emerging norms of lyric reading. Beyond her radical politics and dismissal simply because she was a woman, Ridge's reputation has languished while Jeffers and Hart Crane (another poet "guilty" of poetic "sins" that resemble Ridge's) despite the fact that, through its focus on the crucifixion and its channeling of a prophetic voice through deliberate archaisms, high diction, and conventional forms, *Firehead* represents a point of thematic and stylistic contact between Ridge's work and theirs. Because of this, it also throws into starker relief the qualities that distinguish her from them and the "Americanist" avant-garde they represent. *Firehead* is not a poem that is clearly ethnically-marked, or that many today would look on as ethnic literature. Nonetheless, it pushes toward a form that *can* depict a multiethnic, multilingual United States and establish solidarity among the poem's readers and the others—immigrants, radicals, ethnic whites—on whom her poetic career was largely focused.

As Ridge tells the story of the universalization of the biblical covenant—the effect, in Christianity, of the death and resurrection of Jesus—she strives toward poetic forms that are also capable of enacting a kind of universalization by producing solidarity. *Firehead* revises American biblical typology by revising the biblical text itself, challenging the concept, codified through text and convention, that Jesus' universal covenant is in fact limited: running only through men, heroism, and institutional power. *Firehead* offers a biblical counter-history in order to produce a contemporary counter-typology. To accomplish this, *Firehead* resists the forms, both conventional and modernist, which, to Ridge's mind, suppressed or blocked the politics and poetics of solidarity.

Ridge therefore turns to an alternative genre—the epic—for this poem. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Firehead* rests uncomfortably within this category as well, whether by the terms

of the emerging norms of the (increasingly overheard, lyricized) modernist epic and a longer epic tradition perceived as stretching forth from antiquity.[166] Ridge's poem displaces the heroic man (and it is *always* a man) of epic. As *Firehead* opens, Jesus already hangs upon the cross; by page 55, he is dead; and the remainder of the work turns to the experiences of those around him in the period before his return. He is present primarily as an absence; conquered in a way that Poseidon never quite gets the best of Odysseus, or Blazes Boylan of Leopold Bloom. (This muddies, as well, readings of *Firehead* that flatten it into a parable of Sacco and Vanzetti: if they are represented by Jesus, then, like him, they are relegated to the poem's periphery.)[167]

As Jesus dies, the day becomes "arteried with fire" (17) from a final burst of "Light, from his eyeballs raying" (52). This is an image familiar in works that engage with American biblical and prophetic typology: recall both the "pillar of fire" Zukofsky found throughout New York City (in, for instance, the tip of his cigarette) and the use of rays of light and fire to symbolize the presence of prophetic energy in the illustrations of Aaron Douglas. Ridge takes their reclamation of this imagery on behalf of the underserved and oppressed to a further extreme, refusing to link prophetic signification to "heroic" individuals (typically male) or even moments of historical importance or labor martyrdom. Her sonnet sequence "Death Ray" (1920), for instance, utilizes the same imagery that defines the opening of *Firehead*, but places it amid the ordinary. The

[166] The high modernist epic has a standard approach, articulated both by Joyce's schema to *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's well-known essay, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth": take a central myth or story of the Western tradition and re-situate it within the conditions of modernity, providing a framework that orders an otherwise fragmentary work and offers the possibility of ordering the fragmented experience of being modern. So we find Odysseus in *Ulysses* and Pound's *Cantos*; the Grail legend in Eliot's *Waste Land*; the biblical exodus in Mina Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* and Zukofsky's *"A"*; Vergil in Hart Crane's *The Bridge*; and, throughout the late 1920s, a slew of retellings of crucifixion, including Countee Cullen's *The Black Christ* and Robinson Jeffers' *Dear Judas* (both 1929), and, again, Zukofsky's *"A"*. Structural myths and histories could, of course, be layered onto one another and be drawn from outside the Western/European tradition.

[167] For *Firehead* as the story of Sacco and Vanzetti, see Maun 20 and Berke 40. The link between *Firehead* and the two has its origins in Ridge's assertion that "she began writing it after two nights without sleep a week after their deaths" (Svoboda 258). Svoboda's biography is skeptical of this reading, but replaces it with another type of displacement, holding that "the psychological impetus in *Firehead* seems to be much more about her guilt over the abandonment of her son Keith" (258).

sequence closes on the image of "a sunbeam" balanced "as you would a jar" in an open hand, one which "shall cleave forever there / A golden nailhead, burning in your palm" (20). The prophetic light that permeated the moment of Jesus' death suffuses even the mundane act of staring out one's window, or of noticing the light on their palm. Everyday events, outside historical noteworthiness, are infused with as much prophetic and politically enlightening potential as the crucifixion itself.

Firehead's formal hallmark is a polyvocality that shapes both its narrative and its prosody. The poem's rejection of the possibility of a single protagonist (let alone a hero) set it apart from even the noted polyvocality of modernist epic. Ridge's contemporaries did not avoid the inclusion of an epic hero; in many cases they may not have wished to do so. Works as fragmented as Pound's *Cantos* and even Zukofsky's *"A"* are nonetheless guided and organized by the mediating presence of the poet's voice—which becomes, in its way, the central character of the work. They express a monologic tendency which Ridge's poetry resists—and which resembles that which is found in national history and political power, the poetic translation of *e pluribus unum*. The formal struggles within *Firehead*, this is to say, track with and further those of her labor and immigrant-focused poetry: the content may not be that of the United States in 1929, but the form she develops is one which, unlike "French-influenced" (high and expatriate) modernism, *can* depict its multiethnic, multilingual, immigration- and labor-shaped reality. *Firehead* suggests that the codification of witness into an authoritative document necessarily suppresses and excludes the majority of accounts—and, through a pretense to accuracy, papers over its own, inevitable, subjectivity.

The poem's table of contents displays its narrative polyvocality succinctly: It replaces the crucifixion narrative of the Gospels with a range of independent perspectives, almost entirely

unheard within the canonical texts of the New Testament. (John the Evangelist, apostle and purported author of the Gospel of John, does appear as a narrator—though the poem revises and circumscribes his voice.)[168] The three most important figures in *Firehead* are the two Marys and Judas, whose actions are central to the *narrative* of the crucifixion and resurrection, but whose voices are suppressed, marginalized, and edited out by both the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John.[169]

Each witness to the crucifixion comes to it with their own agenda and the bulk of *Firehead* explores the uses to which each would put their claim to prophetic witness and transmission. For some, this is the accrual of personal reputation, wealth, and power. Figures such as Peter, Judas, and Tiro assert their own experience of the crucifixion as the only valid one and claim that this singularly prophetic encounter gives them the right to authority over others rather than establish solidarity with and among them as equals.[170] Mary Magdalene describes Peter as a political savant:

> […] Simon Peter—Peter
> Moving in circles . . . but his way is power.
> Not one of them had heart to learn
> The wheedling ways of conquest as hath he. (120)

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[168] For the purposes of this discussion, the "actual" or "historical" author of the Gospel of John is not important—but the author whom the text itself claims is. The "John" whom Ridge revises, then, is the John constructed by the gospel named after him.

[169] Bruce Chilton, for instance, takes up the suppression of women's voices at length in his study of Mary Magdalene (Chapter 10, for instance, is devoted to "Expurgating the Magdalene"), concluding that "The Synoptic Gospels silence Mary in deference to Christianity's emergent family values, and to prevent her view of Jesus's Resurrection from interfering with their own. . . . The same Gospels that prove Magdalene's influence resent her memory and seek to displace it" (110).

[170] In many ways, this is also a gendered division: *Firehead* asserts that Mary Magdalene represents as true and powerful a witness to the life and death of Jesus as John or Peter. Among Ridge's aims with this work is the recovery of suppressed, female voices. But that neat schema doesn't quite hold up across the work: figures such as Thaddeus, Jesus, and even John are in many ways feminized and aligned with the Marys; Thaddeus' mother, Myrenne, like her husband, does not quite comprehend what she has seen—and laughs at it. A fuller discussion of this dynamic is outside the scope of this chapter, though it deserves study in its own right, along with Ridge's exploration of parent-child relationships which, as Svoboda indicates, is also among the central themes of the work.

His self-descriptions, filled with implicit violence, only enhance this perception. "I am a common man, a man of action" (153), he announces, claiming the right to leadership and prophetic transmission. He transforms the metaphoric language Jesus used to describe the divisions his teachings would cause within families and communities into an expression of support for the use of force in support of Peter's leadership: "Did He not say, O virgins, / I come not to bring peace among ye but a sword?" (152). As his thoughts progress, he transforms himself from mere "common […] man of action" into a messianic figure in his own right, aligning himself with Judas (!) as a potential leader of the masses whose potential is superseded only by that of Jesus: "truly / Had He not called . . . I should have led ye, even as Judas of Gamala" (153). As a divinely-ordained leader, his authority is both grounded in and enforced by threat of violence:

> But I say unto you this day prophecy is upon me! I am Peter the Rock, I socket
> Pillars, I sustain temples! Uphold me brothers, I am Peter,
> Slitter of the throats of fishes—hoist me upon the stone
> Antlers, horning azure, taking the light upon their tips. O I am the word
> Made rock to watch above the peoples, that shall pass up and look up at me as they
> pass—
> Incessantly drifting as sands of the desert under my stone lids . . .
> Before me, Peter and no other . . . I say there shall not be another! (154-5)

He slits throats—but this is not all. In this passage, Peter aligns himself with the revelation of God's presence, singularity, and ultimate authority in the Old Testament ("Thou shalt have no other gods before me" [Exodus 20.3]) and the New ("And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" [John 1.14]). As he imagines the people gazing upon him in wonder, he casts himself as the conduit through which their disparate thoughts and experiences are synthesized: out of many voices, one. As he seeks to subsume a variety of prophetic visions, encounters, and voices

within and beneath his own, Peter gives expression to both the monologic document and the monologic institutions—not merely the Church he founded, but the idea of the modern nation.

The institutional Peter is known as the Rock of the Church; the gospels agree that this role and title was given to him by Jesus when he changed his name from Simon to Peter (in Greek, *Petros*, or stone). Yet Ridge suggests that this is not so, that the "true" church (or nation) rests on a different foundation, the multiplicity of voices suppressed by Peter's monologic claims. *Firehead* gestures toward this structurally: before Part V ("Peter") takes up his vision of the church he will found, Part IV ("The Stone") presents the perspectives of the two Marys. While "The Stone" refers in part to the stone blocking the mouth of Jesus' tomb, by which the two women wait, it also serves to de-center Peter from his claimed role as the true "Rock" of Jesus' prophecy.

"The Stone" turns *Firehead*'s critique from the authoritative institution (church/nation) to the authoritative text (the Gospel of John). The apostle John stands in as a symbol of the texts that claim authoritative witness of the life and death of Jesus. Yet, in Ridge's telling, he can claim no such witness. Mary Madgalene challenges both his witness and his passion:

> He walks alone; old, old, though he is but a boy
> His blood is chillier than a fish's and his heart
> Is fed with water like the moon's.
> […]
> I hate him too . . . ah no, why should I hate
> Him—who did flee off crying in the dark
> He did but huddle with thy other sheep
> Who would not plunge over the edge with thee
> But scurried to some safer fold—Luke, James,
> Philip, Thomas, Simon Peter—Peter
> Moving in circles . . . (119-20)

By contrast, Mary burns with a passion (and prophetic energy) associated at once with Jesus and the sun, given in sexualized language. Repeatedly "pierced" by phallic beams of light, she likens

awareness of Jesus' prophecy to the loss of virginity while longing after the easier life before she knew him, to live in "Night, chaste, unknowing any pierce of light that applies bright torsions to those deeps / That long but to be still" (37); the dying Jesus, she imagines, looks to the spectators around him like a stain of "cardinal on white design" (40) as they disassociate themselves from him. John, on the other hand, is filled with "blood [...] chillier than a fish's" and is associated with the cool, reflected light of the moon, not the sun's burning. Moreover, he is deeply uncomfortable with his own sexuality and the sexualization of prophetic energy. "Lord, I have known no woman" (66), he proclaims, while "even light / Is tainted with some strange infection; dawn / Is like a mindless woman lying, / Too close against me" (67). But at the same time, he pleads, "O Lord, / I need the comfort of thy touch" (67) and remembers when "thy kiss / Blew faintly salt upon my cheek" (68) and how "thy full / Lip curved on me in tender scorn; thine eyes / Pierced all my poor defences till I stood / Abased before their intolerant love" (71). Like Mary, sexual energy drives his connection to Jesus; but like the crowd at the crucifixion, he cannot totally overcome the connection that would therefore imagine prophecy as sexual impurity. "Why must thou pierce me?" (67), he asks Jesus before wishing for a time when "Thy hands are yet unpierced, thy feet / Are yet blemishless" (71), casting the pre-crucifixion Jesus as virginal.

John does not burn enough to compose a martyrological, or prophetic, document. Yet he also cannot rightly claim to compose even a simple document of witness. Mary's statement that John "fle[d] off crying in the dark" (120) is true. "Swiftly through the woods John sped away" (59), we learn in the opening line of Part II ("John"), subtitled with further reference to his flight: "He walks at dawn in a wood without Jerusalem." Because he flees, he is not present for the entirety of the story his gospel purports to tell. This fact is already embedded in it: Mary Magdalene discovers the empty tomb and it is to her that Jesus first reveals himself risen.

Framed within *Firehead*, this serves to limit and circumscribe the claims of individual witness and documentation. Ridge does not cast John as a charlatan or a false prophet; unlike Peter, his thoughts do not turn to how to best harness the crucifixion for the sake of his own interests. Rather, John is a figure who recognizes the limitations of his own witness in a way that the text's reception, read as authoritative "witness" of the good news, does not allow.

As *Firehead* draws to a close, he does, at last, burn with the energy of prophetic transmission. Still wandering fields,

> He stood apart, yet rimmed about
> By the common luster of the air,
> There at the hollow of the flame
> He felt the self of music stir
> Transfuse into the light . . . and then
> A wand of fire immaculate
> Light tremble into sound again,
> Till his heart stumbled on a beat and fell—
> Out of that radiant company
> Out of the glory imperishable
> And the shining without end . . . (218)

The point, this is to say, is not that he cannot lay claim to a prophetic connection or partial witness of Jesus, but that this knowledge and music is fleeting and ineffable. The claim is false only when it ignores that partiality. *Firehead*'s closing lines emphasize the impermanence of prophecy and partiality of witness:

> For none who heard might hold it long—
> That silver singing underneath
> The diapason of the sun
> That sounded on Jerusalem,
> Where encased in light as in a sheath
> The star of morning sang with him
> Who blent with morning's song. (218)

Any witness, but especially that which claims prophecy, is necessarily fleeting: what remains is not the thing itself, but only the knowledge of it. So it is not the case, *Firehead* implies at its

close, that the Gospel of John contains no truth, or could not potentially have been truthful. The flaw is in its presentation, which enacts the risk of poetic witnessing: that the claim of the document, ossified, transforms from that of partial history to that of "standard" or complete history. When the Gospel frames itself as in alignment with the (mono-)*logos* that was both God and with God, its function becomes necessarily different than if it were, as Ridge's poem implies it should be, framed as the gospel of a man who saw firsthand very little of what he presents and, in fact, witnessed it only fleetingly and epiphanically. This counter-historical gospel highlights what Ridge's poetry insists is the true effect of martyrological witness: not the heroization of the martyr, or the channeling of witness through him or any one individual, but the way the shared experience of witnessing martyrdom produces passions that bind individuals in solidarity. It is, necessarily, polyvocal.

This also describes the various "scribes" *Firehead* observes at the crucifixion. As a group of them lingers in the crowd before the cross, the poem looks on them skeptically:

> Those scribes, who feared the shadow flung
> Of that great flame upon the scrolls
> On which for daylight they had wrought
> To trick the word out, aping thought,
> And furbish it, that they likewise
> Might glister and their meager souls
> Attain more stature in men's eyes,
> Picked, of sly habit, warily
> From off the oiled quiver of the tongue,
> Some sentient dart to cast at him,
> There nailed on the horizon's rim,
> And climbed to mark him as He hung. (21)

And, a few pages later, Mary Magdalene "heard the chattering of the scribes, one to the other" (33) while they stand like a gaggle of bored reporters waiting for Jesus to die so they can write their ledes and go home for the evening. These figures of professional writing—poets, historians, writers of Gospels—are both self-interested and without true talent. They are,

Magdalene thinks, watching them, "less than a rushlight"; the prophetic truth of the event, on the other hand is "a flame [which] shall out-bide you all" (33). Their loyalty lies with their own ambitions: they write to "Attain more stature in men's eyes" and, in fact, "feared" precisely that which they have come to document.[171] The description of their style echoes the complaints Ridge lodged against French-influenced American poets such as Gertrude Stein in her letters to Henry Loeb. They "trick the word out, aping thought," trying to make it "glister"—that is, not to glow with the heat of its own burning, but to reflect that which is already around them, like a pretty bauble.

Ridge's development of a formal and prosodic polyvocality in *Firehead* therefore flows naturally from the concern for narrative polyvocality. The expatriate, high modernist elite's rejection of conventional forms in favor of experiment and fragmentation ultimately produce texts as monologic as the documents, histories, and assertions of political power she wishes to challenge. Ridge, by contrast, does not use any form with regularity. This holds true even for the bulk of the poem written in meter. Her deployment of both conventional and experimental forms challenges the styles of the expatriate, high modernist elite. She alternates among pentameter, tetrameter, and trimeter, sometimes rhyming, sometimes not—and only rarely with a regular rhyme scheme. In places, she shifts into ballad meter and common meter; here and there, a stray hexameter line bursts through; she quotes nursery rhymes and labels two sections of the poem "Lullaby." For the most part, she avoids the blank verse associated, since Milton, with English-language epic. (Not infrequently, a passage will *appear*, momentarily, to be blank verse—until Ridge's irregular rhyme patterns interrupt and undermine it.) She employs a variety of free verse

[171] The light imagery in the first lines of the long quotation is part of *Firehead*'s extensive association of flames, light, and the sun with what we might call the prophetic energy of Jesus' death. As in Aaron Douglas' woodcut illustrations to *God's Trombones*, beams of light strike figures with prophetic importance; and, immediately following the passage quoted above, Jesus "Looked from the crosshead broodingly / Into the fulgent eye of the sun" in direct contrast with the fearful scribes (21).

forms as well, ranging from short, one or two-word lines to rambling, Whitmanesque passages. In places, the free verse is limited by a loose, fifteen-syllable count—but this is freely broken when the line or phrase demands. But while this sketch may, at first glance, sound like a description of modernist play with form, the total effect is quite different. Those who speak or think in free (or "modern") verse forms are those who seek power—Judas, Peter, Tiro, for instance. Formal verse, on the other hand, is employed by those whose voices have been suppressed by canonical documents.

This critique is at its most apparent in Part III of *Firehead*, "Judas." It opens in pentameter—but this is third-person narrative. As soon as Judas' consciousness emerges as the dominant poetic voice, three pages in, the lines shift to free verse. Even the moment when he appears, at first glance, to speak prosodically confirms his inability to do so. Thinking of silver begins to order his thoughts: they drift, for a page (83), toward pentameter, but he can't quite sustain it. Shortly thereafter, he attempts to "sing" of silver:

> Silver
> is tractable and gentle;
> it hath dawnsweet in it
> and the savor of bitter waters;
> it hath the eyelight of seagulls
> and of the white peacock
> and the indomitable gleam
> of the eyes of the priestess
> who pleasureth the stranger
> and bestoweth herself without joy,
> holding her soul aloof,
> for gold is harlotry but silver
> is the virginity of the heart
> and cannot be taken away— (84)

In this passage and its companion on the following page (interrupted by a passage of sprawling free verse lines) Judas appears—perhaps even attempts—to work in lines of trimeter and tetrameter. While there is a rough syllable count—six to eight syllables, but not always—there is

no meter. Certainly these passages are not ballad meter: they do not rhyme, line lengths do not alternate, and it is not iambic. The thought of silver coins has moved Judas to a kind of music—but this isn't lyrical, or an ode, or a hymn. All he can muster is a kind of rhapsodic chant. Not quite right-justified, this is Ridge's positioning of the lines on the page, quite literally setting Judas' "song" apart from the formal verse used elsewhere in *Firehead*.

The next two sections of Judas' narrative ("The madness in the field" and "The Void") present the advent of "modernist" forms as the breakdown of selfhood. "The madness in the field" opens unexpectedly with three pages of irregularly but consistently rhymed iambic tetrameter, followed by a further two of blank verse as Judas imagines his mother's presence beside him. Over the course of this section and "The Void," the prosody loosens, then progresses into Whitmanesque free verse, and, finally, avant-garde fragmentation. Yet this is not the joyful play with forms of Joyce's "Oxen of the Sun" episode in *Ulysses*. Nor is it the formal pastiche that T. S. Eliot employs in *The Waste Land* to capture the fragmentation and deterioration of modernity. Modernist technique serves not as a means of comprehending an incomprehensibly fragmented world, but as symptomatic of insanity and incomprehension. In *Firehead*, those who can think in meter can understand—and those can cannot or will not are doomed.

The bereaved but serene Mother Mary, for instance, describes that which she can comprehend in pentameter, tetrameter, trimeter, and, here and there, hexameter, sometimes rhyming, sometimes not. That which is more difficult to comprehend, whether because of its supernatural character or because of the emotional strain of the memory, causes the metrical quality of her thinking to falter. So, for instance, at her description of Jesus' conception (a "graft of alien fire" [137]) an exaggerated stanza break that doubles the white space on the page also

marks the temporary movement from iambic verse to free verse. Within twenty lines, however, she has returned to pentameter.

By contrast, when Judas recalls the moment when his mother abandoned him as a child, the briefly established meter of "The madness in the field" wobbles and then collapses as he addresses his fantasy of her:

> Dost thou remember, Mother? Let this moon,
> That on so many nights came in thy place
> To my bleak pillow, bear
> Witness how thou didst leave me in the blank room
> Whose window in the wall
> Looked forth upon another wall,
> And how at my cry
> Thou didst turn back upon the stair
> And set four kisses softly—on my brow,
> On each wet eager cheek—the tender last
> On my small heaving breast
> Four kisses lightly laid . . . now deep
> As four nails in a cross . . .
> There was significance in that sign . . . a cross
> And tenantless . . . this is unique.
> He made his cross to flower, mother—mine
> Has arms to honor me . . . no crown . . . a crown
> May grow from out the ruined trunk in time. (93-4)

From the regularly iambic pentameter of the passage's first line (indicative of the pages that precede it), the meter begins to destabilize. The second line is still pentameter and can even be read, a little awkwardly, as containing only iambs. But "came in" scans, as spoken language, more naturally as a trochee (*came* in, rather than came *in*) while "thy" in the ultimate foot could just as reasonably be stressed or unstressed. The result is a line that forces itself into an unnatural sing-song pattern as Judas' consciousness begins to strain against the meter. So the passage becomes a search (unsuccessfully) for a poetic form that *can* contain and give shape to his thoughts: alternating lines of trimeter; a line that could be a kind of irregular pentameter or, with its sixth stress on eleven syllables, failed hexameter; trimeter; tetrameter; a five-syllable,

two-foot line; tetrameter again; two lines of pentameter; and trimeter. Ridge's use of ellipses further muddies the form of the passage's final lines. One of the defining stylistic devices of her free-verse poetry, the ellipsis here breaks into and disrupts her formal verse at precisely the moment that metrical regularity attempts to reassert itself. Read prosodically, it renders the meter of an otherwise stable line unclear: "Four kisses lightly laid . . . now deep"—is this a pause? a beat? a kind of silent foot? Are we, that is to ask, supposed to scan this as tetrameter? As pentameter? As a nine-syllable line? (Is this ellipsis something even softer than a pyrrhic?) For four of the following five lines, the uncertainty remains: trimeter or tetrameter; pentameter or hexameter; tetrameter or pentameter; pentameter or fourteener.

Like Mother Mary, Judas re-establishes formal control by alternating lines of pentameter and tetrameter in the next stanza. But this is short-lived. After these eight lines, Judas' misogynist rage bursts forth and the lines roll on, unconstrained, as he fantasizes about the landscape raping his mother:

> Faugh, thou art but a rutting beast, sprawled there on the earth's rump!
> Dance, dance with thy legs agape—call on hills to enter thee!
> Ravish her, O hills!
> Toss her from one to the other
> Till she fall without sense on thy buttocks and the night vomit upon her;
> Give her such issue as no eye hath looked upon the nourish at her dugs. (95)

And so on, for another violent, scatological page, before Judas turns his attention to the "firelings" (97) that he imagines have arrived to torment him and whose imagined presence eventually drives him to suicide. In his isolated death, he is the typological model for those incapable or unwilling to feel and establish solidarity.

Just as *Firehead* draws on the conventions of epic in order to critique it, the Judas section draws on the allusivness and use of quotation that distinguished the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Judas' metrical breakdown comes to resemble the deliberately-chosen poetic designs of Eliot, thereby

aligning the formal technique of the expatriate, Anglo-American, French-influenced modernist elite both with those who would betray the revolution to the state and with an insanity brought on by the inability to apprehend or comprehend modernity. Some of the allusive connections are merely circumstantial: Judas, in Mary Magalene's description, might as well be J. Alfred Prufrock, "an unsure man craving woman"(32); his hallucination of his mother, perhaps, echoes the hooded third companion in "What the Thunder Said"; like Eliot's Tiresias, Judas is a sexual voyeur, recounting to his mother how he "crouch[ed] like a larger cockroach / Behind the cushions of thy bed" (94). Most, however, are more direct. As Judas' formal control begins to break down, Ridge gestures specifically toward "Prufrock." Immediately preceding the passage analyzed above, Judas channels the language and imagery of Eliot's first major work:

> Let us go
> Down to the old sea whose profuse salt
> Assoils those hearts too sullied for small streams
> To wash their filth away. We two shall share
> Her large forgetfulness, we two shall walk
> In innocence—and none shall know us there
> Amid the other strangers in the sun—
> A woman and an unknown man. (92)

Quoting and alluding to the opening and closing passages of "Prufrock" ("Let us go then, you and I"; the ending's "walk upon the beach"), Judas weaves potentially incestuous language through anxiety over sexual purity and impurity.[172]

The documentary riffing off of Eliot continues. Its most important instance occurs as "The Void" draws to a close. Here, as poetic form and Judas' consciousness fragment in the moments leading up to his suicide, Ridge draws on the conclusion of "The Fire Sermon" to re-

[172] In the passage quoted from page 92, we find Judas reminding his mother that "Thou didst turn back upon the stair" (93), echoing Eliot again: "Time to turn back and descend the stair" ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 39).

write "What the Thunder Said."[173] Judas, perceiving "playful lightning in my brain" that "illumes a certain garden" presents what *this* thunder said as a kind of nihilist prophecy:

> There is nothing   nothing   a void within a void   whomsoever
> Believeth on me shall be saved
>   there   is   no   saviour
> Yet remaineth a consolation
>   there   is   no consolation
> Yet there must be a point
>   there   is   no   point
> There are these fiends
>   there   are no   fiends
> Begin at the beginning Peter Peter beginning of the circle nought   there is nought   I
>   am the rim
> About the circle of nothingness   turning   turning   count   a thousand   nought
> 'Twas a false start   count a thousand   nought   how does it begin
> O God   let me remember
>   count a thousand   nought   count a
> Thousand   nought   count a thousand   count a thousand (103)

Standing at the point of total nervous breakdown (where a voice in Eliot's poem announces that "On Margate Sands, / I can connect / Nothing with nothing"), Judas is not rescued by the thunderous word "DA," or Augustine, or the Buddha from the belief in nothingness.[174] Rather, the voice he hears reveals that "there is no God," there is no soul" (102), that "There is nothing" (103). Instead of "Burning burning burning burning," we find Judas "turning   turning" (103) as he pleads not, "O Lord Thou pluckest me out" but "O God   let me remember." Unable to proclaim "The peace which passeth understanding," Judas sees only "a void within a void" (103). Then he hangs himself: the next portion of Judas's section ("The Watch of Light") returns to a third-person narrator and opens with the image of "Matthew / Lingered at the tree / For which his eyes / Contested with the streaming rabble of the flies . . ." (104).

[173] I should also say that this passage, as a whole, *feels* to me like an echo of the closing section of "The Hollow Men," with particular emphasis on the parallel between Judas' imagined dialogue ("no saviour," etc.) and Eliot's "Shadow" that falls regularly "between" paired concepts. Certainly, we might say, Judas' life, in this imagining, ends "not with a bang but a whimper." Still, this connection remains more impression than argument.
[174] It's worth noting, as well, that while both Ridge and the Buddhist "Fire Sermon" draw on the language of burning, the bettered souls this works toward are opposites: for the Buddha, burning purifies one from unnecessary and dangerous passions; for Ridge, to burn with passion is precisely the point.

The portion of *Firehead* that is, in its poetic technique, most clearly "modernist" collapses: first into a repugnant and violent sexual mania; then into madness and despair; and, finally, suicide. Ridge uses documentary techniques to incorporate Eliot's poetry into her own in two significant places, both thematically and formally: first, when Judas' ability to think prosodically begins to falter, and again when mere coherence collapses entirely. He is, at risk of being too blunt about it, incapable of shoring fragments against ruins. Yet *Firehead* does not damn all formal experiment or the use of free verse in all cases. The type of modernism exemplified by Eliot's poetry fails on two counts. It is, first, incapable of capturing the immigrant encounter with America—that which, in Ridge's vision of a truly American literature, sets aside a unitary or monologic idea of the nation in order to present it as inherently ethnic and plural. On the level of poetic form, moreover, it is incapable of enacting the plural, public witness of prophecy which poetry must—and which Ridge's can. At first, Judas cannot act in solidarity. But by the time of his death, he cannot perceive the existence of anything beyond himself with which to stand in solidarity; the universe beyond him is an endless void.

Mary Magdalene's recovered, counter-historical, martyrological witness provides the model for a formal and prosodic polyvocality—for a poetics of solidarity, one capable of revising the typology of the crucifixion and transmitting the true universalization of the covenant. In Ridge's retelling of the resurrection, Jesus reveals himself to Mary alone through a sexual encounter. In a nonce sonnet, she describes how he "draweth me by my two hands / Unto the bow whereon He stands" and there "pierced me with his light" while his "love overpoured / The rigid confines of his word / And filled me, a predestined urn / In which the living sap might burn" (213). Mary is now lit by a "pure ray" which "Shine[s] on me as from a star / When it hath burned away" (213). Reworking the cliché, Mary Magdalene, pregnant, "glows" with the

gospel: "the child I bear of him," a figurative "vision that I share," burning like "The living tendons of a flame"—the news that "He hath not perished, He doth live / … / He is not dead He hath arisen" (214).[175]

The old forms, too, are not dead, but, arisen, live transfigured: Mary's self-created tetrameter sonnet in which she describes the revelation of Christ, or any of the less-creatively reimagined forms she (and others) use throughout *Firehead*. Mary, the most passionate figure in the poem, is also the most comfortable in both traditional and modern poetic forms. Where, for Judas and Mother Mary, free verse signals the moment when emotion threatens coherence, for Magdalene, it is a way of remaining in control of the passions which burn her and refining them into prophetic vision: "Whereon dripped thy wounds / Shall be roses"; "Where thou didst rest in the desert / The rocks flower, / There are wild gardens" (126), as she begins to reconcile herself to Jesus' death. (Likewise, the third-person free-verse narration of Mary's fury at the moment of the crucifixion—"She turned, struck madly at the swirling faces" [40]—resolves, over the next two pages, into a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman soldiers several decades hence.) Like Mary Magdalene—and John, and Mother Mary (who staves off free-verse incoherence with a virtuosic shuffling among verse forms)—*Firehead* itself displays command of a variety of verse forms, both "traditional" and "modern." But, as Mary's nonce sonnet suggests, it is uncomfortable with the division these categories create.

Expatriate high modernism, of course, *also* drew traditional verse forms into its poetry. But where Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, quotes Shakesepare, Edmund Spenser, and John Dryden (along with their meter and style), the premise is that traditional forms are dead; the effect of quoting them is, in essence, to transform them into "free" or "experimental" verse. These "fragments" of once-living forms are the pieces from which a new form, capable of addressing

[175] The supernova imagery also recalls the star that guided the Magi to the elder Mary as she gave birth to Jesus.

modernity, will be created. Whether this use is driven by parody, pastiche, Eliotic theories of literary filaments, or Poundian notions of linguistic energy, Ridge stands askance: she uses them sincerely—the difference might be found in the verb itself; she does not simply "quote" them. Ridge deploys traditional meter, rhyme schemes, and archaisms in combination with modern and experimental forms in order to undermine the authority of a canonical text and give voice precisely to those who had previously been shut out. Ridge's poetry judges the effectiveness of "new" and "old" forms differently. It does not matter whether traditional forms are judged dead or stale by the standards of private, self-expressive poetry. The only question that matters is whether they are capable of transmitting the moment of martyrological encounter, of using this experience to establish solidarity first among its readers and then between these readers and its subjects. Put only slightly differently, the ability to deploy traditional verse forms as well as modernist techniques remains a necessary conduit for giving voice to ethnic, political, socio-economic, or immigrant outsiders. (Voice, after all, must precede audience solidarity.) High modernist parody and pastiche effectively declare these forms off-limits to all except those who know how to deploy them "correctly"—with irony, rather than sincerity. In doing so, expatriate modernism (and even a great swath of its "Americanist" cousins) reassert the control of a select few over the possibility of a democratizing array of poetic forms.

The use of prosody and poetic form, we can therefore see, runs parallel to—indeed, becomes analogous with—American discourses of covenant and typology. There is, we might say, a kind of *poetic* covenant that her self-theorizing and her agenda for an American modernism seeks to universalize. Likewise, from this perspective, both the strictures of conventional prosody and experiments of high and expatriate modernism serve to limit the scope

of this covenant: to those who know how to "properly" deploy conventional forms in the modern world.

V. Conclusion: Redeeming the Type

Lola Ridge's works allow us to see the use of traditional verse forms by ethnic and immigrant poets in the first decades of the twentieth century as more than necessary strategies in the face of normative and/or white audience expectations.[176] Rather, they serve to universalize the typological discourse of an American covenant—in American poetry, and perhaps even in civil religious discourse more broadly. In the language of typology, Ridge's poetry *redeems the type*: that is, she allows it to fulfill or complete the mission, as medieval Church Fathers thought the New Testament did for the stories and characters of the Hebrew Bible, or the Puritans, in their national-historical re-application of typology, thought their experiences redeemed and fulfilled the Exodus. In the context of the United States, Ridge's approach to traditional verse forms fulfills a polyvocal, democratic promise.

Whether we're thinking of Mary Magdalene's nonce sonnets, the mixed forms of *Firehead* as a whole, Zukofsky's modernist sestina, "Mantis," or Claude McKay's masterful sonnets, treating these as *living* forms is essential to the poetic presentation and exploration of a multiethnic United States—to depicting in verse "the Passion eternal" of the lives of immigrants, African Americans, or other ethnic, religious, or political outsiders—"the Passion eternal" which, like the crucifixion to which it refers, is an act of universalizing the covenant. What does this look like in action? On the one hand, *Firehead* or "The Ghetto" or "Stone Face" or "Three

[176] See Houston Baker's discussion of the "mastered masks" of Claude McKay's sonnets and Countee Cullen's ballads in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987, pp. 84-6ff.) and Michael Nowlin's "Race Literature, Modernism, and Normal Literature: James Weldon Johnson's Groundwork for an African American Literary Renaissance, 1912-1920," *Modernism/modernity* 20.3 (September), 2013, pp. 503-18.

Men Die" or "Frank Little at Calvary." In all of these poems, Ridge eschews what Michael North calls the "plain American" (128) of the Americanist avant-garde, the quality which he finds problematic and the location of the movement's ultimate failure. The prophetic idiom of her martyrological poetics is hardly "plain" or "spoken": precisely through its sometimes deliberately archane constructions, it highlights the ways in which both a prophetic voice and traditional verse forms have, within the confines of modernism, become something other than normative accents. So this "universalizing" to which I continue to refer *also* looks like Zukofsky's "Mantis"—not as a parodic or comedic modernizing of the sestina, but as a continuing ethnicizing or vernacularizing of "normative" or "traditional" verse alongside that of the avant-garde. Maybe Zukofsky's sestina or Claude McKay's sonnets are not what Houston Baker and others call "masks"—but, like James Weldon Johnson's King James ragtime, they locate the ethnic and the traditional/normative/universal conterminously. In other words, ethnic forms are not necessary to write ethnic poetry.

Ridge, re-working both the New Testament's crucifixion narratives and modernist approaches to prosody and poetics, ultimately re-writes the source-texts of American biblical and prophetic typology. Each new wave of immigrants comes to stand in the same revisionary (perhaps even supercessionist) relationship to those already there as the earliest, "Jewish" Christians did to the period's non-Christian Jews. Immigrant Americanness supersedes that of its WASP predecessors.

Yet this was not the only possibility. Charles Reznikoff would turn to the same subject matter—epic, the limits of poetic form and experiment, the rejection of an idolization/fetishization of indigeneity, crafting counter-historical revisions of typological narratives—yet develops a very different way of fitting immigrant Americans into the

typological frameworks of Americanness. Reznikoff's prophet, legal brief in hand, does not bear the good news of Ridge's Magdalene, but insists the typological roles have not yet been fully cast. America as sacred state, as the New Jerusalem, needs its Nathan—its court prophet prosecuting the king on behalf of all the underserved. Ridge's prophetic "anti-epic" proclaims human potential. Reznikoff gives us an alternative that casts a cold eye on the history of human—and national—sin.

Chapter Four: Renewing the Covenant: Charles Reznikoff's Biblical Translations and Legal Poetry

I. Introduction

The woman of barely five feet whose friends nonetheless recalled as strikingly tall, reading effusive, passionate, free-flowing, and often sensual verse and the young, prematurely balding man in spectacles whose poetry offered spare, unvarnished glances at the city around them would have made an odd pair. Yet, had their paths ever physically crossed in The Sunwise Turn Bookshop where Lola Ridge offered readings and Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976) sold his self-published collections, they might have found their works had more in common than they initially believed. Despite dramatic stylistic differences, they shared an interested skepticism in the experiments of better-known high modernists—a skepticism produced by their shared commitment to the city's poor, its immigrant neighborhoods, and, above all, to the cause and concept of labor.

It was labor that brought Reznikoff to the Midtown Manhattan bookstore, one of the major New York hubs of American modernism.[177] Founded in 1916 by Mary Mowbray-Clarke and Madge Jenison on the belief that "if we could have fifty patrons who bought $500 worth of books a year, we would be safe," it resembled the bookstore founded by the protagonist of Reznikoff's 1930 novel *By the Waters of Manhattan* in its refusal of the supposedly popular and

[177] Mowbray-Clarke's husband, John Frederick Mowbray-Clarke, had helped to organize the 1913 Armory Show exhibition that introduced Americans to the experiments of European visual art; Harold Loeb, the publisher of *Broom*, helped to fund the enterprise; Alfred Kreymborg, Alfred Stieglitz, Amy Lowell, Thorstein Veblen, Lytton Strachey, and Robert Frost, passed through its doors, giving readings, displaying art, and lending their presence to its atmosphere. See Svoboda 170-1 and Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, 65ff.

insistence on selling only the highest-quality works: a fitting home for the painstakingly hand-crafted volumes that contained Reznikoff's poetry.[178] After self-publishing two chapbooks of Imagist-influenced poetry, *Rhythms* (1918) and *Rhythms II* (1919), the modernist publisher Samuel Roth put out a collection, *Poems* (1920) that contained these earlier works as well as a third group of verse. But when Roth offered, throughout the 1920s, to release further editions of his writing, Reznikoff refused. He preferred to publish privately—after 1927, from the manual printing press he had purchased and installed in his parents' basement. These handcrafted books declared proudly on their title pages that they were available for purchase at the Sunwise Turn. To Reznikoff, poetry was an object of both intellectual and physical craftsmanship, a link to the world of labor. He may have been trained as an attorney, but as a poet, he thought of himself above all as an artisan like his parents, Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Russia who made hats for a living—and, in his telling, resisted the principles of efficiency and mass production that were reshaping New York's garment industry.[179] Indeed, he only briefly practiced law after graduating from New York University in 1915, working throughout the 1920s as a salesman in his parents' business, the Artistic Millinery Company.[180] This work, not his poetry, first brought him into contact with the *Menorah Journal*, a flagship magazine of American Jewish art and criticism; to supplement his income, he sold advertising space for the publication; his long association as a contributor of verse began later.

Reznikoff's poetry contains the qualities this dissertation has explored and examined in the works of James Weldon Johnson, Louis Zukofsky, and Lola Ridge. These include, but are

[178] Madge Jenison, *The Sunwise Turn: A Human Comedy of Bookselling* (E.P. Dutton, 1923), p. 8.
[179] For a more detailed discussion of the connection between Reznikoff's poetry and his parents' craftsmanship, see Joshua Logan Wall, "Family Business: Charles Reznikoff in Text and Textile" (*Studies in American Jewish Literature* 37.1, Spring 2018, forthcoming).
[180] Not practicing law did not mean abandoning law altogether; in 1917, he took up graduate legal studies at Columbia. During the 1930s, he would work as an editor for the legal textbook *Corpus Juris*.

not limited to, the creation of a specific and distinctive poem-audience relationship by deploying direct address or operating in the tradition of commemorative verse; a defining translational practice that merges poetics and ethics; and attention to the ways that migration and immigration lead to the founding and/or re-founding of a society. Containing these formal and thematic qualities, Reznikoff's works most explicitly engage with and cast themselves within the framework of *covenant*. Through theorizing Reznikoff's works as a practice of *covenantal poetics*, this chapter allows us to see how this rubric envelopes the formal and typological qualities shared across the poetry of Johnson, Zukofsky, Ridge, and Reznikoff.

A covenantal poetics is defined by the poem's role as an active medium between the poetic speaker (or even the poem itself), the individual reader, and the collective audience of readers. If effective, it binds them in a mutual, communal whole by engaging poet, poem, reader, and audience in the active and dynamic process of assenting to, upholding, and calling out violations of society's ethics. This is a readership, one might say, that comes with responsibilities. In the Hebrew Bible, the covenant with God at Sinai is an act of witnessing; the two tablets that embody and symbolize the heart of this covenant—referred to in English as the tablets of the law, or of the covenant—are, in Hebrew, the *lukhot ha-eidut*, the tablets of the testimony, of the witnessing. Reznikoff's poetry—his various works titled *Testimony*—are, in this reading, witnessed by their readers to form such a covenant. As we'll see explicitly in his works, by suggesting both the covenantal founding and present of a nation, such a covenantal poetics offers an alternative to blood- and descent-based theories of citizenship and nationhood. In doing so, they allow for the incorporation of newcomers and outsiders into stories and communities of national and local belonging.

Reznikoff's poetry imagines the covenantal community upheld not through the Sunday congregation (as in Johnson's poetry), Zukofsky's pedagogical poetics of the Exodus, or Ridge's labor solidarity, but through the workings of the courtroom. Drawing on his own legal training, Reznikoff casts the role of the poet as a prosecuting attorney. This re-imagining becomes covenantal through Reznikoff's engagement with biblical typology and civil religious discourse: his works align the poet-prosecutor with the duties of the court prophet in the Israelite kingdom of the Hebrew Bible, the figure tasked with and allowed to challenge authority directly with its own failures and violations of the covenant. This is the poet re-imagined in the form of the biblical prophets, who advocate on behalf of the orphan, the widow, the beggar, and the stranger (outsiders and immigrants).

This role serves as Reznikoff's approach to what Hana Wirth-Nesher calls "the privileged yet vexed place in the very concept of the American nation" that Jews have served.[181] The very presence of Jews troubles the typological (and supercessionist) image of the United States as a new Israel. In exploring the way that Reznikoff casts American Jews and modernist poets into what we might call the "privileged yet vexed" place of the biblical prophets (as Jews among "new Jews"), this chapter traces the ways in which Reznikoff's use of Jewish sources, particularly the Hebrew Bible, informed his poetics at large. The documentary poetics of his later, long works such as *Testimony* and *Holocaust* derive, I demonstrate, from his study of and translations from Hebrew during the 1920s. Through biblical translations such as "Israel" and "King David," Reznikoff begins to develop a poetics defined as much by ethical as by formal standards, while also building toward the legalistic structure that defines his late works. Through a relationship to Hebrew that resembles Virginia Woolf's description of "Not Knowing" Greek, translation carves out a new role for the poet as a courtroom advocate whose own voice must

[181] *Cambridge History of Jewish-American Literature*, 8.

remain secondary to the subjectivity of others. By engaging with typological visions of American law and founding, Reznikoff's works, I then argue, move beyond the poetics of recovery to operate both prophetically and covenantally. These covenantal poetics, I ultimately argue, require and create distinct modes of poetic reading, whether from the inwardly-oriented ideas of poetry that, from John Stuart Mill to W. B. Yeats to Northrop Frye, was increasingly preeminent, or the national narratives of epic. For Reznikoff, this covenantal alternative is defined by the law and by the technique of recitative, to which this chapter now turns.

II. Procedures of Discovery: Genre, Document, and Law

Discussing Charles Reznikoff's poetry in the context of twentieth century Zionism is unavoidable. Not only does his writing frequently take up questions of exile, diaspora, homeland, and Hebrew language, but his wife, the writer and translator Marie Syrkin, was an active and prominent advocate of Labor Zionism—the cause that her father, Nahum Syrkin, is credited as helping to theorize. (Labor Zionism, which held that a Jewish state would be built from the bottom up, by the working class, was the dominant philosophy of Zionism in the twentieth century; its American proponents included Louis Brandeis and Albert Einstein; in Israel, David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir.) Reznikoff's poetry runs against this grain: scholarship notes its denationalized and de-territorializing tendencies, the ways in which it replaces "the humiliating connotations of *galut* or exile . . . [with] the joys of cosmopolitanism."[182] The United States, ultimately, offers not a *goldineh medineh*, but a diasporic "counter-Zion."

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[182] Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Diaspora and Zionism* (103). See also Maeera Shreiber, "'None Are Like You, Shulamite': Linguistic Longings in Jewish American Verse,"*Prooftexts* 30.1 (2010): 35-60. See esp. 49.

Yet Reznikoff's works also draw on the tradition of a different type of "Zionist" rhetoric: that of the typologically-charged traditions of American civil religion and nationalism, the belief, for example, that the United States could serve as a city upon a hill, a sacred state and New Jersusalem that was the typological heir to the Israelite kingdom. Reznikoff distinguishes himself from those discussed in earlier chapters, such as James Weldon Johnson or Louis Zukofsky, insofar as he does not reject this typological association. Rather, his poetry calls into question what a typological association with David's kingdom or the biblical Israelites might *actually say* about a modern nation. In doing so, he aligns the role of the contemporary poet with that of a prophet among "Jews"—that is, as a deliberate outsider willing to speak uncomfortable truths to an otherwise comfortable people—even (as in his 1934 poem, "Jeremiah in the Stocks") when the only thing that results is the cry that the poet-prophet should be executed for sedition.

This typological counter-history runs through Reznikoff's early biblical translations and culminates in the decades-long project that encompassed multiple versions of *Testimony*, a constantly-developing, always unfinished poetic project that spanned more than half his life and the overwhelming majority of his active career as a poet. He published three works under the title of *Testimony*: a small volume, in prose, in 1934; a short selection of verse included in 1941's *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down*; and, finally, the multi-volume *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915): Recitative*, published over the course of 1965 to 1978.[183] Across all these versions, Reznikoff examines American history through poetry created from editing, redacting, and glossing the cases he encountered in law reports, first at his job as an editor of legal encyclopedias and then as research for the creative project itself.

[183] In 2015, Black Sparrow Press released the first single-volume edition, which also includes the 1934 version as an appendix.

In *Testimony*, writes Charles Bernstein, "to found America means to find it—which means to acknowledge its roots in violence, to tell the lost stories because unless you find what is lost you can found nothing" (225), and the poem's earliest published iteration, precisely by not sharing the same title as the later three versions, locates the project within the myths of American founding. Published in the avant-garde little magazine *Contact* as "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in 1931, it references the song of the same name that was, until that year, one of several unofficially recognized national anthems.[184] At risk of repeating common knowledge, this song presented the United States as "sweet land of liberty," "Land of the pilgrims' pride, / Land where my fathers died"; it is, the singer announces, "My native country." This is an America rooted in common ancestry and a shared rhetorical, cultural, and civil religious heritage within traditions emanating from English colonists. The relationship that establishes the singer's right to claim the United States as "My country" or "My native country" is not the contingent givenness of where one was born or raised, but indigineity of the place where repeated prior generations have lived and died—of a nationalist intertwining of land, nation, and person.[185] The sense of American chosenness central to the song turns, in its final stanza, to directly address "Our fathers' God," with the request that the "freedom" and "liberty" which define the nation continue unaltered. The song, in essence, replaces the exodus narrative of American founding central to narratives of American immigration with one of citizenship established through one's ancestors' blood sacrifice.

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[184] This was the second iteration of the magazine, resuscitated for three issues by William Carlos Williams. The first series, which ran a decade earlier, had originated during a conversation between Williams and Robert McAlmon in 1920—during a party hosted in Lola Ridge's apartment (Williams, *Autobiography*171-2).

[185] Gorski, for instance, draws a distinction between a conquest narrative based in blood sacrifice and blood descent, undergirding nativist and religious-nationalist discourses of Americanness, and that of a wide, mainstream middle of American civil religious discourse. (The distinction might be put, in Colonial terms, as that between, respectively, the Increase and Cotton Mather on the one hand and John Winthrop on the other.) See, e.g., pp., 20-1, 29, 55, 99, and 107.

This erasure of the violence of national founding, the potential for national sin, and the rooting of community, politics, and civic belonging in a kind of sacrificial indigenousness in which they could not share did not escape the notice of American writers in the aftermath of the Immigration Era. Indeed, Reznikoff was one of four children of Russian-Jewish immigrants who zeroed-in on "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in the early 1930s. Henry Roth marks it as the subject of punning critique in *Call It Sleep* (1934), while in 1931, the same year as Reznikoff's work, George and Ira Gershwin turned their ironic eyes toward it in *Of Thee I Sing*.[186] The title song of this Broadway smash, the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, depicts presidential candidate John P. Wintergreen crooning, "Of thee I sing, baby / You have got that certain thing, baby / Shining star and inspiration, / Worthy of a mighty nation, / Of thee I sing!" aligning the virtues of his love interest with those of American self-presentation.

In addition to its then-risqué parody, the Gershwins' musical was also notable for its pioneering adaptation of the technique of "recitative" into American musical theater. This technique, also the performative subtitle which Reznikoff attaches to the final version of *Testimony*, refers to an operatic method in which the singer, typically in order to further plot, adapts a style of delivery that resembles the spoken, rather than sung, word. "Recitative," in this context, points toward a spoken song distinct from speech, situated between the modes derived from *epos* and *lyros*—one that resists both the Classical and modernist epic traditions while also requiring an alternative to the twentieth century's lyricized norms of poetic reading. In Reznikoff's poetry, recitative offers a way to imagine the intertwining of both form and ethics in the constitution of poetry. In its very title, Reznikoff signals that *Testimony* requires an

[186] "My country, 'tis of dee," sings Roth's child protagonist, David Schearl, "Land where our fodders died!" (62). Of course, David has no fathers or forefathers whose blood is in America's soil—and his biological father is either alive, terrorizing his apartment, or dead in Russia.

alternative mode of poetic reading—one that, as we'll see, is not merely jurisprudential, but *covenantal*.

Reznikoff's recitative eschews the playful satire of the Gershwins for the focused advocacy of an attorney reciting historical precedent in a courtroom. In this, Reznikoff's poetics might be viewed as kin to James Weldon Johnson's revision of commemorative verse in *God's Trombones* (discussed in Chapter 1). Here as there, this modernist iteration abstracts from commemorating a specific moment in time to a poem grounded within an iterative event: from Johnson's Sunday sermons to Reznikoff's courtroom. This event is no less concrete and audience-oriented in *Testimony* and Reznikoff's other long works: in these, the speakers are witnesses and, at times, their attorney (through the poetic arranger and speaker). They address judge, jury, and all others in attendance.

This sets Reznikoff's "anti-epic" apart from the modernist epics of his contemporaries. Works like Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Louis Zukofsky's *"A"* in fact reveal a lyricization of the epic. As those works turn inward even while attempting to "contain history" (in Pound's parlance), they increasingly blur the generic distinction between the narrative-historical poetics of epic and lyric—which, as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have noted, was in the midst of a definitional drift toward John Stuart Mill's "overheard speech" and Northrop Frye's revision as "utterance that is overheard."[187] Modernist epic engages history through the voice of the poet talking (or thinking) to himself. So *"A"* follows the tracks of Zukofsky's mind, the reader perched on his shoulder as he writes; Pound's *Cantos* likewise allow the reader to "overhear" the

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[187] Lyric, wrote Northrop Frye, adapting John Stuart Mill's assessment, is "utterance that is overheard." This aphorism, write Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, became a model not merely for reading *lyric* poetry in the twentieth century, but poetry generally, as that century's critical thought built toward a "lyricization of poetry" (7). While the critical frameworks built by Frye and the New Critics took hold in academic circles only in the decades after World War II, in practice, the trend toward internalization had begun in the nineteenth century and, by the time he wrote, two distinct trends were clear: the poetry of self (lyric) or the poetry of history (epic).

poet's experience of reading, for instance, Andreas Divus' 1537 translation of Homer into Latin (as in Canto I) or the letters of Sigismondo Malatesta (in the Malatesta Cantos). Such norms of lyricized poetic reading, in which even the poetry of history (epic) blurs into the poetry of self (lyric) do not hold for works like *Testimony*. Reznikoff not only subsumes his own voice to those of others within his poetry, but directs them outward, toward a concretely and situationally imagined audience. In place of the inward turn of his contemporaries, Reznikoff's poetry continually implies the presence of a collective "you"—the situational audience to whom the poetic voices speak.

This mode of address, as much as poetic engagement with legal and historical documents, situates *Testimony* within the documentary culture of the 1930s—the most important, innovative quality of which, Paula Rabinowitz writes in her seminal study of the period, is the way the "subject produced and provoked by documentary . . . is a subject of (potential) agency, an actor in history. And the performance of the documentary is precisely to remand, if not actively remake, the subject into an historical agent."[188] This "social documentary" or "documentary culture" is an aesthetic phenomenon with distinct origins from that of "documentary poetics" (though in practice, the two are often intertwined). Where the latter derives poetry from prior documents, the former is overwhelmingly visual, defined by the aesthetics of photography and film, even in literary works, and, as William Stott puts it in his seminal work on the subject, has "an axe to grind" (21).[189] Social documentary, both Rabinowitz and Stott acknowledge, often resembles (or even *is*) propaganda. The aesthetic "is instrumental, and its people tend, like the

[188] *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (1994), 8.
[189] Michael Davidson, in *Ghostlier Demarcations*, sees Reznikoff and Rukeyser similarly, considering *Testimony* alongside Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. Yet his application of documentary culture to readings is limited to his discussion of Rukeyser; Reznikoff's documentary poetics are exclusively those of the document. Monique Clare Vescia's *Depression Glass*, on the other hand, considers Reznikoff in the context only of visual documentary.

innocent victims in most propaganda, to be simplified and ennobled—sentimentalized, in a word"—a description not wholly inappropriate to Poundian documentary poetics as well.[190]

Reznikoff's documentary practice is informed by the practices and rules of the courtroom. It therefore both draws on and distinguishes itself from the aesthetics and traditions of "documentary poetics" and "social documentary," rejecting the Poundian inward turn yet, in its socially-conscious outward turn, rejecting the sentimentalization of victims just as vehemently. This is a distinction that has led, unfortunately, to a central misreading of Reznikoff's poetry: that, as an "Objectivist," he is "objective," rendering no judgment in poems such as *Testimony*. In his introduction to the 2015 single-volume edition of *Testimony*, for instance, Eliot Weinberger highlights the fact that "We never learn how the judge or jury ruled in the case" (xiii) and declares it "inaccurate to attribute any politics or reflection on human nature to" the work (xii). But placed within its historical and aesthetic context—the willingness of social documentary to sentimentalize or even objectify the victims of the system(s) it sought to critique—a different view emerges. In a 1969 interview with L.S. Dembo, Reznikoff explained, quoting himself:

> "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 and, if he writes in verse, by its music." Now suppose in a court of law, you are testifying in a negligence case. You cannot get up on the stand and say, "The man was negligent." That's a conclusion of fact. What you'd be compelled to say is how the man acted. Did he stop before he crossed the street? Did he look? The judges of whether he is negligent or not are the jury in that case and the judges of what you say as a poet are the readers. That is, there is an analogy between testimony in the courts and the testimony of a poet. (194-5)

And later, he continued:

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[190] Stott 57.

> I can only testify to my own feelings; I can only say what I saw and heard, and I try to say it as well as I can. And if your conclusion is that what I saw and heard makes you feel the way I did, then the poem is successful. (195)

Reznikoff's objectivity is not the easy relativism that stares into the abyss of history only to turn aside and shrug off responsibility with a meek, "But who am I to judge?" Rather, the rules which govern Reznikoff's "Objectivism" and his documentary poetry are those which govern the admissibility of testimony and the roles of actors within a courtroom. As an advocate, he cannot decide the case; he can only present it. But he *is* a biased, opinionated actor and seeks to deny the readers any comfort or catharsis.[191] The duty of the reader (the continuously implied object of poetic address) is not to identify with those who testify—with whom or what they do not know and have not experienced—but to judge the case on its merits and issue a verdict. To, that is, accept the responsibilities of their roles as actors in history.

Although they are in conversation with both the Poundian and the social formulations of documentary poetics and culture, I contend that neither provides sufficient context for Reznikoff's documentary poems—and his turn to them from the short, Imagist-inflected poems and sequences of his early career. Documentary poetics itself—that is, poetry developed in some significant way from already-existing texts—has been understood as a result of the failure (or perhaps simply the chronological passing) of Imagism.[192] Imagism, in this reading, becomes the first form of an "avant-garde anti-lyricism," in which lyric is considered sentimental; the lyric

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[191] Todd Carmody discusses *Holocaust* from a similar perspective against Holocaust accounts and writings that seek to elicit sympathy rather than apprehension in "The Banality of the Document: Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* and Ineloquent Empathy," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.1 (2008): 86-110.

[192] Lawrence Rainey *(Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture: Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos,* 1991) and David Ten Eyck (*Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos,* 2012) discuss the development of Pound's documentary methods. In his monograph on Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, Timothy Dayton identifies the development of documentary poetics with a dilemma posed by the lyric speaker in modern poetry. He frames this dilemma with two admittedly anachronistic and apparently incommensurable stances exemplified by Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno: for Brecht, the isolated lyric speaker must be brought into contact with history; for Adorno, only through the subjectivity of lyric can the isolation of the modern individual in the face of economic and historical forces be documented and resisted. Documentary poetry, with varying degrees of "success," tends to attempt to navigate these shoals, at times through synthesis (2ff).

"I" excessively present. Imagism focuses on the object to pare away excess; documentary replaces the object with the document.[193] This is the context into which Reznikoff's turn toward longer, documentary poetry is typically cast: already engaged with immense quantities of documentary source-texts during his day job as a legal editor, the story goes, Reznikoff turns to these with his characteristically terse, straightforward poetic presentation, replacing "object" with document, informed by leftist aesthetics of reportage.[194]

Yet this timeline doesn't quite fit. Reznikoff didn't begin to work for the American Law Book Company on its compendium *Corpus Juris* until 1928, and with regularity only in late 1929; while a 1933 letter implies he had only recently read Pound's *A Draft of XVI Cantos* (1925).[195] More importantly, he had already begun to explore historical narrative and the adaptation of document in his verse dramas of the early- and mid-1920s. These plays, including *Uriel Acosta* (1921), *Meriwether Lewis* (1922), *Coral* (1923) and *Captive Israel* (1923) already reveal a turn toward American and Jewish history, particularly toward revisions of myths of national founding. At the same time, he was engaged with learning and reading biblical Hebrew, beginning to develop adaptive translations from the "epic" of Jewish literary heritage as source material for his own poetry.[196]

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[193] As noted above, of course, what results—Pound's *Cantos*, for instance—is nonetheless shaped by the same mode of "lyricization" it seeks to escape; as Jackson and Prins astutely observe, avant-garde antilyricism is merely another aspect of the lyricization of poetry.

[194] This dynamic is most clearly delineated by Michael Thurston's discussion of Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* in *Making Something Happen: American Poetry Between the World Wars* (2001), which argues that "Rukeyser's poetic extension of the document situates her in the literary battles over the relationship of poetry to history, battles also joined by Ezra Pound . . . Whereas Pound exerts his editorial control over his sources in an all-encompassing remaking of the world, Rukeyser focuses her attention on the specific institutions at fault for contemporary human suffering." (188-9). The scholarship on Reznikoff and documentary poetics specifically is admittedly thin: but Davidson pairs the documentary practices of Reznikoff and Rukeyser, while Monique Claire Vescia frames it within a broader left-wing documentary culture that stretches across reporting, visual culture, and poetry (*Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams*, pp 31-62 esp.)

[195] See Fredman 163 and *Selected Letters* 200-1.

[196] I don't mean to pretend that the Hebrew Bible is an actual epic, especially when we recall that "epic" refers to a specific form and genre of poetry, not merely narrative of national founding. Indeed, Robert Alter goes so far as to

Reznikoff's documentary turn, I contend, develops from this engagement with and translation from Hebrew. By returning to the document which is the textual source of both American biblical typology and the civil religious discourse of national self-imagining, Reznikoff revises both. This is clearly the case in his biblical translations, "Israel" and "King David," but, as we'll see, *Testimony* also operates through these typological re-imaginings.[197] As with the works of Louis Zukofsky, translation is central. Reznikoff's biblical translations go hand-in-hand with his efforts to write and re-write historical narratives and founding myths, both of the United States and the Jewish people. Translation, moreover, teaches Reznikoff to subsume his own voice to those buried within the works and documents with which he engages, rendering these works, like Lola Ridge's *Firehead*, more genuinely and radically de-centered and multiperspectival than their contemporaries and predecessors among modernist epics. Together, these qualities form the foundation of his covenantal poetics.

III. On Not Knowing Hebrew

Reznikoff's biblical translations engage with two key aspects of American biblical typology: its understanding of national origins through a concept of chosenness and the framework it provides for understanding the nation as a sacred, or chosen, state. However, his poetry doesn't reject these typological associations. Instead, it insists that they're all too true—and that they've been tremendously misunderstood. In "Israel," he turns an eye toward the economic exploitation that occurs at moments of national founding, while in "King David," to the political violence

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propose that, against "many hazily conceived notions" of the Bible as epic, it draws on literary elements now associated with prose fiction to avoid the genre/form of epic and to highlight, by contrast, the reality of indeterminacy (*Narrative* 25ff). Reznikoff's turn to the Bible, this chapter likewise argues, helps him find an alternative poetic genre or form.

[197] As Robert Alter notes, a distinguishing feature of prophetic poetry against other forms of biblical poetics is that it "is devised as a form of direct address to a historically real audience. Amos the Tekoite speaks to a real assemblage of Israelites in Beth El during the reign of Jeroboam, son of Joash, beginning two years before the great earthquake" (*Poetry* 140).

occasioned by the establishment of a sacred state. At the same time, he builds toward a poetic form capable of participating in and helping to sustain a covenantal community.

These two poems first appeared in his 1929 *By the Waters of Manhattan: An Annual*. Its contents provide a cross-section of Reznikoff's development as a writer and, in retrospect, perhaps signal a turning point. The bulk of the miscellany was prose: a series of short stories, some previously published in the *Menorah Journal*, which he would revise into the second half of following year's novel, *By the Waters of Manhattan*; and "Early History of a Seamstress," a family memoir written either by or in the voice of his mother, which would be lightly revised to serve as the first half of the novel.[198] The third portion of the collection, under the heading "Editing and Glosses," offered two narrative poems developed from biblical source material: "Israel" and "King David." Their placement immediately precedes and informs his turn toward the poetry of legal history and is among the first instances of Reznikoff translating, adapting, or editing already-existing documents in order to create his own poetry.

Just as his short, ambulatory poems of New York neighborhoods and streets function by drawing the reader's attention to that which they might have otherwise overlooked (whether unnoticed beauty or human suffering obscured by city life), his biblical counter-histories draw out the stories and voices suppressed by the originals. To the extent that "Israel" and "King David" represent a move to take up the content of the modernist epic, replacing the Greek with the Jewish, they resist the heroic self-aggrandizement present at times in the parodic adaptations of Joyce, Pound, or even Zukofsky. This is not to say that Reznikoff has moved away from the importance of the human self—but from that of the poetic, speaking self.

"Israel" and "King David" eschew the Bible's third-person narrative. Nor is Reznikoff's recovery of voices concerned with the authorial layers of J, E, D, P, R, or any other letter, but

[198] And then re-printed, now as memoir again, in *Family Chronicle* (1963).

with the voices of the actors themselves—especially those who do not stand at the center of the biblical narratives. "Israel," tracing the history of the Hebrews between Jacob's theft of his brother's birthright and the revelation at Sinai, is presented through the perspectives of Rebecca, Rachel, Laban, Joseph's older brothers, Potiphar's wife, Pharaoh's cupbearer, Joseph, the collective voice of Israel enslaved, and Pharaoh. The major figures of these narratives appear only in situationally-dependent roles: Isaac, only in dialogue with Jacob and Rebecca; Jacob, in dialogue with Laban, Esau, and his father (only briefly on his own); and Moses as he interacts with Pharaoh and delivers the legal code which is revealed at Sinai.

Although these figures continue to reside at the center of events, they are testified *about* rather than offering testimony of their own. The opening stanza of "Israel" immediately marks a distinction between those whose voices offer first-person narrative and those who appear only in dialogue with others:

> Our eldest son is like Ishmael, Jacob is like you;
> therefore, you like Esau better:
> because he is a hunter, a man of the fields,
> can bring you venison from distant cliffs,
> is strong, and covered with hair like a ram;
> but Jacob who is like you, a quiet man, dwelling in tents, is the better.
> Esau is like a club, Jacob a knife,
> Esau is stupid, Jacob shrewd,
> Jacob is like my brother Laban.
> My father, sit and eat of my venison.
> How is it that you have found it so quickly?
> God helped me.
> Come near that I may feel you, my son,
> whether you are my very son Esau or not;
> the voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are Esau's.
> Are you my son Esau?
> I am.
> Come near now and kiss me, my son. (*Collected Poems* 63)

The first half, framing the story of Jacob (and the entirety of "Israel") is Rebecca's distinct and subjective perspective of her family's situation. While this does, to some extent reflect the

relative strength of Rebecca's agency and the degree of Isaac's passivity in the biblical source text, only here does her perception of the family's dynamics anchor the narrative. The scene of deception itself, drawn from Genesis 27.20-27, comes only after her framing discussion. It is, moreover, presented "objectively," a record of dialogue: witness and then evidence. The notable changes made by his translation are of omission. Reznikoff deletes all third-person narration, including that which offers otherwise absent characterization of Isaac. The old father's perceptions, central to the biblical narrative, are left out: the effect is that of a deposition read aloud or entered into the record. Rebecca's explanation of the natures of their sons (and Isaac's attitudes toward each), is entirely Reznikoff's interpolation. This characterization takes the place of the deception in explaining *why* Isaac believes that Jacob is Esau. In Genesis, the tangible senses ultimately prove decisive over the evidence of voice; here, where voice is all that can be trusted, the implication is that Isaac believes the deception because he *wants* Esau to be present at his bedside: he will believe because he longs to be kissed by his favorite. Yet, because her description of her husband and her sons shapes how the scene to follow should be understood, *her* perceptions are centered. Likewise, the remainder of the story of Israel is told through the voices and from the perspectives of those who are not necessarily outsiders, but who, in the biblical narrative, are peripheral or merely instrumental. When otherwise central figures appear only in dialogue they are presented as Rebecca is in the Bible: figures who are important to the story, but whose perspectives or perceptions do not really matter.

This radical de-centering of ancient Israel's national epic allows Reznikoff to re-frame the story of "Israel" around economic exploitation. Rebecca's opening lines establish this. Jacob is "a knife," "shrewd," and "like my brother Laban" takes advantage of the "stupid" who are suited only to low-skilled labor and the infirm, like his father. Seen through Rachel's,

Laban's, and Esau's eyes, Jacob is concerned with temporary beauty, has returned Laban's gratefulness with theft, and is an uncouth materialist. The contrast with Esau, in Reznikoff's retelling of their reconciliation scene, is starkest. When Jacob presents him with gifts—bribes—"To find favor in your sight," Esau merely responds, "I have enough. Let that which you have be yours" (64).[199] The first section of this poem, ostensibly the story of Jacob, ends with his sons selling Joseph into slavery. And their decision-making process, like their father's, is businesslike. They do not kill him outright because, "What profit shall we have in the death of our brother?" (65).[200]

The pattern continues throughout the generations. Joseph is seen as others see him: never a captive, but a powerful man with "a gold chain about his neck" who "ride[s] in the second chariot and all cry out before him, Bend the knee!" (66). Reconciling with *his* brothers, he too offers wealth: "I will give you all the good of the land of Egypt. / I will establish my people like a pyramid, / no longer to be blown along like sand" (67). Being Jacob's children as well, the brothers, unlike Esau, accept.[201] In the story of the Exodus itself, Reznikoff makes certain to highlight the desire for wealth of the people even after they have been enslaved for generations.

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[199] This dialogue is faithful to that at Genesis 33.8-9. But Reznikoff, notably, omits the following two verses, in which Jacob further presses the gifts onto Esau, who accepts them. Rabbinic tradition, viewing Esau as the paradigm for the enemies of the Jewish people, sees this eventual acceptance as revealing his true nature: greed rather than modesty. Reznikoff, by contrast, emphasizes Jacob's through omission: a materialism that misses the point.

[200] This section of "Israel" is a redacted version of Gen. 37.19-28. Reznikoff varies from both the KJV and 1917 JPS translations throughout this passage, however. In some places—"ba'al ha-kholomot" as "the master of dreams" rather than "this dreamer"—he follows the Hebrew; in others—retaining the KJV's "spicery, balm, and myrrh" as the goods carried by the Ishmaelite caravan to which they sell Joseph—he veers from it. I make this point to highlight the fact that Reznikoff's translations are more than simply redacted versions of already-existing English translations. While he clearly looked to them, their voices are by no means definitive—just as the Hebrew text itself is not.

[201] The passage from which these lines are drawn, Gen. 46.18-20, is not, in the Hebrew, spoken by Joseph. Reznikoff takes Pharaoh's instructions to Joseph, that he offer these goods, on behalf of the state, to his family, and places them into Joseph's mouth. This new, unprompted context makes the emphasis on material wealth intrinsic both to Joseph and to his brothers—who actually take part in this scene in Reznikoff's version. And his concluding metaphor should not go unremarked: to establish them "like a pyramid, / no longer to be blown along like sand" is to exchange the iconography of Abraham's covenant, in which his descendents will be as numberless as the sand, for that of the Egyptian wealth and power.

The compression of Reznikoff's poem emphasizes the details which are retained. So it is notable that the Hebrew slaves are depicted taking "the jewels of silver and the jewels of gold, / the fine clothing you have borrowed from the Egyptians" and that the time they spend on the accumulation of wealth is directly contrasted with their rushed preparation of food for the journey (70).[202] None of this is to say that Reznikoff depicts Jewish history as the history of economic exploiters. It is one of oppression—but of a people that is not inherently better than any other, one prone to greed, rivalry, lust for power, and economic manipulation.

This depiction, of course, runs decidedly counter to the concept of chosenness, particularly when applied typologically to the United States. In Reznikoff's telling, the Hebrews are a chosen people only insofar as they possess and acknowledge an ethical ideal which they repeatedly fail to actualize. This, then, rather than the "errand into the wilderness," "shining city upon a hill," or "light unto the nations," would be the typological quality of American chosenness: chosen not in the absence of failure, but in the recognition that these failures *are* failures, that there is a higher ethical standard to strive for. And this, in turn, runs counter to the typologically charged language of American political rhetoric during Reznikoff's lifetime, the vision of the United States as a chosen nation on a quest to "make the world safe for democracy."[203]

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[202] Although this also occurs in the biblical account, the departure of Israel from Egypt on the night of the Passover takes thirteen verses in Hebrew (Exodus 12.19-42; in the JPS translation, four paragraphs of English) and the packing of gold, silver, and jewels is contained in a single *pasuk*. In Reznikoff's version, the departure occurs rapidly, in only seven short lines, two of which describe the material wealth taken out. In other words, a very generously calculated 7.7% of the Hebrew account (12.35 is significantly shorter than most of the verses in the passage) against 28.6% of Reznikoff's account is devoted to describing the luxury goods that go with the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt.

[203] Even the seemingly secular rhetoric of Wilsonian progressivism (which Gorski is too quick to set outside the discourse of American civil religion) and progressivism after Wilson falls within the tradition of—and on a continuum with—the language of biblical exceptionalism. If a "war to end all wars" is not a messianic dream fit for Isaiah or John the Revelator, then nothing is.

“King David” turns from national founding to the idea of the sacred state in applying this typological revision of national chosenness. That the Davidic kingdom fails to achieve the ethical standards presented at Sinai is not the fault of the ideals of economic justice it represents, but because of the very nature of political power. The state—even the “sacred” state—is unable and, more often than not, unwilling, to separate itself from the violence of political power. As an epigram, Reznikoff quotes the biblical passage in which God prohibits David from building the Temple because of the blood he has spilled, prefiguring the nation of casual violence which *Testimony* will later depict. *This*, says “King David,” is the model for your sacred state: one in which David is not, in fact, the triumphant poet-king ushering the golden age of Jewish national existence, but a tragic figure who, by doing more than any other to create the state that might actualize the ideals ultimately called for in “Israel,” has also stood in the way of accomplishing true justice. The failure to achieve holiness is directly connected to the violence committed in its pursuit.

The arrangement of “King David,” pushing beyond the multitude of perspectives offered in “Israel,” begins to more closely approximate the retrospective testimony offered in a courtroom. Re-arranging the order in which events are narrated (though not in which they are said to have *occurred*) so that their presentation enhances his brief, Reznikoff assumes the role of poet-advocate in this poem, calling Saul, Jonathan, Ahimelech, Ish-bosheth, Abner, Joab, minor military and court figures and messengers, the residents of Jabesh-gilead, and the leaders of non-Israelites (the King of Gath, Philistines, Doeg the Edomite, ambassadors from Hamath) to testify

against David.[204] Cast in typological terms, this is the poet-prosecutor as the prophet Nathan appearing in David's court to condemn the king (II Samuel 12).

Even while drawing on biblical typology and an aesthetics derived from the courtroom, "King David" continues to engage with documentary poetics and the tradition of a public, commemorative verse that, as we saw in Chapter 1, serves as a generic underpinning to covenantal poetics. In Reznikoff's verse, the Hebrew Bible from which he translates serves as the locus where all three intersect. Prophetic poetry (as distinguished from other forms of Biblical poetry) is, Robert Alter notes, likewise situationally concrete, "devised as a form of direct address to a historically real audience. Amos the Tekoite speaks to a real assemblage of Israelites in Beth El during the reign of Jeroboam, son of Joash, beginning two years before the great earthquake."[205] In such a context, Reznikoff calls his witnesses to narrate past events straightforwardly, without the extrapolation that, in his interview with Dembo, he insisted had no place in his poetry because it had no place in the courtroom. The voice of a third-person narrator occasionally intervenes, like that of an attorney, to introduce a new event or situation. By recovering these forgotten voices and arranging them as testimony, "King David" highlights the trauma which the civil war between Saul and David would have caused. David's voice is minor, almost absent, with the exception of a few snatches of dialogue and a psalm of thanksgiving, presented near the poem's end, where it can be read only with the deepest irony.[206]

The most important and poetically powerful testimony is offered by David's first wife—and Saul's daughter—Michal. Her words alone have no origin in the biblical source, but are

[204] For instance, the source texts for section IV of "King David" (pp.81-3) are, in order: I Samuel 20.1-3, I Samuel 22.1-5, I Samuel 23.23, I Samuel 23.14, I Samuel 24.1-3, I Samuel 27.1-12, I Samuel 22.7-8, I Samuel 21.2-10, I Samuel 22.9-19, and I Samuel 25.44.

[205] *Art of Biblical Poetry* 140.

[206] Much of this "psalm" is drawn from II Samuel 22.2-51, which appears again in altered form as Psalm 18, though the introductory lines, which frame David's words within the context of his rise from sheepherder to king of Israel, draw on II Samuel 7.8-9, 18-19, and I Chronicles 17.7 and 17.16. The lines from II Samuel 7.8-9 were initially spoken by *God* (!) to the prophet Nathan in the context of building the Temple.

merely extrapolated from what can be gleaned from it about the events of her life, her reactions to them, and her attitude toward David. If the role of "Editing" is the arrangement and highlighting of voices that are already present in the text, then the function of "Glosses" is, perhaps, what Reznikoff accomplishes with Michal: the recovery of the testimony of a major figure whose voice has been entirely suppressed by a monologic source-text.[207] Indeed, the details of her life that become most central to her character in "King David"—that she had five children with Paltiel during the civil war and that David hanged them in order to end a famine caused by the sins of *Saul*—are themselves extrapolated from a textual crux: the puzzling reference to the five sons Michal bore with Adriel, deemed an impossibility because he was also her brother-in-law.[208] Of the editions Reznikoff is known to have read, Luther's German translation reads "die fünf Söhne *Merabs*, der Tochter Sauls, die sie dem Adriel *geboren hatte*"; the KJV, on the other hand, refers to "the five sons of *Michal* . . . whom she *brought up* for Adriel" (emphasis, in both cases, mine). One, that is to say, denies Michal's role entirely; the other, that she was in fact the mother, rather than the guardian, of the children David hanged.[209] Reznikoff rejects this papering-over of Michal's suffering: she does not hate David, as the Bible insists, because he danced drunkenly and exposed himself before the Lord (2 Samuel 6:16), but because she holds him responsible for the death of her father, her brothers Ish-Bosheth and Jonathan, her nephews, and her five sons.

[207] In section III of the poem, subtitled "*Michal,*" she interrupts the proceedings to predict this will be her fate even in the event of domestic harmony: "The grave men who will write / the history of the kings of Israel and the wars of God, / will not trouble to write of our happiness" (81).

[208] The Talmud Bavli (Sandhedrin 19b) calls 2 Sam. 21:8 a "confused passage." The difficulty stems from the fact that a marriage of Michal and Adriel would not have been halakhically permissible; the Talmud concludes that another of Saul's daughters, Meirab, gave birth to the children, but Michal raised them. The revised 2000 JPS translation includes the Hebrew—which is explicit about Michal's maternity—alongside an English translation that reads "Meirab," while footnoting "Michal" as an alternate reading.

[209] The 1917 JPS translation refers to "the five sons of Michal . . . whom she bore," but the revised 2000 JPS translation reads "Merab" (it retains the *Hebrew* reading of "Michal," however). Its note on this verse observes that Hebrew and (Greek) Septuagint editions are divided on this point as well, with the Hebrew tending (but not exclusively) toward "Michal" and the Septuagint likewise toward "Merab." The Hebrew verb is from Y-L-D, to give birth.

The recovery of Michal's voice and suffering coincides with a rejection of the biblical statement that she died childless, and that this was caused by her condemnation of David's dancing naked before God (2 Samuel 6:20-23). The words of the biblical narrator are given to David, who sneers at her toward poem's end with no regard for syntax: "God— / Who chose me rather than your father and all his house / to be king of Israel; / but you shall die childless" (89). In "King David," however, she is not childless because of *her* sins, but because of David's quest for power, his jealousy of her happier marriage with Paltiel, his rejection of his own responsibility for the civil war, blaming it instead on "Saul and his bloody house" (88). She is childless, she retorts, only "After you have hanged my sons, / from the eldest who was as tall as I / to the youngest who had not yet learned to walk" (90). Michal casts this poem explicitly as a counter-history of King David's Israel. The poem's closing lines see the future clearly: "Your scribes will write me down a cold, proud woman, / wandering about the garden of the king, / and you a glorious king, a glorious king" (90).

The dialogic recovery of voices in Reznikoff's poetry emerges from more than a multi-perspectival or de-centered narrative technique. Rather, his poetry is dialogic in the strong sense of the term that Jahan Ramazani proposes, pushing back against Bakhtin's insistence that poetry is, in fact, monologic: it "is infiltrated by and infiltrates its generic others."[210] In "King David," we see this in a three-fold way: through the practice of translation, which places text in conversation with source-text; through engagement across genre, with the Hebrew Bible considered as both a national and legal document; and through the act of recovery. The friction created by the first two opens room for the voice of Michal to emerge through the third. Her voice, like the other "witnesses" called forth in "King David," is limited to testimony concerning

[210] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (2014), 5. His discussion of a dialogic poetics extends across pp. 1-16.

her own experiences with David or under his rule.[211] Hers is emotionally stirring and, as the last voice heard in the poem, the climax of the case, the final witness toward whose testimony that of the others has been arranged to build. The role of the translator, this is to say, resembles that of the advocate in court who can arrange testimony, construct the strongest possible case, but cannot speak in place of others and cannot sentimentalize or instrumentalize them or their experiences. Counter-history, for Reznikoff, is translation—and translation is counter-historical, but only to the extent that each mirrors the practice of an idealized legal system in which the voices of the marginalized are recovered and placed on an equal level with those of the powerful.

This alignment of translator, poet, and advocate develops out of Reznikoff's long and ambivalent engagement with Hebrew—a relationship that, channeling Virginia Woolf, might be best described as an active process of "Not Knowing" Hebrew. Although Reznikoff was raised by Yiddish-speaking parents, it is unclear whether his childhood provided him with any degree of literacy in a non-English language. Louis Zukofsky's upbringing makes for a useful contrast: Yiddish was the exclusive language of the Zukofsky household; English, which the parents never learned, was something sought out deliberately by Zukofsky and his older brother. Although Reznikoff's parents, Nathan and Sarah, were native Yiddish speakers and also fluent in Russian (they ceased to speak it after immigrating), they followed a more deliberate course of Americanization and committed to raising English-speaking children; Yiddish was limited strictly to conversations with grandparents.[212] Additionally, Reznikoff was not raised exclusively within Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrant communities: the family migrated from

[211] Michael Davidson gestures toward the intersection of translation and testimony/*Testimony*, but sees it as a metaphor for the lengthy, revisionary composition of Reznikoff's long poem: "The continuity linking the several editions of *Testimony* is the act of translation, whether from witness to judge, from court transcript to case report in the reporter volumes, from first-person testimony to third-person narration, from prose to verse" (153).

[212] *Man and Poet* 123-4. Stephen Fredman, following the recollections of the "Objectivist" poet George Oppen, believes that Reznikoff was probably more fluent in Yiddish than he acknowledged in interviews.

Brownsville to the Upper West Side to the Lower East Side and to Brooklyn again as business demanded, while Reznikoff, an avid walker from an early age, never felt confined to a single neighborhood.

Reznikoff's childhood Hebrew education was nonexistent. He recalled visiting, with his mother, the "traditional" Hebrew school environment of a *kheyder*; both were appalled by its darkness, its disorganization, and its casual corporal punishment.[213] In his poetry and recollections, Reznikoff associated Hebrew with a grandfather who had been a *melamed*, or Hebrew teacher, in Russia. The destruction of this grandfather's Hebrew-language poetry (fed to the fire "a few sheets every morning" [*By the Waters* 52]) recurs throughout Reznikoff's writing and serves, writes Stephen Fredman, as "the primal scene of poetry" in his works.[214] Hebrew language, he writes, was "lost— / except for what / still speak[s] through me / as mine" (*Collected Poems* 249). Scholarship, understandably, has focused on the first clause—on the loss of Hebrew.

Yet this loss occurs alongside continuity.[215] By his own recollection, Reznikoff "began to pick it [Hebrew] up when I was in my twenties": that is, sometime in the 1910s or 1920s.[216] His accounts always imply that he was self-taught (though his poetic and fictionalized accounts should by no means be taken as definitive); he used Modern Hebrew's Sephardi pronunciation, not his grandfather's Ashkenazi. How he studied it at this time, or with what intensity, is also

[213] *Man & Poet* 124.
[214] *Menorah* 41. This scene, with slight differences, appears in *By the Waters of Manhattan*, *Family Chronicle*, and "Early History of a Writer." It refers to Reznikoff's maternal grandfather, for whom Hebrew was at once the sacred language of liturgy and Torah study and the language of a nascent Jewish literary culture. After his death, his widow, who could not read Hebrew, destroyed the manuscript of his poetry for fear it could be deemed "anarchist"—or that the neighbors and authorities might conclude all foreign manuscripts were inherently anarchist.
[215] Critics have read Reznikoff's relationship with Hebrew through a matrix of loss. Finkelstein, Fredman, and Shreiber all read Reznikoff's lack of formal Hebrew study as synecdoche for his dispossession from Jewish cultural patrimony. For a longer discussion of Reznikoff as a poet of successful inheritance, rather than disinheritance, see Joshua Logan Wall, "Family Business: Charles Reznikoff in Text and Textile," *SAJL* (forthcoming, 2018).
[216] *Man & Poet* 121. In a 1923 letter, he mentions "working very hard at" Hebrew (*Selected Letters* 37).

unclear: Marie Syrkin's recollection of his reading, each evening before bed, several pages of the Bible in Hebrew with and English and German translation open beside it dates from later decades (they met in 1927 and married in 1930, after his study began). It is not until 1927's self-published *A Fifth Group of Verse* that he turns his attention to the process of learning Hebrew; "Israel" and "King David" were his first published translations from Hebrew.[217]

Even more than as expression of ambivalence about Jewish identity or nationalism, Reznikoff's relationship to Hebrew is perhaps best placed in dialogue with the works of twentieth-century European poets who took up minor, vanishing dialects and vernacular of which they did not have native knowledge at precisely the moment such languages began to disappear from everyday life—as, that is, a decidedly modernist literary and linguistic practice. Outlining this phenomenon in Irish literature, Barry McCrea draws a distinction between "native" or "vernacular" Irish and "revivalist" or "national" Irish: between the disappearing Irish language of the countryside and the simultaneous yoking of Irish language study with the nationalist project of post-independence Ireland.[218] Poets, he writes, favored the disappearing Irish over the living but politicized iteration. "As they fell out of the speech of everyday life," he writes, "these declining vernaculars [Irish, Italian vernacular, patois French] became unlikely repositories for a host of modernist dreams, expectations, and disappointments about what language could or should do," a way to combat alienation from tired or degraded major languages, to inject these with "new life."[219] We might say that Reznikoff's preference for a Biblical Hebrew rather than a modern or Zionist one mirrors this contemporaneous preference

[217] In the oft-discussed poems 14-16 (as numbered in *Collected Poems*, p. 58), he laments the "difficult[y] of Hebrew, a "Zion" from which he has been "exiled." The first poem of *Jerusalem the Golden* finds the poetic speaker likewise lamenting that "I have married and married the speech of strangers" (CP 93). See Fredman 23-6 and Shreiber (2010) 43-9 for lengthier discussions of these poems.
[218] McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe* (2015), p. 30.
[219] McCrea xii.

for "native" or "vernacular" Irish over "revivalist," "national" Irish. Rather than bound inexorably to "a wider discourse of nationalism, patriotism, or nostalgia" (32), Reznikoff's Hebrew, through its quest for new and "distinct lyrical possibilities" (45), undermines nationalist discourse by appealing to the same set of typological associations.[220]

Hebrew and Irish were on different trajectories during the 1920s and 1930s, with the latter fading rapidly even in its last enclaves and recovered only as a secondary language for schoolchildren, and the former continuing to expand both among a growing Jewish population in British Mandate Palestine and among Hebraist literary elite in the diaspora. And Reznikoff, of course, never *wrote* in Hebrew. The ambivalence he maintains in his writing *about* Hebrew and his translations *from* it continually expresses a skepticism of his own knowledge that resembles Virginia Woolf's stance of "not-knowing" Greek. The translator or writer engaged with "not-knowing" a language differs markedly from the translator who merely does not know a language. Reznikoff, Woolf, and Pound all demonstrate a disinterest in reading or translating primarily for equivalences between vocabularies; all grasp for "the sense" rather than literal translation—but where Pound does so from a position of intellectual self-confidence unto arrogance (he does not *need* to know Chinese to translate from the language), Reznikoff, like Woolf, foregrounds the limitations of his own knowledge. Reading or translating "for the sense" is necessary not because literal translation is unnecessary, but because the distance between our situation and the situation of the original text makes it impossible. Woolf, in "On Not Knowing Greek," argues that we can only approximate knowing Greek because its natural, living embeddedness in

[220] The quoted words are McCrea's (pp. 32 and 45, respectively).

everyday life eludes moderns. One can know *modern* Greek, perhaps, but not *Classical* Greek.[221]

The relationship of Hebrew to the everyday likewise shapes Reznikoff's active practice of "not-knowing" Hebrew. In a 1927 poem, Reznikoff laments,

> How difficult for me is Hebrew:
> even the Hebrew for *mother*, for *bread*, for *sun*
> is foreign. How far have I been exiled, Zion. *(Collected Poems* 58)

Precisely the language's separation from the everyday is what renders it "difficult" for him, but Reznikoff deliberately and doubly foreignized his Hebrew, eschewing the modern language for the Biblical, but the familiar, traditional Ashkenazi pronunciation for the Sephardi pronunciation that the modern ("revival," "nationalist") language adopted.[222] The linguistic "exile" in which he finds himself, moreover, is the same concept which, in the poem "Joshua at Shechem," enables an exiled and "scattered" Jewish people to become "citizens of the great cities, talking Hebrew in every language under the sun" (113).[223] Hebrew, not capable of being the language of the everyday, remains cut off from the mundane. It is not, and can never be, a *mame loshn* (or mother tongue) because it must remain *loshn koydesh* (a holy language). This sacredness, borne of separateness, is what Hebrew can offer to—inject into, perhaps—other, major languages. In its stance otherwise than (perhaps in opposition to) the everyday, Reznikoff's Hebrew aligns with "the prophetic voice" of American poetry that, Nick Halpern writes, exists in tension with "the everyday voice" (3).[224]

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[221] Whatever degree of fluency Reznikoff attained was, by all accounts, non-conversational: a pure literacy, the inverse of his childhood's multilingualism.

[222] His father, hearing him pronounce the words, was dumbfounded, exclaiming, "That's Arabic!" (*Man & Poet* 121). In some ways, his relationship to Hebrew mimics the multilingual practices of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and H.D.: classical content (the Bible, Yehuda Halevi) filtered through a modernist aurality (the modernist/Zionist reconstruction of Hebrew).

[223] Shreiber reads this as a resistance to an exclusively (and territorially) Zionist claim on the language.

[224] "The everyday is what the prophetic poets focus on, that is what fills them with rage, that is what they want to transform" (5). Reznikoff, it is worth noting, does not display the anger or rage which Halpern associates with

By "talking Hebrew in every language under the sun" (or at least in English), Reznikoff establishes his poetics in opposition to what I earlier referred to as the sacrificial indigenousness expressed by patriotic hymns like "My Country 'Tis of Thee." The prophetic, sacred valence Hebrew provides English necessarily stands in tension with idea of a "native country" possessed by later generations by virtue of it being the "land where my fathers died." To Not-Know Hebrew is to encounter the language as perpetually foreign—as perpetually Other. But this relationship of humility and subordination is not directed toward the text itself—Reznikoff's translations are not in the service of the "original" text—but toward the subjectivity of others contained within it.[225] The encounter between Hebrew and English, between translator and text, is freighted with the demands of ethics; the translator's voice does not have the right to take priority over those contained within the original—but at the same time a final, finished original *also* does not make a claim on the translator's fealty.[226] Reznikoff's concern as a translator is always with those voices which are contained within the original text but which have been subordinated to that of author, redactor, or final form.[227] His translational practice is as

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prophetic poets: this is both out-of-character for Reznikoff's poetic voice(s) and the rules of the courtroom. (Where his poetry displays anger, as in Michal's final monologue in "King David," discussed below, it channels the anger of a previously submerged subjectivity.) An important distinction here is that the prophetic, in Reznikoff's poetry, is not so much a rhetorical mode (characterized, perhaps, by the use of a higher register) as it is an ethical one.

[225] I mean this in distinction from Walter Benjamin's belief that "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (19), a coming to terms which, in its ultimate, messianic aspiration, would eliminate foreignness (or at least transform it into something rather foreign from itself) through the achievement of an ideal language—the "final, conclusive, decisive stage of all linguistic creation," the "higher and purer linguistic air" of the translated text over the original (19). For Reznikoff, by contrast, linguistic foreignness prompts an encounter between the individual and the language that simulates the encounter between the individual as subject and a second individual as other. The foreignness of Hebrew, this is to say, is not dissimilar from the foreignness of the beggars Reznikoff notices on New York's streets.

[226] In this way, Reznikoff's translations attempt to avoid the tension between translation as a means to construct original poetic authorship and translation as a means, through fealty to the original, to "foreignize" the language. The dynamics of his translation, therefore, differ more markedly from those of his contemporaries (like Pound or Zukofsky) who saw themselves as translators than from those, like Woolf, who did not.

[227] While all three utilize translation as a means to reinvigorate English, Reznikoff's translational practices thus differ from those of his contemporaries and colleagues Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky. All three treat translation as a project of recovery, but Pound and Zukofsky only recover what has been or most likely will/would be suppressed by other translations into English: the spirited, chatty, and eroticized anti-imperialism of Pound's Sextus Propertius, for example, or Zukofsky's attention to the *sound* of the original which ultimately culminated in his

skeptical, this is to say, of the agenda and priorities of that which sits before him, focused into a monologic text, as of his own ability to know the language. The task of the translator is to break down the dominant voices of the monologic original and to arrange those of the ignored and the marginal into a dialogic array of narrative perspectives. This arrangement reflects the motivations of the translator and poet, whose roles are aligned not with David the Psalmist, but with the prophet who, like Nathan, storms into the king's court to indict him.

IV. *Testimony*, Typology, and Translation

Reznikoff's turn to and development of a long-form, documentary poetics, the previous pages have shown, was shaped by his engagement with and translation from biblical Hebrew as much as concurrent forms of documentary writing or his legal training. The ethics of translation are inextricably bound up with role of poet, typologically-speaking, as a prophet—as Nathan storming David's court. Reznikoff develops the technique he deploys in the various iterations of *Testimony*, this is to say, not through the playful collage and pastiche typically associated with modernist epic and anti-epic, but through the translational aesthetics of the courtroom—of, that is, the injection of "Hebrew" into English poetry. *Testimony*, in all its forms, demands a reading that is at once typological and translational. Through such a reading, we can see the way in which its content—the "world of horrifying suffering" that Dembo described—and its formal innovations work together to create a mode of poetic reading and readership that might be best described as covenantal.

Like "King David," *Testimony* casts its readers into the position of judge and jury while the poet acts as a prosecuting attorney, calling and arranging the testimonies of witnesses.

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theory of homophonic translation. Reznikoff, on the other hand, seeks to recover that which has been suppressed *by the very text he sets out to translate*.

Instead of offering an identifiable narrative of American origins or national founding (or even a clear, identifiable parody of these), each iteration of the poem presents a series of discrete, individual narratives. Here, the decentralizing, dialogic effect is even more extreme than in "Israel" or "King David." In those poems, the multiplicity of perspectives continue to present a single, unitary, and familiar narrative—even if turned on its head. Taken together, the individual narratives of *Testimony* present an image of the United States between 1885 and 1915. But individually, they can make no such claim. The narrative of American history is not merely decentralized, but dissolved; in its place, one finds a composite snapshot. The lives of Americans, it implies, are not lived through its national story.

This sets Reznikoff apart even from the pluralism of Walt Whitman's proclamation, in *Song of Myself*, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large; I contain multitudes.)" In the expansive democratic embrace of Whitman's voice, these multitudes come together within his "I." Reznikoff's America, though multitudinous, does not speak as one. And, as his translations and practice of "Not Knowing" Hebrew indicate, Reznikoff's poetry remained deeply skeptical of a text that speaks as one. Even well-intended, this monologic poetry would suppress voices by merging, blending, and holding them together: not, *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one; but *ex uno plures*, out of one, many.

Those whose voices are most likely to be suppressed—and whose testimony Reznikoff's poetry likewise seeks to highlight and recover—are precisely those with whom the biblical prophets were most concerned: orphans, widows, beggars, and wanderers.[228] Their centrality to the indictment presented in *Testimony* is epitomized in its 1941 distillation. In it, the national "story" (such as it is) accumulates in the aggregate from the lives of day-laborers hired to unload

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[228] Injunctions to care for those in these categories can be found (non-exhaustively) in Exodus 22.20-22, Deuteronomy 14.29, Jeremiah 7.6, and Isaiah 58.7 (in the passage emphasized by its traditional reading as the Haftarah portion in the Yom Kippur liturgy).

a steamer trapped in darkness as the boat wrecks against ice and begins to fill with water; of Amelia, "just fourteen and out of the orphan asylum; at her first job—in the bindery, and yes sir, yes ma'am, oh, so anxious to please" (207) whose hair is pulled from her scalp by a book-binding machine; of Madelina, an Italian immigrant who is raped and (the poem implies) forced into prostitution after the murder of her husband; and how, "Once upon a time (the best beginning!)" a rich woman grew tired of the beggar who came to her door every day and conspired to poison the poor woman—nearly, in the end, killing her own son by mistake. Although scholarship makes the point that *Testimony* highlights the ways in which the legal system has failed these figures from the margins, this system is not the only, or even primary, target of its reproach. Instead, *Testimony* highlights the ways in which a variety of mediating institutions have failed in their obligations to the orphan, widow, beggar, and stranger/immigrant. In the expansive 1978 version, for example, a non-exhaustive list of these institutions would include: the courts, but also industrial labor, the rail industry, shipping, mining, intracity transit, gambling halls, marriage, the police, neighborhoods/neighbors, property law (wills, divorce, prenuptial agreements), Jim Crow, schools, and even organized labor.[229]

But how, beyond the focus of its content, might we read these poems without Jews or Israelites as typologically-charged, as engaging the discourse of American civil religion to call out the nation's failings, as re-imagining the role of the poet as that of the accusing prophet? The answer lies in forms deployed in Reznikoff's poetry. This goes beyond the technique of recording a decentralized counter-history. Reznikoff derives the "objective" legalisms of his

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[229] Michael Davidson, Daniel Listoe, and Kenneth Burke all focus their attention on a single intermediary institution: the centrally-present legal system. By doing so, however, they obscure the diffusion of institutions that Reznikoff presents. *Testimony*, in their readings, stresses how our knowledge of historical events is mediated by "the reported character of events as framed by the law court" (Davidson 151) and draws our attention to "the *pronounced political difference* between the law and the subjects who stand before it" (Listoe 122), "the mediating language and kernel of form that makes up testimony as such" (Listoe 123). This isn't inaccurate, but it also isn't the whole picture.

poetics by translating and adapting the poetics of the Hebrew Bible into English. This is to say, the rhythms, techniques, and literary qualities of the Bible serve Reznikoff as a documentary source much as they did James Weldon Johnson: this document provides him with the technical framework required to adapt legal documents into poetry. The form itself provides the prophetic charge and typological inversions that allow each page to "speak Hebrew."

"Perhaps the greatest peculiarity of biblical poetry among the literatures of the ancient Mediterranean world," writes Robert Alter, "is its seeming avoidance of narrative."[230] Classical epic, by contrast, is defined by an inexorable narrative thrust. Each version of *Testimony*, likewise, dismisses narrative progression in its entirety—in fact a far more radical move than the manner of decentralization of multiple-perspectives offered in his biblical poetry of the late-1920s, which offer a kind of cubist narrative, given from multiple perspectives but still following familiar tracks.[231] Yet, in both biblical poetic forms and Reznikoff's *Testimony*, this avoidance is only "seeming": biblical poetic form contains, rather than denies, narrative progression, sharply delimiting it within smaller poetic units. Such is the case with the biblical formal technique of parallelism, in which the parallels "are approximate equivalents but prove to be, on closer inspection, logically discriminated actions that lead imperceptibly from one to the next."[232] This progression lays the foundation for the technique of *intensification* through parallel repetition, a heightening of emotion, strength of language, and the reader's awareness of these qualities.

Stephen Fredman has observed that Reznikoff's language and that of biblical Hebrew share an affinity for "grammatical compactness," "condensation and terseness," observations

[230] *Art of Biblical Poetry* 27.
[231] Historicist readings of biblical poetic form at times suggest "that the ancient Hebrew writers generally avoided verse narrative precisely because of its associations with pagan mythology" (Alter 28); one might perhaps, seek an affinity between this interpretation and Reznikoff's un-writing of American foundation myths.
[232] *Art of Biblical Poetry* 39.

reinforced by what Alter refers to as the "reticent" nature of characterization in Biblical prose.[233] But the parallels go beyond—and run deeper—than this Imagist-esque compactness. Syntactic techniques familiar from biblical poetry and defined by the relation to its parallelism occur in all three versions of *Testimony*. The 1941 version employs parallel intensification in its depiction of the orphaned Amelia suffering in a book-binding factory:

> She felt her hair caught gently;
> put her hand up and felt the shaft going round and round
> and her hair caught on it, wound and winding around it,
> until the scalp was jerked from her head,
> and the blood was coming down all over her face and waist. (*Collected Poems* 207)

The first three lines present repeating, interwoven actions, each inching forward temporally while increasing in urgency, detail, and strength of language: that Amelia's hair is caught, the circular winding of the bookbinding machine. First, she merely "felt" it, then she "put her hand up and felt the shaft." The development of intensification from the penultimate to the ultimate line should, one hopes, be apparent enough not to need elaboration. We can also see intensification in phrases within lines, as Reznikoff's repetition of words to intensify and highlight an action mimics the repetition of a root or lexeme in biblical Hebrew, which is at times manipulated to develop a poetic leitmotif: "the shaft going round and round"; "wound and winding around it." Elsewhere, Reznikoff's poems utilize this technique but end with a break from the parallel, rather than an intensification of it. This is the focused turning of the reader's attention to a final image that, in the context of Reznikoff's sequences of short verse, Charles Bernstein refers to as "Reznikoff's nearness," a poetic method again dependent on those of biblical Hebrew.[234]

Similar techniques can be found even in the ostensibly prosaic 1934 *Testimony*:

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[233] Fredman 30-31. See also Chapter 6 of Alter's *Art of Biblical Narrative*, "Characterization and the Art of Reticence" (114-30).
[234] Bernstein, "Reznikoff's Nearness" (210-27).

> It had stopped raining. He was walking home with his brother. There was a puddle of water on the sidewalk, shining in the afternoon sunlight, and when he came to it, he slapped his brother on the arm and said, “See, there is money, can’t you see? I will make money out of that. That is the biggest thing in the world to make money out of.”
>
> In the middle of the night it was raining and thundering again. His wife woke up and found that he was gone. She didn’t know where he could be. She got up and lit the lamp and waited an hour or so. At last she heard him on the attic stairs; he came into the room, dripping wet, the water running from his hair, and his nightgown pasted to his flesh. He had been up on top of the house. He said it was very nice on top of the house when it rained and the lightning flashed; he liked it. (*Testimony* 580)

The two paragraphs of this prose-poem function together much like two versets in biblical poetry. Each presents the man’s reaction to the rain—though the second, both in the length and detail of action it provides, intensifies it. While these paragraphs do not offer a true narrative, the juxtaposition and descriptive and emotional development from one vignette to the next does express a kind of progression of the relationship between the man and the idea expressed in the title of the sequence of which this poem is a part: “Depression.” The depression that drives a man to seek to monetize rainwater develops into that which drives him to drench himself (and his nightclothes) in that substance. The juxtaposition also compares two types of depression: economic (in the first, the man is fixated on money, whether his attempt to profit from puddles is sincere or ironic, rooted in greed or desperation) and psychological (the man who cannot sleep at night sitting drenched on the roof of his house, watching a thunderstorm, because *this* might allow him to feel the peace he desires).

The qualities of biblical prose also reveal themselves in Reznikoff’s verse, particularly the syntactic and thematic repetitions of biblical narrative. Consider, for instance, the repetitive yet progressive parataxis of the first stanza of the first poem in the 1965 *Testimony*:

> Jim went to his house
> and got a pair of plow lines
> and then into the stable
> and put one on the jack
> and led the jack out

and tied him to a fence;
and put the noose in the other line around the head of the jack
and began to pull.
The jack began to make a right smart noise. (*Testimony* 5)

This passage, demonstrating the compactness of language for which both Reznikoff and biblical Hebrew are notable, develops through the simultaneous brevity of its actions and the development of keywords and images through their repetition. The verbs—"got," "put," "led," "tied," "put," "pull"—are all verbs of Jim's hands which, though never described, develop through them into a trifold *leitmotif*: of human *techne*, of human power, and of human cruelty. This, in addition to its reliance on repetition rather than elaboration, marks it as closer to biblical parataxis than Homeric—even though the style is that of biblical prose rather than poetry. What is important is not whether biblical narrative is prosody—it isn't—but that Reznikoff found a poetic source within it nonetheless.

Translation, ethics, poetic form, and biblical typology are just as intertwined in Reznikoff's poetry as in Zukofsky's, and the role of translation is likewise central to this blending. Yet in Reznikoff's poetics, the role of translation is not to model the typological framework, the goings-out of the exodus. Rather, it serves to apply typology to the American language as well as the American people. Poetics and language come to serve as vectors of typological critique: by translating the nature of the Hebrew language, as well as (or even rather than) the content of biblical narratives or verse, poetry, even that written in the "plain," unembellished language Reznikoff employs, can be set apart from the everyday, can contain within it a "sacred" valence. The forms used within *Testimony*, translated from Hebrew, render the stories and voices it recovers not merely critical or prosecuting—but typological.

V. A Covenantal Poetics

Reznikoff's poetry does not merely reverse, undermine, or play with the typological language, roles, and metaphors that define American civil religious discourse. Its prosecutorial/prophetic stance, by contrast, is precisely what enables it to engage with that very discourse's concept of *covenant*. "A nation under covenant," in one understanding, "is not a nation under contract but a nation *under judgment*."[235] Such a covenant operates not through appeal to "blood descent" but to a shared and agreed-upon law.[236] A covenantal nation is one that is not founded once, but continually found and re-founded through the renewing and renewal of this covenant. Such a society is thereby able to incorporate immigrants and other outsiders into both its national story and its concept of citizenship. If this sounds familiar, it is because it shares much with the congregational community which James Weldon Johnson's poetry sought to establish. Yet where Johnson's poetry operated within the Du Boisian discourse of a "new covenant," casting the Crucifixion and Sermon on the Mount as central typological moments and placing heavy emphasis on concepts of inclusivity, equality, love, and self-sacrifice, Reznikoff returns to the Sinaitic covenant of the Hebrew Bible.[237]

Reznikoff's translation and retelling of the giving of the commandments and divine law at Sinai comprises the final third of "Israel" and functions as the pivot between it and "King David." This moment, rather than *Testimony*, represents the first time that Reznikoff crafted verse from legal code and court reports: it prefigures the dryness of much of *Testimony*, and similarly focuses on the details a reader might expect an attorney or jurist, rather than a poet, to be drawn to. Reznikoff's Torah is highly redacted, focusing primarily on laws of jurisprudence,

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[235] Gorski 128, emphasis original.

[236] Gorski 55. He finds this divergence beginning during the Colonial period, when Increase Mather's notion of election set a covenant of blood descent against a more inclusive covenant of divine law. Secularized, we can easily see these terms translated to a blood- or descent-based nationalism/nativism and a more flexible, fluid concept founded in legal precedent and democratic norms.

[237] For a discussion of Du Bois and covenantal discourse, see Gorski 120-3.

economic ethics, land use, neighborliness, and the radical economic regulations of the sabbatical and jubilee years. The language of this section, not surprisingly, resembles that of *Testimony*:

> At the end of every seven years,
> the creditor shall release that which he has lent:
> he shall not exact it of his neighbor.
> And you shall number seven Sabbaths of years, seven times seven years,
> then you shall sound the trumpet throughout the land
> and shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty to all the inhabitants.
> it shall be a year of jubilee.
> The land shall not be sold forever: the land is God's,
> you are strangers and sojourners before Him;
> you shall grant a redemption for the land;
> but if the land is not redeemed,
> it shall stay with him who bought it until the jubilee,
> and in the jubilee he who sold it shall return to his possession. (*Collected Poems* 73)

Reznikoff's revelation at Sinai presents an alternative to the foundational moments of peoplehood and nation found in "Israel" and "King David." This is a break with the past, as the introduction of the Decalogue makes clear: "You are not to be like other nations; / you are to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (*Collected Poems* 70). Re-framing the covenant to excise any connection with earlier national history, these lines instead link the earlier commandment to "be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19.6) with the condemnation the people receive from their prophets when they announce, "We must have a king over us, that we may be like all the other nations" (1 Samuel 8.19-20) and "We will be like the nations, like the families of the lands, worshipping wood and stone" (Ezekiel 20.32). In Reznikoff's "Israel," "You are not to be like other nations; / you are to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation," demands a break from both the past—ancestors who worshipped material products and profit, metaphorically and literally—and the future kingdom of David. National history, the political institution(s) and power of the state do not establish a "holy nation"; the commandments which follow do.

Reznikoff translates the Hebrew word *tzedek* as "righteousness" and uses this word to bind the concept of a holy people/nation, the Ten Commandments, and economic regulations. Between the second and third commandments (against idolatry and false oaths), he interpolates the introductory clause, "By righteousness you shall serve God:" (*Collected Poems* 70). Likewise, the expected conclusion to the Decalogue, "[Y]ou shall not covet your neighbor's house, / your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his ass, nor anything your neighbor's" flows immediately into a subsequent command that, "In righteousness shall you judge your neighbor" (*Collected Poems* 71), from which follow laws of jurisprudence, economic ethics, neighborliness, dietary restrictions, harvests, gleanings and tithes, treatment of animals, treatment of strangers, and the sabbatical and jubilee years (with an emphasis on fields, property law, slavery, and credit). The focus, above all, is on the covenantal ethics of community: how one and one's community behaves toward the poor, the defenseless, the wanderer, and the debtor determines whether they have fulfilled their covenant, behaved within the bounds of the righteousness that establishes holiness.

These commandments, moreover, reflect the rejection of individual(ist) and national(ist) narrative that informs Reznikoff's "anti-epic" generally. That is, they are not interested in the relationship between man and God (except insofar as the worship of false, materialist idols, the preference for profit over prophecy, is to be avoided), or ethics on the level of nation or history. These are commandments that order the ethical structuring of the intermediary institutions on which *Testimony* will turn a critical eye in American history. Reznikoff's re-writing of Deuteronomy 6 (adapted into Jewish prayer as the liturgically central affirmation of faith, the *sh'ma*) concludes the poem. The Biblical lines govern the private inner life of a Jew: to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"

(Deuteronomy 6.4-5), to establish both the love of God and the fact of God's oneness within the household understood both as the building itself (its doorframes, its gates) and the family (through teaching this truth and love to children, through reciting it upon waking and upon going to sleep—in moments of non-communal life particularly). Reznikoff retains portions of this passage, but radically revises the famous opening ("Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the one Lord" [Deuteronomy 6.4]):

> You are not to do each what is right in his own eyes:
> the words of this day shall be upon your heart,
> teach them diligently to your children,
> talk of them when you sit in your house,
> along the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up,
> bind them upon your hand,
> they shall be frontlets before your eyes,
> you shall right them upon the door-posts of your house and upon your gates. (*Collected Poems* 73)

Excised are the central affirmation of faith and the commandment to love God—the traditional antecedents to "the words" which must be remembered, taught, spoken of, bound as frontlets and doorposts. In their place, Reznikoff draws on the language of Judges 17.6 and Proverbs 21.2, which condemn idolatry, greed, and wealth while making clear the necessity of an ethics oriented around communal, rather than individual, good. In the place of the monotheistic faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who brought the Israelites out of Egypt to be their God, Reznikoff inserts a one-sentence summary of the legal code which the poem has just outlined. These laws, in both entirety and summary, proclaim the existence of an objective justice, an all-pervasive ethics: not "each what is right in his own eyes," but what is right according to ethically-oriented legislation.

This is a crucial moment for Reznikoff's poetics, the moment when he begins to truly explore the boundaries of what might legitimately count as "poetry." Might it be defined not

only by formal characteristics, whether modernist or Victorian, but also by an ethics? It is not merely the dry legalisms that this Sinai scene and portions of *Testimony* share which establish this connection—which translate, we might say, the ethics from one to the other. The title of Reznikoff's project—*Testimony*—takes on a twofold meaning. On the one hand, there is the obvious: drawn from court records, *Testimony* presents the testimony of those whose voices it recovers, arranged by Reznikoff in the role of poet-prosecutor.

Yet *Testimony* also refers to the name of the two tablets of the covenant received by Moses at Sinai—in Hebrew, the *lukhot ha-eidut*; literally, the tablets of the *witnessing*, of the *testimony*.[238] This is the covenantal testimony presented by the poet-prophet. According to Jewish tradition, the covenant was established not merely by the giving of the law or the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were engraved, but by the communal act of witnessing that event, to which the *lukhot ha-eidut*, housed in the Ark of the Covenant, gave testimony. For Reznikoff, God is excised: the covenant, whether that of the Israelites or the United States, is one that is continually established through the act of testimony. *Testimony*, this is to say, has a dual function: it highlights, condemns, and prosecutes the nation for its failures, both real and typological. And through this very action it performs the second: the ongoing creation and recreation of that very covenant through testimony. To title these works *Testimony*, is, in many respects, to title them *The Covenant*. The poet, poem, individual reader, and communal audience all participate in the giving and witnessing of this testimony. In so doing, they are all bound covenantally—and this covenant is renewed with each reading, each witnessing, of Reznikoff's *eidut*, of *Testimony*.

VI. Conclusion: Recitative and Covenantal Poetics

[238] See, for example, Exodus 31.18, 32.15, or 34.29.

"Israel" and "King David" take as their subjects two possible foundational moments for a Jewish nation: the establishment in "Israel," of peoplehood, of Israel as Israel; and the establishment, in "King David," of the Jewish state. These poems, as we've seen, re-write the character and meaning of these stories of national founding. Abraham's covenant(s) with God are never mentioned, Jacob's assumption of the birthright is presented as a swindle, and he never struggles with an angel or has his name changed to that which his descendants (and the poem itself) carry. David is a jealous, adulterous cuckold who rises to power by dragging the nation through civil war and enforces his kingship through the bloody thuggishness of Joab. Reznikoff does likewise with myths of American founding in *Testimony*, even though he limits its scope, as the subtitle to the 1978 edition states, to roughly the period from 1885 to 1915. The moment of discovery becomes the foundational moment: so America is re-founded, again and again, during the period of mass immigration that brought Reznikoff's parents (and millions of others) to its shores. In his biblical translations, the covenantal community made possible (but not permanent) by the giving of the law at Sinai offers an alternative to the bloody and blood-based modes of national founding that envelop it. *Testimony* itself, as we've seen, serves as this covenantal moment for the United States by recovering, arranging, and presenting testimony. This, in turn, creates readers who bear witness to it, re-enacting and re-founding the moment of covenant with each reading.

The success of this covenantal moment, however, depends on the recognition and reading of Reznikoff's poetry as poetry. As Jahan Ramazani observes, although both poetry and law are language systems that attempt to make sense of life by composing and imposing systems of order, these are "two different orders of order." The friction between poetry's "impatience" with the law's "binary logic, linearity and formality, and argumentative single-mindedness" is

precisely what enables poetry based in legal documents and/or history to recover suppressed persons, voices, and narratives through its engagement with the law.[239] That is to say, if Reznikoff's poetry is read simply—or even *too*—prosaically, the counter-narratival, translational ethics of its covenant, unable to cohere, simply dissipate. Yet, at the same time, I've argued that Reznikoff's poetry cannot be accurately read through norms of either lyricized poetic reading or within (or against) the genre of epic. Hence the importance of the concept of recitative as the second subtitle to *Testimony*: it indicates to readers that, more than just prose with line breaks, the work is more than just the spoken testimony of witnesses in a courtroom. And it *also* points away from reading *Testimony* as either "lyric" or "epic." The label it applies to itself, importantly, had recently re-emerged in American musical theater as a form that assisted the Gershwins in satirically critiquing and undermining American mythology. (It further strikes me as not irrelevant that recitative, as an operatic device, fell out of favor during the 19th century when Richard Wagner's compositions began to blend aria and recitative. Wagner's vision of blood-based national founding, needless to say, is more or less everything that Reznikoff's was not.) So in *Testimony*, as in Reznikoff's biblical translations, poetry itself is defined more by the ethical, covenantal community it forms among poem, poet, and readers than through either traditional or modernist formal standards. Poetry, this is to say, serves as the voice through which one "speak[s] Hebrew in every language under the sun," as Reznikoff puts it in "Joshua at Shechem": it is what language requires and becomes if it contains the prophetic ethics necessary to establishing, maintaining, and renewing a covenant with and among its readers.

Testimony, in all its iterations, exceeds its prose sources and functions as poetry precisely because, rejecting "objectivity," it does not decline to offer judgment. Although the poem

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[239] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (2014), pp. 47 and 60. His discussion of poetry and law extends from pages 46 through 62.

regularly acknowledges that there are factors that allow us to empathize, as humans, with the guilty as well as the innocent, judgment—harsh and unremitting—shines through on the level of poetic *sequence*. As a sequence, *Testimony* presents not individual cases but a single, sustained legal brief against the United States. The languages of poetry, prophecy, and jurisprudence merge in this action, transforming the seemingly dry, legalistic language of Reznikoff's works into poetry by speaking to the United States much as "Israel" speaks in the voice of the prophet recounting the history of Israel and reminding the people of the strictures of its covenant, as "King David" recounts the rise of the house of David as the simultaneous fall of the house of David due to his inability (unwillingness?) to live up to that covenant. Likewise, the United States.

Conclusion

Louis Zukofsky's *"A"*, I wrote in some long-lost draft of a document proposing this project, is a poem designed to teach you how to read it. At the time, I thought this was a mark of its newness, that to read it in particular required this act of poetic pedagogy. The process of researching, writing, revising, and discussing this project—and, maybe just as importantly, teaching poetry to students—has led me to realize this reflects a far more basic and pervasive truth: What we read teaches us how to read.

This realization grows all the more important in light of the ongoing expansion of modern and American literary history. As a result of the scholarship of recovery that shaped the new modernist studies, canons and histories of American and modernist poetry look rather different in 2018 than they did even at the turn of the millennium. Yet our practices of poetic reading remain tied to the idealized (and ideally lyric) poem imagined in no small part by earlier configurations of literary canon. Such idealization, pervading even those corners of scholarship where it might not be expected, works to exclude: on the one hand, to render the variety of verse forms, genres, and contexts beyond the lyric less visible. And on the other, to exclude those whose works resist, rest uncomfortably in, or otherwise fail to conform to the idealized expectations of lyric reading.

This remains true even for the poetic voices that, for reasons of politics, race, gender, and language (among many others) had been forgotten or suppressed but which we have begun to hear and acknowledge. But recovery alone isn't enough: we must (re)learn to read them, and to

do so in ways that can account for both their formal qualities and the experiences which shaped their content and construction. If we cannot do so, then we ultimately limit the importance of their works to narrowly-demarcated communities: movements, identity-groups, political niches. Such contexts, to be certain, deserve acknowledgment—more even than they receive today. Yet these borders should not be the limits of their importance. By reading Jewish, Irish, and African American modernisms beyond the lyric, we learn how to articulate the ways in which such works are integral to our understanding of American and modernist poetry at large.

To this diversity of authors, I have argued, we need to bring a diversity of reading practices—to remain open to the possibility that these poems might teach us to read them in ways unfamiliar to us, might force us to reach for practices and read beyond the historically-specific idea of lyric that we have been taught, by poems and scholarship alike. A covenantal poetics is only one way of doing so. There are many others, informed by historically-informed approaches to prosody, poetic theory, and genre—and including those which I don't yet know how to recognize, identify, or read for.

By reading James Weldon Johnson, Louis Zukofsky, Lola Ridge, and Charles Reznikoff, we don't simply flesh out our knowledge of American literary history—though we do, indeed do that. We encounter different ways of reading poetry which we can bring with us as we approach other works—whether those others are as familiar and recognizable as *The Waste Land*, as pigeon-holed in the domain of scholarly minutiae as the 19th-century liturgical poetry of Penina Moise, or as immediately recognizable on the contemporary scene of American poetry as Claudia Rankine's two recent, genre-defying "American Lyrics": *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014). Rankine's poetry challenges our presuppositions about what "counts" as poetry, drawing on extended prose passages, images, descriptions of video projects, and a

reversed poetic gaze in which her frequent second-person address to her readers makes oneself—whoever you might be—the subject of racial scrutiny. Her works, she insists, are lyric. Yet having learned from the works of Johnson, Zukofsky, Ridge, and Reznikoff to read beyond the lyric prepares us for Rankine's upending of generic (as well as formal) norms and conventions, to engage with a poem that insists we do more than listen to it, that we also have no choice but to play an active role in the world it creates.

Reading beyond the lyric also enables us to look again at the development of poetic form in the first decades of the twentieth century. Otherwise marginalized poetic styles, genres, and techniques—newspaper verse, commemorative poetry, dialect verse, conventions of prosody long-ago discarded, and so on—need not figure in the history of modernism only as that which was broken from. Rather, modernist experiments with poetic form often took place in continuity with these techniques: formal and generic revisions rather than rupture. By reading poetry with the belief that it might be more than overheard—and wondering about the formal implications of this possibility—we can see how the techniques of audience-creation employed by commemorative verse continue to inform even the most experimental modernists. In the case of a covenantal poetics, indeed, the relationship to this otherwise passé verse form is integral. This is true for the works of James Weldon Johnson, where we can draw a direct line from his commemorative poetry (such as "Fifty Years") to *God's Trombones*, as well as in the works of Charles Reznikoff, where the connection emerges through attention to translation, multilingualism, and a desire to push at the limits of what counts as poetry.

Covenantal Poetics also works to reconfigure the relationship between the study of immigrant and ethnic poetry and a more general study of poetry and poetics. In the Introduction, I quoted Dorothy Wang's complaint that where ethnically-unmarked (presumptively "white")

poems can be read for either form or content, ethnically-marked poems are all too often read for content alone. Such political or content-based readings of ethnic poetry enforce a slightly different norm of lyric reading, one in which what we overhear is, overwhelmingly, a narrative of identity. As my readings have made plain, a concern with documenting and communicating the experience of being an ethnic, religious, political, linguistic, or other outsider was indeed on the minds of Johnson, Zukofsky, Ridge, and Reznikoff. This drive, I would go so far as to say, is a *sine qua non* of their covenantal poetics. But this is not all that we can or should learn from their poetry.

Jewish poetry, African American poetry, Irish poetry, immigrant poetry, multilingual poetry—ethnic poetry in any configuration you wish—must come to be seen as integral to the study of poetry and poetics at large. *Must*: because it is. For scholarship, I believe that this means we must come to make the case, for example, that Johnson's poetry can make us better readers of Ezra Pound or H.D. as well as heightening our sensitivity to the long history of racial injustice and identity-formation in the United States. Indeed, Johnson made his belief explicit time and again: there could be no American art without African American art.[240] *Covenantal Poetics* has proposed an approach to the study of ethnic poetry that, like the works themselves, is both rooted and cosmopolitan: at once attentive to the content of the poetry (the historical particulars of authors and communities; the obligations art might hold toward them) and to its formal characteristics. By doing so, we learn to read them as they ask to be read, not as we have learned to read other poems.

Only after this do the implications of their works for the history and development of poetic form, theory, and practice at the turn of the twentieth century come into view. Far from

[240] The African American artist, he wrote in the Preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), was "the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products" (688-9).

belated, ethnic modernism in fact developed many of the techniques and innovations associated with high modernism or the later (but still largely ethnically unmarked) Left modernism of the Depression. Documentary poetics has recurred throughout *Covenantal Poetics* as a technique that, like commemorative verse, binds the four authors discussed here together. Their varied practices of document-based poetics, beginning with James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" and stretching through the final version of Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* some sixty years later, did not evolve *from* Pound's strategies for incorporating prior texts into his poetry or, later, the documentary reportage of his ideological opponents. Instead, they developed convergently, drawn (in Johnson's case) from his engagement with a sheet music, prosody, and the King James Bible or perhaps (as in the case of Reznikoff and Zukofsky) from lifetimes spent moving among and between languages, from an interest in biblical and Yiddish translations bound up not so much in Poundian influence as in the historically-situated experiences of being Jewish writers in the United States during the 1910s, 20s, 30s, and 40s.

Yet *Covenantal Poetics* is more than a project of recovery. We may have forgotten how to read the poetry of ethnic and immigrant modernists, but, as I have demonstrated, we can learn to do so again. By turning our attention to James Weldon Johnson, Louis Zukofsky, Lola Ridge, Charles Reznikoff, and other overlooked or misunderstood poets, we do more than fill out the history of modern and American literature—though this is an important and necessary task. Once heard, their voices can teach us new and forgotten ways of reading and classifying poetry, while allowing ethnic literature to emerge from formal experiment as well as from narratives of identity. Reading their works as they ask to be read rejuvenates our sense of poetic possibility.

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