

Exceptional

Walter Benjamin envisaged a book entirely made of quotations, as hinted at by the Arcades Project. Charles Reznikoff made exactly such a book in *Testimony* (1934, 1965, 1968) and again in *Holocaust* (1975). Reznikoff's powerful documentary poems, in which he deployed the verse line he called "recitatif", consist of carefully chosen extracts from American law court and Nuremberg trial records. The reticent American Jewish poet has designs on us, as Claude Lanzmann does in *Shoah*, a film whose published text is laid out as verse, à la Reznikoff. Did Heimrad Bäcker see *Shoah* when it came out in 1985? *Transcript* originally appeared in 1986, as the culmination of many years of research. It too has designs on us, has important affinities with Reznikoff and Lanzmann, and it fulfils Walter Benjamin's fantasy.

What makes a crucial difference to the reader's perspective, however, is that Bäcker, an Austrian poet, photographer and editor, who died aged seventy-eight in 2003, was an active member of the Hitler Youth and joined the Nazi party in 1943, aged eighteen. After the war, he clearly looked into his own soul and did not like what he saw. *Transcript* is a kind of apology or reparation for the author's and his nation's past. By deploying exclusively passages from books and documents written by the planners, perpetrators, witnesses and victims of the Holocaust, and drawing on his skills as a visual and concrete poet, Bäcker builds up a verbal/visual montage, possibly influenced by the theories and practice of Sergei Eisenstein, and certainly by the strictures of Adorno concerning poetry and the "Final Solution". Like Lanzmann and Reznikoff,

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Heimrad Bäcker

TRANSCRIPT

Translated by Patrick Greaney and Vincent Kling

154pp. Dalkey Archive Press.

Paperback, £12.99 (US \$16.95).

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Charles Reznikoff

HOLOCAUST

90pp. Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications.

Paperback, £8.99.

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Bäcker wants the Third Reich, and to a lesser extent its victims, to speak for themselves.

A note tells us that although nothing has been invented, there has been minimal editing: "every part of *Transcript* is a quotation . . . The notations . . . (for example, 'based on Hilberg') indicate that new textual patterns were configured from passages reproduced verbatim". Bäcker himself is quoted as saying, naively rather than disingenuously, "When I quote, there is nothing literary about the quotation (except in sequence, repetition, omission; except for the system of transcribing). That is what makes it different from narrative". The key word there, of course, is "except". In this extraordinary literary text, anti-narrative par excellence, there is a complete disjunction between form and subject matter, and this disjunction engenders the deep content of the book: a deliberate attempt to unsettle the reader by flooding him with, yes, the formal qualities of literary language (hence moments of involuntary pleasure) in



Children photographed at Auschwitz

order to bring home all the more strongly the horrors of a world-view the author once embraced and defended. On some pages there is only one line of text, building silence into this radical project, only to break it by another block of words.

Thus the paradox at the heart of the work is that while the author's direct contribution to the subject matter is as stated in the editorial note, his construct could not be more aestheticized: there are long catalogues of names and professions, very brief fragments recalling imagist poems, lists chosen for their sounds; there are instructions, orders, records, etc. The reader could easily imagine the book being recited by a sound poet such as Ernst Jandl, Bäcker's exact contemporary. Why not? After all, "when all is said and done", this is a book about language, language used to help implement and facilitate evil intent: that which could be spoken must not be passed over in silence. The author is known to have studied Victor Klemperer's *The Lan-*

guage of the Third Reich, and must have read Paul Celan. *Transcript* is a strong and troubling work. A product of the post-war Viennese avant-garde, it is a critique not only of the Third Reich but also of poetry. We need to give it our full attention. The next step should be a Radio Three production.

By good fortune, Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* has finally been published in the UK (the original, American edition appeared in 1975, the year before the poet died). The English edition of this singular and disturbing book-length poem by a woefully under-read poet adds a thoughtful introduction by George Szirtes and valuable endnotes on Reznikoff's sources by Janet Sutherland, a poet who has been studying Reznikoff for years. Szirtes states that the "terrible experience" of reading *Holocaust* is "an oddly affirming one, if only because of the music . . . It is the music of sheer labour". This raises the same issues as Bäcker's book, perhaps even more acutely, given Reznikoff's origins.