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Why Read Poems in Such Hard Times? Sociopolitical History and Aesthetic Commitment in  
Modern Hebrew, Yiddish and German Poetry

by

Riki Ophir

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Joint Doctor of Philosophy  
with the Graduate Theological Union  
in  
Jewish Studies  
in the  
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of the  
University of California, Berkeley

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Professor Chana Kronfeld, Chair  
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## Abstract

Why Read Poems in Such Hard Times? Sociopolitical History and Aesthetic Commitment in

Modern Hebrew, Yiddish and German Poetry

by

Riki Ophir

Doctor of Philosophy in Jewish Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Chana Kronfeld, Chair

This dissertation focuses on what art in general and poetry in particular can reveal about sociopolitical history, and on the possible significance of such knowledge or understanding for human subjectivity and ethical-political agency. Following Marxian-inflected theory my claim is that the assumption that poetry and the other arts do not differ, first from already-conceptualized, purpose-driven thought, and then from actual action, is not only dangerously delusional, but also ignores the most radical potential of poetry. Poetry is an imaginative construction that is felt to be as if it were already an objective truth, *als ob*, in Kant's terms, but is in fact something not yet actually proven to be objective. This in turn makes aesthetic experience imaginatively and affectively available to us without the conceptual constraints that delimit objectively-oriented thought and action in the real, empirical world itself. It is in this sense that art allows for the activation of subjectivity and agency not already known and stipulated.

More specifically, this dissertation identifies the role that Jewish poets ascribed to modern Hebrew and Yiddish poetry from a perspective wrought through a rich engagement with German literary culture. I show how both Yiddish and Hebrew modernist poetry provides and records unique evidence of historical experience. This study also examines how and why modern Hebrew Israeli poetry is haunted by the possibility that the newly established state of Israel might be moving away catastrophically from the imperative to achieve a genuinely democratic configuration. Finally, it examines how and why this legacy of critical examination of the sociopolitical reality still suffuses the aesthetic vocations of Israeli poetry today.

This project follows three main routes. The first is an exploration of the work of the Yiddish poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886-1932), read in light of its engagement with the poetry of Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), the poet Halpern admired most; the second is a comparative study of David Avidan's poetry, and to a lesser extent Natan Zach's, with the

poetry and thought of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and, through Brecht, Heine again; the third route is a study of the concept of poetry promoted by the American-born contemporary Israeli poet, Harold Schimmel (b.1935), in light of both Frankfurt School aesthetics and Halpern's poetics.

The complex constellation of poetic works and histories that this dissertation undertakes reveals how poetry emerges out of self-other relations, and in what ways these dynamics facilitate an agency effect, that is, an agency that is never already established, but is always coming into being. It is this notion of felt-agency, I further show, that is vital for the establishment a non-violent public sphere, one that is urgently needed today.

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my beloved parents, Sarah (n. Polat) and Kalman Ophir (Aufrychter). Not long before my mother's sudden, painful death I confessed to her my desire to attend graduate school and write a dissertation, to which she responded that she would rather see me getting married and work as a cashier in a supermarket than complete a Ph.D. I've loved both my parents nevertheless, and miss them greatly (especially now that I have a family of my own), and can only say that, luckily, we don't always live up to our parents' expectations.

## Introduction

In a departure from recent studies of the meanings of Hebrew and Yiddish culture, which by and large tend either to criticize Israeli poetry's voices for their alleged cooperation with Zionist ideology, or hail those which appear to have challenged mainstream ideological thinking, my dissertation identifies the role that Jewish poets and critics have ascribed to modern Hebrew and Yiddish poetry from a different perspective—one, I argue, intimately wrought with a richly textured engagement with German. First, I show how certain Yiddish poetry takes advantage of the fact that the Yiddish language has had no literary heritage to form a unique language of poetry. I also argue that it is a language that finds in self-other relations its ever-changing point of departure. I later show that, through its echoing of progressive romantic and modernist German poetry, as well as Yiddish poetry, modern Hebrew poetry expresses a sense of something being lost *now*, in the project at hand, that is, the establishment of a Jewish nation-state. Indeed, as I demonstrate through close readings of the poems of David Avidan and Natan Zach, modern Hebrew poetry is haunted by the possibility that something, as it were, is going wrong, is being catastrophically thrown by the wayside. In political and cultural terms, I suggest that that terribly fragile, endangered something is *also* the perception of the eroding status, within the Jewish community of Palestine and then Israel, of the imperative to achieve an ethnically mixed, genuinely egalitarian, democratic political configuration or state. I also show how and why Avidan understands that poetry provides and records a unique mode of evidence of the historical experience. Finally, through close readings of Harold Schimmel's poetry and poetic tracts I examine how this legacy which up until now has not been adequately articulated by the critical literature still suffuses the aesthetic vocations of Israeli poetry today, and indeed still gestures toward the most difficult but necessary tasks facing both poetics and ethics in Israel, and elsewhere, today. Put more boldly, the dissertation excavates a history within poetry—a history that also comes from outside the art, and that then gestures back toward the possibility of a different history. It is a history in which the echoes of otherness that might at first seem only to be about a German or Yiddish past urgently tell also of a present whose languages of mutual engagement would be Hebrew and Arabic. In short, and strangely enough, here German and, especially, Yiddish constellated with, or heard inside, Hebrew, signifies Palestinian Arabic, and signifies also, desperately, that the very ability to “hear” this “inside” other is being forgotten, lost, muted.

The focal problem of this dissertation is what art in general and poetry in particular can reveal about sociopolitical history, and the possible significance of such knowledge or understanding for human subjectivity and ethical-political agency. The received literary histories past 1947-1948, perhaps especially those of the Left, seem to miss art's abilities to illuminate what is not known, or not known enough about our sociopolitical world. These familiar histories try to uncover the power struggles in which art is understood merely to play a role as an undifferentiated ideological discourse within social or political reality. Following a rather different sort of Marxian-inflected aesthetics and critical theory, and especially Robert Kaufman's explications of Frankfurt School aesthetics, my claim is that there is little to gain in inquiries that ask how art should affect politics or society, now or historical; instead, I argue that art has a unique power to achieve a provisional independence not from material sociopolitical reality, but from the concepts that delimit human action in the actual world.



Although I am interested in the the relationship of artworks to forgotten or repressed pasts, my main concern is the sad present and perilous future as they relate to the ongoing national conflict in the Middle East. I believe that—to use the key term inherited from Walter Benjamin’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s critical theory, a key critical notion they associate with the history and practice of art itself—“constellating” Israeli Hebrew, American Yiddish, German, and international trends of both poetry and thought enables a deeper investigation of what poetry actually makes available to us today (and not least, what it may, in surprising ways, show us about the history of Palestine and Israel that might otherwise simply go missing). This introduction tracks the main themes and ideas that my dissertation engages with in the order that they are discussed in the pages that follow. But first, let me examine a clear indictment of Statehood Generation Hebrew poetry made by a poet who is largely considered among the more progressive voices in Hebrew poetry, Avot Yeshurun (1904-1992). This revealing charge will assist me in illuminating my own stance in relation to these prevalent views of art and poetry:

### אבות ישורון / טיוטה מן העיזבון

אחרי תקופת מלחמת העצמאות נתגלו פה ושם קבוצות של משוררים צעירים בישראל, אשר בניגוד לשירת הדור הקודם אשר פנתה מתוך מצבור הכלל החברותי אל הפרטי—הללו, המשוררים הצעירים—פנו מטעם האני האישי שלהם—אל הכללי [...] הראשונים כתבו על רחמי אם ואב, האחרונים כותבים על רחמים עצמיים.

למפלת האריה של העם היהודי באירופה עדי שמיעה היו; ולמפלת הלְחָיִים של ערביי ארץ ישראל עדי ראייה היו. לכל אלה לא היה הד בשיריהם. אבותיהם, אשר עלו חלוצים בשנות העשרים המוקדמות, סיפרו להם, בבוא השואה, את אשר קרה שם, באירופא את היהודים. אך העלימו ולא סיפרו ולא העמידו אותם על דעתם על מה שאירע כאן, לעיניהם, לערבים. מכל אלה לא נשמעה קריאת ביניים אחת בשיריהם. עוד אתמול היו הערבים מביאים לכתובותיהם את המשמיש, ולמחרת—מאפיש. היו ואינם. לכל אלה לא באה שאלה מפיהם, בשיריהם.<sup>1</sup>

### [Avot Yeshurun: A posthumously published excerpt

After the War of Independence some circles of young poets appeared here and there in Israel, who, unlike the poetry of the previous generation, which addressed the private from the within aggregate of the collectively social—they, these young poets—addressed the general on behalf of their own personal “I” [...] The former wrote about the pity of mother and father, the latter are writing about their own self pity.

To the lion/s-carcass<sup>2</sup> of the Jewish people in Europe they were ear-witnesses; and to the jaw-bone defeat of the Arabs of the Land of Israel they were eye-witnesses. All that had no echo in their poems. Their fathers, who had arrived as pioneers in the early twenties, told them, when the *Shoah* came, what happened there, in Europe, to the Jews. But concealed and did not tell and did not enlighten them as to what happened here, in front of their eyes, to the Arabs. Of all this not one heckling

1 See *Mita'am: A Review of Literature and Radical Thought* 9 (March 2007), 6. The editors of *Mita'am* did not specify when this draft was written. *Mita'am* is Hebrew for “in the interest of,” “on the part of,” or “on behalf of,” supporting the notion of biased information dictated by the authorities. However, literally the word *ta'am* (accent on the first syllable) means taste, flavor, or meaning; *mi* means “from” or here “of.” Thus, the journal’s name may suggest both criticism of hegemonic discourse, and a concept of taste.

2 Yeshurun is obviously alluding here to the biblical story from *Judges* 15:15 where Samson kills a thousand philistines with a cheek (or a jawbone) of a donkey.

outcry was heard in their poems. Only yesterday did the Arabs bring *mishmish* [Arabic: apricots] to their addresses; and the next day—*mafish* [Arabic: nothing]. They once were, but are no more.

About all this no question came from their mouths, in their poems.]

This excerpt from the literary estate of the Israeli poet Avot Yeshurun opens one of the issues of the leftist journal of *Mita'am*. Yeshurun claims here that the poetry of the Statehood Generation, written at such proximity to the Nazi genocide and the 1948 war, perhaps not entirely but generally, spoke nothing of these two catastrophes, which are comparable according to Yeshurun here.<sup>3</sup> How can one explain, then, the universalist poetry of two of the most prominent figures of this generation, Natan Zach and David Avidan? What can be said about their and others' turn, as it were, towards their own private, personal "I"? And who was he, this "I" they were writing to and about?<sup>4</sup> Recently it has been asserted that, while ostensibly having less of a national call, Statehood Generation poetry was yet another manifestation of the national project. As Hamutal Tsamir argues, relying on the work of Hanan Hever and post-colonial theory, the poetry of the Statehood Generation constitutes a national subject that only masks itself as individual and universal.<sup>5</sup> The leftist poet and editor of *Mita'am*, Yitzhak Laor, seems to side with this interpretation, as well as with the claim that the above-mentioned poets collaborated with the Zionist hegemony in hiding the actual reality of the *Shoah* and especially The *Nakba*.

Yeshurun, alongside a number of women poets, mostly Dahlia Ravikovitch (1936-2005), is often considered the "good guy" in the story of the alleged collaboration of Hebrew poetry with Israeli nationalism.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in a recently published anthology of Hebrew poetry "which did not ignore the *Nakba*," Yeshurun's poetry is represented rather abundantly.<sup>7</sup> Hever, the editor of the anthology dedicated to poems published between November 30, 1947 (on the heels of the partition decision), and December 1948 (the end of the war), explains in an interview that Yeshurun understood that there was no way to acknowledge the Jewish trauma of the Nazi genocide while ignoring the Palestinian trauma of the *Nakba*.<sup>8</sup> Hever further maintains that as long as the Israeli public refuses to accept Israel's responsibility for the *Nakba*, there can be no peace (according to Hever, in the form of a binational state.) Poetry, "one of the most delicate means of expression of Hebrew culture," Hever explains, can be useful for examining the ways

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3 Chana Kronfeld has been constantly arguing that the work of Statehood Generation poets, Yehuda Amichai and Dahlia Ravikovitch, have always been critical of mainstream Zionist ideology. See her "Beyond Thematicism in Hebrew Political Poetry on the Nakba," *Jewish Social Studies (The New Series)* 18:3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 180-196, and "Shira politit ke-omanut lashon bi-ytsirata shel Dahlia Ravikovitch," in *Kitme or: chamishim shnot bikoret u-mechkar al yetsirata shel Dahlia Ravikovitch*, eds. Hamutal Tsamir and Tamar Hess (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uchad, 2010), 514-543.

4 Although Zach was not born in Palestine, his is arguably among the very poets to whom Yeshurun refers.

5 See Hamutal Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof: le'umiyut, migdar ve-subyektiviyut ba-shirah ha-yisre'elit bi-shnot ha-chamishim ve-ha-shishim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006). Tsamir relies closely on David Lloyd's theoretical understanding of nationalism and on that of Benedict Anderson.

6 See, for example, Laor's adjoining essays on Avidan and Ravikovitch in *Mita'am* (his discussion is somewhat more nuanced than Tsamir's) "En davar kaze adonit," *Mita'am* 14 (2008): 111-129, and "Hasi'ach shel ha-adon u-mot ha-shira: ha-mikre shel Avidan," *Mita'am* 15 (2008): 93-112.

7 *Al tagidu be-gat: ha-nakba ha-falastinit ba-shira ha-ivrit*, eds. Hanan Hever et al. (Tel Aviv: Zokhrot, Parhesya and Pardes, 2009).

8 An interview with Amichai Shalev in *Ynet*, accessed January 29 2010, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3836493,00.html>.

in which Jewish Israelis reacted to the *Nakba* in the first decade after the 1948 war. And such an examination, it can be inferred, may help change the ways Jewish Israelis nowadays understand the *Nakba* and relate to it. However, I believe both Hever and the editors of *Mita'am* ignore Yeshurun's own complication of the analogy between the Nazi genocide and the *Nakba*. In his poem *Pańszczyzna* ("serfdom" in Polish) Yeshurun writes that his previous comparisons between the two catastrophes were "slogans, advertisements [...] as one would adorn himself with a pocket watch and a chain."<sup>9</sup> Yeshurun's *Pańszczyzna* opens the way for understanding that a recognition of the difference between the two traumas, rather than their conflation, is what enables a universal—that is, a genuinely viable intersubjective—perspective. For Yeshurun's speaker indicates that a genuine understanding of both traumas lies not in an imposed comparison, but in the subjective experience of those who witnessed the two catastrophes. It does not necessarily follow that the two traumas are unrelated, only that a certain historical, concrete precision is required so as not to fall into mere slogans or ornaments.

Second, we need to question the assumption regarding the nature of poetry that lies behind Hever's assertions. If we believe that open and public negotiations which induce a new understanding are vital for any change of private and public opinion, we may indeed ask why not try to promote actual change through the publication of such an anthology. Since so many people have already lost their homes and lives over this conflict, and the future seems bleak for both sides, shouldn't we use whatever means we can to facilitate a change? Perhaps we should, but first we need to acknowledge what is actually at stake. The anthology is evidently based on a *thematic* criterion (poetry that addresses the *Nakba* is preferred over poetry that doesn't), under the assumption that the right kind of poetry may promote predictable consequences. Poetry is thus understood to be indistinguishable from other forms of discourse, judged according to how useful it may be in promoting a certain already known—and hence, thematizable, already conceptualized—change. But since the declared purpose of Hever's anthology is to facilitate predicable change in thoughts and feelings that will translate into actual action, a related question must then be raised: How are we to understand human subjectivity and the ways in which it is affected or even effected? If poetry is judged according to its purpose and use, not unlike any act of either cooperation or resistance to hegemonic power, both the poet's and the reader's subjectivities are treated as pre-established, as merely functional and instrumental aspects of knowledge, discourse, and activity. That is, the poet's subjectivity is treated as if it's already known and complete, since it is assumed to have directed and inscribed a certain content into a poem for the purpose of making it useful for already-known ends. Meanwhile, the reader's subjectivity is being treated as if it were simply there, awaiting interaction with any clearly already existing content, purpose, aim. Put differently, the subjectivities of both writer and reader, in a way that's in fact identical to the way the artwork itself is being treated and approached, are assumed to be established even before poetry comes into existence. Somehow along the way, then, notwithstanding the good intentions involved, art's constitutive *Schein*, its imaginative and unpredicted potential that comes from its fictional but not "false" play with the established concepts by which we know reality is eliminated. Poetry has become no more than a "delicate means of expression," and an unavoidable question presses itself on us: why then bother with it in such hard times? Laor offers an intriguing answer:

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9 Avot Yeshurun, *Kol shirav* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uchad, 1995-2001), 2: 165-166 (written May 12, 1975).

בְּתֵּזָה הַשְּׁנִיָּה עַל פּוֹרְבֵּךְ  
 כֵּתֵב קַרְל מַרְקְס: "הַשְּׂאֵלָה אִם  
 נִמְנִיֵת עִם הַחֲשִׁיבָה הָאֲנוּשִׁית  
 אִמֵּת מִשְׂאִית אֵינָנָה שְׂאֵלָה עִוֵּנִית  
 אֵלָא מַעֲשִׂית. בַּפֶּעַל  
 מִכְרַח הָאָדָם לְהוֹכִיחַ אֶת  
 הָאִמֵּת, זֹאת אוֹמֵרֵת אֶת  
 הַמִּמְשׁוֹת וְאֶת הָעֲצָמָה שֶׁל  
 חֲשִׁיבּוֹתוֹ, אֶת הַיּוֹתָה  
 שְׂרוּיָה בַּעוֹלָם זֶה."

**[A Quotation / Yitzhak Laor**

In the second thesis on Feuerbach  
 Karl Marx wrote: "The question whether  
 objective truth can be attributed  
 to human thinking is not a question of  
 theory but is a practical question. Man  
 must prove the  
 truth, i.e. the  
 reality and power of  
 his significance, its  
 this-wordliness]<sup>11</sup>

While aiming to grant philosophical grounding to his stance regarding poetry or thought and the actual world, Laor's "A Quotation" partially quotes Marx's Second Thesis on Feuerbach, as well as introduces an intriguing alteration to it.<sup>12</sup> Instead of "Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power of his thinking, its this-wordliness," Laor writes, "the reality and the power of his *significance*," [emphasis mine] using a term (*chashivut*) of the same root as thinking (*chashiva*), *ch-sh-v*, to suggest something importantly different. Laor is turning a man's thinking into a man's significance, unavoidably creating an affinity, even if by way of negation, between *chashiva* and *chashivut*, thinking and importance. The result is rather confusing semantically; objective truth can be attributed to human thinking, it seems, if man *actually* proves his significance, his power, in and on this world. Perhaps through showing that he

10 Yitzhak Laor, *Shirim* 1974-1999 (Tel Aviv, Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uchad, 2002), 213.

11 My translation is based on the English translation in *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 5:3.

12 The Hebrew translation of the thesis is as follows:

"הַשְּׂאֵלָה, הָאִם יֵשׁ לִיִּיחַס לַחֲשִׁיבָה הָאֲנוּשִׁית אִמֵּת מוֹשְׂאִית, אֵינָה שְׂאֵלָה שֶׁל הַתִּיאוֹרִיָּה, כִּי-אִם שְׂאֵלָה מַעֲשִׂית. בַּפְּרָאקְסִיס חַיִּיב אָדָם לְהוֹכִיחַ אֶת הָאִמֵּת, כְּלוֹמֵר אֶת הַמִּמְשׁוֹת וְאֶת הַתּוֹקֵף שֶׁל חֲשִׁיבּוֹתוֹ, אֶת מִצִּיאוֹתָהּ בַּעֲבֵר מִזֶּה [בַּעוֹלָם זֶה]. הַמַּחְלֻקֵּת בְּדַבָּר מִמְשׁוֹתָהּ אוֹ-אֵי-מִמְשׁוֹתָהּ שֶׁל אִיזוֹ חֲשִׁיבָה הַמִּתְבַּדֶּלֶת מִן הַפְּרָאקְסִיס, אֵינָה אֵלָא שְׂאֵלָה סְכוּלָאֲסִיִּית בְּלִבָּד."

From: Karl Marx, *Mivchar ketavim polityim*, ed. Avraham Yas'ur, trans. Shlomo Avineri (Tel Aviv: Poalim, 1983), 155. (Emphasis in the original).

deserves to be treated with respect, perhaps through fighting over his definition as a human being and over his rights as such, can he prove his importance. Objective truth can thus be attributed to human thinking only if it contributes towards human's importance, whatever that may mean. In other words, human thinking should be real, as real as “this world” is, and it has no merit if it isn't translated into practice, as man should make his thinking, *chashiva*, actually “work” in and on this world for him to have any *chashivut*, significance or importance.

Laor seems to have wanted to do exactly what he calls for, strengthen Marx's initial intention, make the affinity between significance and signifying, *chashiva* and *chashivut*, more urgent and powerful by introducing his own thinking, his own significant change. Notwithstanding Laor's evident strength as a poet and the freedom of poetic license, I believe his version of the thesis introduces a meaningful alteration to Marx's original intentions. Following a long tradition of interpretations of the Theses on Feuerbach, Laor's is also calling for art or theory to promote a particular concept or program of politics. But what does the thesis in its entirety convey? Here is the part that Laor doesn't quote: “The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.” [Emphasis in the original.] In other words, *the dispute whether thinking as such, art as such, is real or not, important or not, contributes towards human emancipation or not, is futile*. For, according to Marx, as he writes even more explicitly in the celebrated Thesis 11, thinking is *not* action, nor is theory or philosophy action; by extension, neither is art (though the difference with art is that its very illusion-status allows it to ask its audiences to *imagine* and *feel* what it would be like for the thought-experience generated in it to “become” reality).<sup>13</sup> Thought, theory, philosophy, criticism, and art cannot simply be turned into reality, they cannot be declared “identical” or “unified” with “this world” no matter how much effort we put into improving them for the sake of making them “real.” In his interpretation of Marx's Feuerbach Theses, Robert Kaufman explains that in resisting both Feuerbach's materialism and Hegel's idealism, Marx rejects, especially in the Eleventh Thesis, the idea that there could be a politically correct kind of thinking or theory, including of a “Marxian” variety, that could already count as or even towards being action or change. The Eleventh Thesis says the following: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Kaufman explains this pithy aphorism, in so far as it might apply to art as well as theory and philosophy, ought to be seen as Marx's “insistence on aesthetic autonomy over against the *aestheticism* that [...] believes,” as in many Left accounts from Marx's time to ours, “that intellectual or aesthetic activity can be collapsed into, or identified with, substantive political stances and actions.”<sup>14</sup> Interpretation, whether in the form of philosophical thought or art, can only be an interpretation of the world in one of various ways, but it is not yet an actual, real change made in the world. The difference with art is that its very illusion (*Schein*, semblance) character both gives the reader/audience a sense of agency, but that immediately reminds the audience/reader that precisely this illusion character means that the “sense” of agency has been generative, but that nothing in the real world itself has necessarily been changed, for the latter requires not thought, theory, or

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13 See an interview with Frederic Jameson in which he is asked about Thesis 11, suggesting an understanding commensurate with Laor's: *Diacritics* 12: 72-91, and See also Robert Kaufman's “Red Kant, or The Persistence of the Third Critique in Adorno and Jameson,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 682-724, for a response to Jameson.

14 See Kaufman, “Lyric's Constellation, Poetry's Radical Privilege,” *Modernist Cultures* 1:2 (Winter 2005): 212, and his “Marx Against Theory (Much Ado About Nothing—And Poetry)” (forthcoming).

artistic/aesthetic/experience, but something that can never be made identical or united with “theory”: political action itself, which is hardly *hostile* to thought, philosophy, theory (or art!), and often learns from them, *but is never identical with them in any generalizable way*.

Following Marxian and Marxian-inflected critical theory (especially that associated with the Frankfurt School, and, in certain key aspects, that of Bertolt Brecht), I will be suggesting throughout my dissertation that the assumption that poetry and the other arts do not differ, first from already-conceptualized, purpose-driven thought, and then from actual action in and on the world, is not only dangerously delusional, but also ignores poetry’s most radical potential.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most of all, it does not allow for the activation of subjectivity, that is the ability of art to stimulate, inculcate, nurture, or strengthen a sense of subjectivity and agency not already known and stipulated, not already felt. Poetry is an imaginative construction that is felt to be as if it were already an objective thought, *als ob*, in Kant’s terms. Poetry or art are felt to be a concept—the mental representation of an already-known objective truth—but is in fact something not yet actually proven to be objective. This in turn makes (aesthetic) experience imaginatively and affectively available to us without the conceptual constraints that delimit objectively-oriented thought (not to mention action) in the real, empirical world itself. Art’s or poetry’s distance from the already established concepts by which we represent the already-known aspects of the empirical world is precisely what enables Kant’s celebrated reflective judgment and the critical agency that, since Romanticism and its liberal and Left aftermaths, make way for the new, or for a further understanding of the real, and then for the capacity to take such understanding and act upon it in ways that can, in sustained and effective manner, change the world.

Can we then dismiss out of hand the question I started with: How are we to understand the fact that Avidan and the early Zach turn away from the actual reality of the Nazi genocide and the *Nakba*? Doesn’t their silence play into the hegemonic statist discourse of the time? Or is it the wrong question to ask, for is it the case that poetry has nothing to do with “this world?” In answering these and similar questions I reread the early poetry of Zach and Avidan to show that at least some of it does relate clearly and directly to the sociopolitical reality of its time. I further claim that these poetries, and especially Avidan’s, even without explicitly engaging with any obvious this-wordly content, radically ironize the Hebrew language as the voice of Israeli Statism, or *mamlakhtiyut*, in David Ben-Gurion’s terms. This then is an ironic reversal not only of the ideologies and actions Ben-Gurion promoted, but, especially in the case of Avidan, of Moshe Dayan’s militaristic approach to the Israeli-Arab conflict. The poems perform this reversal also through their engagement with a certain Brechtian poetics. Thus, the language of poetry both reveals the military and aggressive tone that the Hebrew language had acquired, and hints at, albeit provisionally, social experience not represented in status quo conceptual language and discourse. In sum, the poems create language and experience that gesture towards possibilities of a different way out, possibilities by no means merely utopian. What the readers of Zach’s and Avidan’s poetry will do with it, is, as Avidan himself has vigorously insisted (and in accord with the reading rehearsed above of Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach) entirely up to them: the reading of the poems does not cause a politics or political action. All that poetry can do is stimulate an agency-effect in its readers, which is a necessary, though never sufficient, condition for actual change.

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15 For a concise discussion of these ideas see Kaufman, “Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire Baudelaire,” *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 1 (January 2008): 207-15.

I follow, coordinate, and constellate three main routes, languages, and cultures in my project. I should first mention the dissertations's comparative study of the poetry of David Avidan, and to a lesser extent that of Natan Zach, alongside the poetry and thought of the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Also vitally conjoined here is an exploration of the work of the Yiddish poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886-1932), read in light of its dialogue with the poet Halpern admired most, Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). The final part of this constellative triangulation involves the concept of poetry promoted by the American-born contemporary Israeli poet, Harold Schimmel (b.1935), in light of both Frankfurt School aesthetics and Halpern's poetry. These final considerations on Schimmel and Halpern in turn reflect back and amplify the earlier chapter's adumbrations of touchstone Kantian-Frankfurtian and Brechtian theories and practices of poetry and poetics/aesthetics. In offering a way out of the now-dominant postcolonial approaches to Hebrew literature, I follow Chana Kronfeld's work on Hebrew and Yiddish modernist poetry, reading these literary traditions in the context of the international trends in which they take part, and the dialogues they form with other literary traditions.<sup>16</sup> I also avoid a now-common constriction of Yiddish literature as resisting the Hebrew national endeavor, since such framing remains limited by the national idea as the only way to rethink hegemony, subjectivity, and art.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand I am also suspicious of the somewhat prevalent view that poetry, in Israel and elsewhere, is no longer where "things happen" nowadays, namely that poetry has been replaced by other artistic media, or rather, other forms of action; I believe that Hebrew modernist poetry is still being written, albeit hardly ever read, and is still, although rarely, relevant and important to us.<sup>18</sup> The real question is what it is that we miss when we do not read current poetry, and how criticism can help facilitate a deeper understanding of the indispensability of poetry and art for life in general and for life in Israel in particular. I also believe that a comparative study is vital for pursuing this question, as I will shortly begin to explain, and I am not referring only to the need to uncover the historical, cultural, and biographical affinities between Heine and Halpern, or between Avidan and Brecht, Schimmel and Halpern, or even between Statehood Generation Israeli poetry and American Yiddish poetry. In a recent paper Chana Kronfeld has suggested that the group formed around the literary journal *Likrat* (Towards), the founding cenance of Statehood Generation Poetry, became acquainted with American Yiddish modernism through the mediation of Benjamin Harshav (Hrushovski) in his role as editor, poet and translator of Yiddish poetry.<sup>19</sup> Kronfeld seems to be looking for the hidden or suppressed connections between Hebrew and Yiddish that, when revealed, undermine Zionist ideology's attempt at creating a monolingual culture based on

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16 See Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary dynamics* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996).

17 See also Dan Miron, *Ha-tsad Ha-afel bi-tschoko shel Sholem Aleychem* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2004). Miron reads Sholem Aleychem's prose fiction as minor literature following post-colonial readings and Jill Deleuze and Felix Guatary's work on Kafka. See also my critique of this line of thinking in the context of Hebrew literature in "If I Could Only Burn Down the Space: On the Hazardous Concretization of Home in S. Y. Agnon's *A guest for a Night*" (unpublished paper).

18 Among relatively recent attempts to reintroduce poetry as a meaningful medium are the literary reviews *Ho!* edited by Dory Manor, and Laor's *Mita'am*. Whereas *Ho!* calls for "the return of the rhyme" (thus providing a previously acquired criterion for poetic form), *Mita'am* celebrates works that engage with the occupation and the introduction of Palestinian poetry in translation, feminism, and *mizrachi* identity.

19 See Chana Kronfeld, "*Safa Akheret Motsi'ah lach lashon: The Poetry of H. Binyomin and Gabi Daniel*," forthcoming as the introduction to *The Collected Poetry of H. Binyomin/Gabi* (Haifa: Pardes.)

Hebrew alone.<sup>20</sup> I also feel that bringing Israeli poetry into engagement with American Yiddish modernism can speak what is yet unspoken, or not spoken enough, perhaps especially about Israel's sociopolitical history and its present. My interest lies less in the suppressed aspect of Israeli culture that Yiddish represents, and more in what may emerge out of constellating the very different yet historically connected poetries (through national identities and poetic traditions) of Halpern, Heine, Brecht, Zach, Avidan and Schimmel. It is my understanding that something in each of these poetries, and even more so when they are constellated with one another (and with the overlapping sociopolitical and cultural histories), gives voice to that which is not yet known, or not known enough about the nature of poetry, and its affinity with actual life in the real world.

As briefly noted above, all this is closely related to Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno's notions of the constellation, force field and dialectical image, notions and practices that aim to emphasize that, as Robert Kaufman explains, "the social and the aesthetic interfuse one another in ways that frustrate claims for predetermined causality or even for causal direction."<sup>21</sup> The constellation is not about how poetics and criticism illuminate the sociopolitical context of art, or how the cultural and political contexts help us understand art. Rather, the constellation originates and is developed in art itself as an imaginative process of forming "configurations of thought that allow us critically to move towards grasping or conceiving what otherwise would tend to remain unapprehended in the sociopolitical or historical."<sup>22</sup> These configurations, Benjamin explains in the *Arcades Project*, speaking of the dialectical image, are formed when an image of the past suddenly emerges in the now as if in a dream when one encounters that which conjures it up. Kaufman further explains that Benjamin and Adorno initially theorize and develop the constellation and force-field in opposition to two critical tendencies: the first is orthodox historical materialism, that is, the idea that artistic and cultural phenomena essentially reflect or are determined by the socioeconomic or historical. The second tendency involves versions of formalism that by ascribing sociohistorical forces to mere background thematics isolate and hypostasize the literary-artistic object. Benjamin and Adorno, on the other hand, wish to put acts of aesthetically stimulated apprehension into intense dialogue with what seems like the works' sociohistorical ground, which transformed by the literary art form "can begin to appear as extended or altered sociohistorical horizon." In this way history, culture and politics are seen with greater clarity and particularity as the very substance of art and aesthetic experience. The constellation is then both "the subject's constellative action informed by reflection and undertaken in relative freedom from conceptual determination," and the constellative object constructed by such action."<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that the constellation forms a critique of constitutive subjectivity, i.e. the notion that meaningful human subjectivity is automatic, or pre-established, although it does involve a subjectivity, because it is only subjectivity itself that "can stretch past already determined and therefore mechanistic concepts of self and reality."<sup>24</sup> For Benjamin and Adorno, the answer to "the problem of subjectivity"—of

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20 See also related articles by Shachar Pinsker, "Yiddish as a Double Agent in Israeli Literature" (forthcoming in *Poetics Today*), and "The Bilingual Imagination of Yossl Birshtein and the Dynamics of Yiddish in Israel" (forthcoming in *Israel Studies*.)

21 See Robert Kaufman's, "Lyric Constellation, Poetry's Radical Privilege," 209.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.



what used to be called “bourgeois individualism” is actually *more* subjectivity, more genuinely emancipated, critical subjectivity which breaks through via aesthetic experience, through acts of constellation-making whose source in history lies, mostly richly, in art and aesthetics’ own histories.

In what follows I hope to show the ways in which the different poets I read form constellations through a creative process that always involves an encounter with otherness, an otherness that without critical aesthetic semblance-form will remain unknown and unengaged. This process, I further believe, is vital for a felt-understanding of self-other relations of the kind that exceeds prevalent formulations of both subjectivity and ethics. I also suggest, if only provisionally, why such understanding of subjectivity and self-other relations is pertinent to life in Israel, and elsewhere, today. My constellative attempts do not hope to emulate art’s *Schein*, but rather follow art’s imaginative process in suggesting the need not to abolish previous concepts, but to learn not to be bound to them exclusively. In other words, criticism learns from art’s semblance-play with concepts that truths about reality can be thought without depending only on what has already been thought, although unlike art criticism cannot accomplish this in illusion-play, but rather with moving toward the articulation of new concepts that would allow us to know more of social, historical, cultural, reality. Without forsaking conceptual thinking, we can begin to grasp what it is that art reveals about itself, about sociopolitical reality, and how all that art reveals is related to human agency. It hardly needs saying that the theater or scene here involves, ultimately, the urgent need to discover what art can tell us about the mutually implicated histories of Palestine and Israel.

## Chapter 1: A *Gestus* of *Grobe Reyd*: Heine, Halpern, Brecht

The Yiddish poet Moyshe Leyb Halpern (1886-1932) plays an important role throughout this dissertation. I begin my discussion of Halpern's poetry and poetics with what Halpern terms a poet's *perzenlekhkayt* (personality, character, or selfhood), asking whether this notion differs from the “self-indulgent subjectivity” that Brecht criticized Heinrich Heine for. Since Heine's poetic *perzenlekhkayt* was very important to Halpern, this question gains an additional importance.<sup>25</sup> I then go on to suggest, using the Brechtian notion of *Gestus*, that what Halpern shares with Heine, which is possibly related to what Brecht shares with Heine, is a certain performativity not unrelated to Halpern's ideas of *perzenlekhkayt*. I discuss this gestic performativity in its relation to the Benjaminian-Adornian discussions of the critical value of charged auratic distance, thus forming a link between these three different poetries and histories. Focusing on Heine's use of the Yiddish language I demonstrate that Halpern's *grobe reyde*, coarse speech, is related to his poetry's unique power in letting us hear the voice and the pain of the other. Finally, I claim that if we agree with Theodor W. Adorno that Heine's poetry is a wound that could only have been revealed after World War II, then Halpern, in his reworking of Heine's poetry, reveals a certain similar wound through the language of poetry even before the Nazi genocide.<sup>26</sup>

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25 See Tom Kuhn, “*Unsichere Gesellen*: Crossing Borders with Heine and Brecht,” in *Bejahende Erkenntnis. Festschrift für T.J. Reed*, ed. Kevin F. Hilliard et al. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer 2004), 202-204.

26 Adorno's essay on Heine, as I will soon show, does not relate the kind of anachronism that Michael Andre Bernstein has termed “backshadowing.” See Michael Andre Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions : Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

## Chapter 2: All that Was and Wasn't Said: Zach, Avidan, Brecht

Decades after the publication of his first poems, Natan Zach chimed in with a certain critical assessment of his own work and that of his generation. In 2009, when his literary memoir was published, he too contended that Statehood Generation poets, whose first poems were published in the 1950s, mostly ignored the turbulent sociopolitical reality of their time, and not only by refusing to join the collective national effort, as was often argued, but simply by turning a blind eye to the injustice around them. This declaration of Zach is a salient example of just how prevalent these views have become, especially among the Left in Israeli academic and artistic circles. In a departure from these views my reading of Zach's early poetry strives to show what poetry can offer when everyday language is used for creating a nationalist story that involves the erasure of all forms of remembrance. I then move to read Avidan's early poetry, starting with his rewriting of Brecht's "Die Unbesieglische Inschrift" ("The Invincible Inscription," 1934) where instead of the inscription "*Hoch Lenin!*" (Up With Lenin!) written on the wall of an Italian prison cell during the October revolution of 1917, Avidan's version, *Ha-ketem nish'ar al ha-kir* ("The Stain Remained on the Wall,"), presents a mere *ketem*, a stain, that the speaker tries to erase from the wall in vain. *Ha-ketem* offers a radical distillation of Brecht's poem, but also a brilliantly bitter re-activation of it in very different circumstances, making the stain even more inexpungible than Brecht's inscription. In Brecht's poem there is a visible inscription of a revolutionary agency that feels "as if" it's already all but broken down prison walls. Avidan turns this inscription into a moral stain that symbolizes what happened and should have been seen but was made invisible for too many within the Jewish population in those early years of national sovereignty.

## Chapter 3: Harold Schimmel and The Poetry that is Born Out of Poetry

Harold Schimmel presents a unique, unparalleled voice in Hebrew poetry. Schimmel's tone, style and linguistic structures are the result of an idiosyncratic configuration of many sources. Schimmel, who immigrated to Israel in his late twenties, is still attuned to contemporary American poetry, and still engages with the American Yiddish poetry that was written in the first decades of the last century. His poetry also shows traces and recollections of biblical and medieval Hebrew poetry that go past straightforward allusions and intertextual practices, and his theoretical conceptualization of poetry is also the result of his reading in Arabic poetry in translation. In this chapter I bring together Schimmel's pseudo-essayistic writing on poetry with his book *Nokhach* [Facing], a sequence of poems engaging with poetry as the act of facing the other and the self. I then move on to discuss the possible relevance of Schimmel's poetry and conceptualization of poetry, which echo, I claim, Benjamin and Adorno's basically shared ideas of the constellation and dialectical image, for the establishment a non-violent public sphere. Aided by Seyla Benhabib's nuanced and historic understanding of universality, I complete this dissertation in suggesting how and why poetry is indeed related to the most pressing issues in Israel, and elsewhere, today.

## Chapter 1: A *Gestus* of *Grobe Reyd*: Heine, Halpern, Brecht

*Un derbay darf gezogt vern, az Halperns fardinst iz bashtanen oykh in dem, vos er hot gekont poetish shokirn. Zayn ritem, zayn lange shure, zayne umgerikhte gramen, zayn prost vort, vos iz oft gekumen vi a frish vintele nokh farvaykhte lirishe shures, dos alts is geven poetish nay far dem yidishn poet, vos hot efsher gelernt bay undzer poetishn korev Hayne, ober Haynes shokir-shures hobn nisht farmogt keyn troyer, nor a shpitsl.<sup>1</sup>*

[And thus it should be said that Halpern's merit also lies in his ability to shock *poetically*. His rhythm, his long line, his incorrect rhymes, his crass diction, which often comes as a refreshing breeze after softened lyrical lines, all this was poetically new to the Yiddish poet, who has possibly learnt it from our poetic relative Heine, yet Heine's shocking-lines did not possess sorrow, but only a barbed wit.]

The never-ending question for poetry, at least modern poetry, remains: How does—or how can—a poet's development of formal technique enable his or her poem to reach further into the materials of both individual and social experience, not least those involving sorrow and suffering? The American-Yiddish poet, Yankev Glatshiteyn (1896-1971), who had always been ambivalent about the work of his colleague Moyshe Leyb Halpern (1886-1932), acknowledges in the above-quoted words, thirty-one years after Halpern's untimely death, the late poet's innovative contribution to Yiddish poetry.<sup>2</sup> Halpern's innovative meter, pseudo-rhymes, and demotic vocabulary were, Glatshiteyn underscores, shockingly new to Yiddish letters. It could be, Glatshiteyn adds, that Halpern had learnt all this from "our poetic relative, Heine," yet Halpern's poems yield something that the poetic form employed by Heine does not, namely sorrow. Notwithstanding the over-simplified nature of Glatshiteyn's judgment of Heine, his brief analysis pinpoints what could arguably be a most meaningful difference between the work of Heine, the great Romantic German Jewish writer, and that of Halpern, his Yiddish-language legatee and reviser. But what exactly does it mean for poetry to produce witty barbs and not sorrow? What enables Halpern's poetry to express (his own and other's) suffering, while that of Heine remains merely playful, at least according to Glatshiteyn? If indeed Halpern had "inherited" much of his poetry's form and style from Heine, where might the difference between the two poets be found, and how should it be understood?<sup>3</sup> This chapter aims to show the intricate ways in which Halpern is both a devotee and an extender of Heine, and how the poetics that partly resulted from Halpern's engagement with Heine's work emanates the troyer (sorrow) that Glatshiteyn finds in Halpern's work. This chapter also explores a central characteristic of Heine's poetry, a characteristic that

1 Yankev Glatshiteyn, "Moyshe Leyb Halpern" in *Oyf greyte temes* (Tel-Aviv: Y. L. Perets, 1967), 90. On Glatshiteyn's ambivalence towards Halpern see also Yankev Glatshiteyn, "Tsu Moyshe Leyb Halperns yortsayt" in *In tokh genumen*, vol. 1 (New York: Matones, 1947), 124-34. Yiddish poetry and prose are transliterated in this dissertation to make them—if only somewhat—accessible to readers of German.

2 Halpern was marginally associated with the literary group *Di yunge* [the young ones], named after the journal *Di yugnt* (1907-1908), although his poetry differed from his fellow poets in its coarseness and sociopolitical involvement. Glatshiteyn took a major part in the literary group that followed, the modernist *Insikhism* or "Introspectivists."

3 Chana Kronfeld turns the notion of literary influence on its head, asserting that a writer chooses his or her sources of inspiration and possibly also the ways in which she engages with them. See Chana Kronfeld, "Sokhnut intertekstu'alit," (Intertextual Agency) in *Intertextuality in Literature and Culture: A Festschrift for Ziva Ben-Porat*, eds. Michael Gluzman and Orly Lubin (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute and Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uchad, 2011), 1-47.

attracted not only Halpern but, albeit in different ways, the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht. Constellating the poetries of Heine, Halpern and Brecht, this chapter will explore the Brechtian notion of Gestus, suggesting that Heine was one possible inspiration for a literary and theatrical idea that is closely related to the notion of aesthetic or auratic distance. Discussing one of Halpern's early poems, I will demonstrate that his revision and extension of Heine's Gestus, to use Brecht's term for it, enabled him to include his potential readers in the play-formation of the poem in a way that brings to mind pre-modern performative story-telling.<sup>4</sup> This in turn is related to a central trend in modern Yiddish culture that sought antecedents in practices imagined to belong to the nation's cultural past.<sup>5</sup> A later poem will allow us to see how Halpern further developed his engagement with Heinesque aesthetics in his ceaseless effort to reach further into the materials of both personal and social experience.

This chapter brings together poetries and theories that seem very different. In most (though not all) of its occurrences, Halpern's work appears incompatible with a certain condensed Brechtian poetics that wished to create *die schöne widersprüchliche Einheit*, Brecht's term for the beautiful contradictory unit of condensed poetic language. That poetic of condensation would appear distinct from the tendency towards verbosity that can be found in many of Halpern's poems (and possibly in spoken Yiddish itself).<sup>6</sup> The Halpern's poems discussed below also seem formally and stylistically at odds with the aesthetics of the poetry usually associated with Theodor W. Adorno's theories of the critical value of modern poetry that will play a major role in the present chapter. The question thus asked is what can be learned about poetry—especially modern poetry—by bringing Halpern, Heine, Brecht, and Adorno into engagement? Can Halpern's poems teach us something new about Heine? Does Halpern's poetry share the same traits that Adorno ascribes to Heine's? Should Adorno's understanding of modern poetry be reassessed after one reads Halpern? If, as Adorno claims, Heine's poetry is a wound which could only have been revealed after World War II, how can this idea of a belatedly revealed wound be related to Halpern, if at all? Could it be that Halpern, in his reworking of Heine's poetry, reveals a certain wound through the language of poetry even before the Nazi genocide? These are some of the questions that this chapter explores.

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4 In his key essay "The Storyteller" Benjamin explains that experience, "the source from which all storytellers have drawn," has "fallen in value." in capitalist modernity. People have lost the very ability to exchange experiences and therefore "the art of storytelling is coming to an end." Storytelling is replaced in modern times by the novel, and, more recently, by information. Typically provided by the press, information requires no interpretation, and thus lacks the amplitude that narrative achieves. While Benjamin's essay pursue these ideas in terms of prose narrative, Halpern's poetry may be striving to achieve this very amplitude through poetic means, communicating concrete human experience in ways that preserve the lost "mouth to mouth" quality of the pre-modern storyteller. See Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller." in *Illuminations* (Schocken: New York, 2007), 83-110.

5 Notable Yiddish authors who may demonstrate this trend are Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (especially in his turn to Hasidism), S. An-ski (most famously in his *The Dybbuk*), and Itzik Manger (in his gestures towards the *Purim-shpil*, or in his famous article "Folklore and Literature"). For a discussion of the Yiddishist re-discovery and aesthetic transformation of folk traditions including the *badkhn* (jester and master of ceremony in traditional Jewish celebrations) and the *purim-shpil* see Zehavit Stern, "From Jester to Gesture: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Re-imagining of Folk Performance" (PhD diss. University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

6 Brecht, who did not shun spoken language, and often used folkish song-formations, nevertheless strove for a poetic language that differed from daily speech and created a tension within language itself between different forms of expression. More about this in what follows.

### a. A Poet's *Perzenlekhkayt*

Halpern's engagement with the German language began in 1898, when at the age of twelve, he was sent by his parents to Vienna to study commercial art. He returned to his hometown Zlotchev only in 1907, and left for New York a few years later. While in Vienna he audited German literature classes at the university, and even began to write poems in German himself.<sup>7</sup> Since he had left for Vienna at an early age, it is reasonable to assume that Halpern's Jewish education was rather limited. His reading in German poetry seems also not to have been comprehensive, as there is no evidence in his poems and essays, or in the memoirs and monograph written about him, that he had read much beyond nineteenth-century German poetry and the work of his Yiddish peers and predecessors. Available evidence suggests that what was most decisive for Halpern was his encounter with Heine's work. Eliezer Grinberg stresses in his monograph on Halpern the importance to Halpern of Heine's *Die Nordsee* (*The North Sea*) poem cycle; and the literary critic Noyekh Shtaynberg recalls Halpern enthusiastically speaking of Heine (and of Ludwig Börne), and taking every opportunity to recite Heine's poems from memory.<sup>8</sup> Heine's name recurs as the paradigm of good poetry in Halpern's article on the sweatshop poet Morris Rosenfeld and in Zishe Vaynper's memoir dedicated to Halpern.<sup>9</sup> Halpern was certainly not alone in his admiration for Heine among Yiddish and Hebrew writers of the time. At the same time, though Heine may also have had a sizable readership outside the world of Jewish letters, his work was often described by authoritative voices within German literary criticism as "trivial, journalistic, and popular."<sup>10</sup> Jewish writers admired Heine, whether because of his Jewishness, his standing within nineteenth-century German culture, his interest in human emancipation, or his adaptation and populist democratization of Romantic models. It could also be that Heine's use of irony, which might be considered Jewish in nature, contributed to his standing among Jewish writers. In any event, Heine was adored by many of his "extended family," as the 1918 eight-volume Yiddish edition of Heine's poetry and prose published in New York attests.<sup>11</sup> Among the contributors to that voluminous translated edition are members of the literary group known as *di Yunge* (the young ones) such as Reuben Iceland, Mani Leyb, and Zishe Landau. Halpern, who was socially associated with but not poetically committed to *Di yunge*, contributed translations of the prologue to *Die Harzreise* (only the prologue), as well as *Das Sklavenschief*, and *Deutschland—ein Wintermärchen*, or in Halpern's translation, *Daytshland—a vinter maysele*. This is an interesting selection, as two of the choices, including the long poem *Deutschland—ein Wintermaerchen*, are taken from Heine's later period and belong to what his biographer Jeffrey Sammons defines as his "radical phase."<sup>12</sup> Halpern is thus interested in Heine not as a purely Romantic figure (unlike Mani Leyb, for example), or merely as "our poetic relative," in Glatshteyn's terms, but as a poet whose work tells of human suffering and engages empirical, and indeed sociopolitical, reality.<sup>13</sup>

7 See Ruth Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 76.

8 See Eliezer Grinberg, *Moyshe Leyb Halpern in ram fun zayn dor* (New York: M. L. Halpern Arbeter Ring Brentsh, 1942), 17, and Noyekh Shtaynberg, *Yung Amerike* (New York: Lebn, 1917), 203-232.

9 See Halpern's "*Der alter un der nayer Moris Rozenfeld*," in the short-lived Yiddish journal *Literatur un Lebn* (March 1915): 103-4. See also Zishe Vaynper, *Moyshe Leyb Halpern* (New York: Oyfikum, 1940), 89.

10 See Tom Kuhn, "*Unsichere Gesellen*," 195. As Kuhn stresses, although clearly popular in the 1930s, Heine was then "far from the exemplary figure of identification that he was later to become, especially for the left."

11 On Heine and Jewish literature see Jakob Raphael, "Heinrich Heine in der jiddisch-literarischen Welt," *Heine-Jahrbuch* 9 (1970), 140-147.

12 Jeffrey L. Sammons, *Heinrich Heine: A Modern Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

13 On Mani-Leyb's idea of poetry as an autarchic realm of beauty see Ruth Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*, 36, 68, 49-50.

Obviously, Halpern is also interested in Heine's style and language. The quatrain that Halpern uses in so many of his poems is an essential building block of Yiddish folk songs, but no less so of the German folk song and of Heine's poetry. Halpern's loose rhythms, off-rhymes, recurrent use of the ballad figure (though in his later poetry they would be at times intriguingly deformed), and occasional use of couplets as well as of the longer stanza, are all reminiscent of Heine.<sup>14</sup> Both poets have an unusual communicative directness and do not shun coarse vocabulary; yet Halpern, unlike Heine, never employed high rhetorical style. The reason could be Halpern's wish to forsake highfalutin Germanized Yiddish in favor of stressing the folkish nature of Yiddish, his ardent desire to tell the truth about the modern world, and also his lack of fluency in Hebrew and Aramaic texts, which form the basis for a learned Yiddish as well as of canonized Hebrew. A twentieth-century German poet admirer of Heine might likewise have dropped "high rhetorical style," because it would be hard to revive it in a way that would avoid quaintness or pretentiousness. It is obvious that Halpern was looking in Heine for something that was extremely important to him, but what exactly was it? Some clues can be found in the way he explained Heine's greatness to his friend and colleague Vaynper:

— *In vos bashteyt di groyskayt fun Haynen? — Hot er gefregt, un a tap tuendik di briln iber zayn noz, hot er ongehoybn tsu redn fun Haynen mit gevaldiker bagaysterung.*  
 — *Es iz nisht bloyz der gevaldiker lirizm, vos es iz do in zayn vort, — es iz gikher di oysgesprokhene un kolirfule perzenlekhkayt zayne, vos men filt in zayn dikhtung.*  
 — *ot nemt undzer Yoysef Rolnik! mir iz fremd Rolniks velt. A kabtsonesdike velt mit kleyne hasoges, ober a velt iz zi un Yoysef Rolnik fartret zi talantful un erlekh.*<sup>15</sup>

[— What makes Heine so great? — He asked, and adjusting his glasses on his nose he began speaking of Heine with overwhelming enthusiasm.  
 — It is not merely the wonderful lyricism of word, — it is first his outspoken and colorful character, which one can feel in his poetry.  
 — Take for example our Yoysef Rolnik! Rolnik's world is foreign to me. A beggar-world with trivial concepts, but a world nevertheless, and Yoysef Rolnik portrays it skillfully and genuinely.]

In this excerpt from Vaynper's memoir, Heine's greatness, according to Halpern, lies in his outspoken and colorful *perzenlekhkayt* (personality, character, or selfhood), one that Vaynper, according to his own account of Halpern's words, unfortunately did not possess. Speaking of his contemporary Yoysef Rolnik, Halpern forms an intriguing connection between *perzenlekhkayt*, i.e. all that individualizes a poet's voice, and the idea of *velt*, world. Of the well-known Yiddish poet H. Leyvik, Halpern would say to Vaynper: "*Mir iz fremd di prostkayt fun zayn ton, ober zayne lider vayzn, az er kumt fun ergets. . . un az men kumt fun ergets, iz do meglekhkayt ergets vohin tsu dergeyn.* [His plain tone is foreign to me, but his poems show that he comes from somewhere. . . and when one comes from somewhere, there's the possibility of one's going somewhere.]" Thus, by "world" in these cases Halpern seems to mean a certain "wherefrom" as it relates to the way of expressing the poet's understanding of the function of poetry. Halpern's words also suggest the possibility that *Velt*

14 Late in his short writing career Halpern would develop his modernist version of mock-epic poetry, in his long talkative lines that Harshav calls "political talk-verse." See Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 107-11.

15 Zishe Vaynper, *Moyshe-Leyb Halpern*, 88-9. The conversation was supposed to have taken place in the first years after Halpern's immigration to America. All the following citations are from the same pages.

is an image or an explication of the world itself through poetry, preferably in a way that engages its actual, contemporary state. That is why a “beggar-world with trivial concepts,” or one whose tone is too simple to suggest the depth and intricacy of real life, can satisfy only partially. But more than anything else, the notions of *perzenlekhkayt* and *velt* suggest that a poetic voice emerges from an actual and unique human being located in a particular space and time. The Halpern of this early conversation seems to be at least somewhat satisfied with any kind of personalized conception of the world, indeed of any world that manifests itself through poetry, probably out of a need to reject poetry that presents itself as the unmediated voice of nature or reality itself. Halpern, following Heine, would attribute that tendency to naïve, self-deluding versions of Romanticism, or to aestheticised poetry. Halpern must have read *Die Romantische Schule* [*The Romantic School*], Heine’s famous essay which also appeared in the selected eight-volume Yiddish edition of Heine’s work.<sup>16</sup> It is there that Heine insists that poetry lives within history and serves human progress, yet simultaneously serves its own autonomous purpose.<sup>17</sup> It is probably safe to say that *Die Romantische Schule*’s celebrated critique of what Walter Benjamin would later stigmatize as the “mystical side” (rather than the productive side) of mysticism itself underwrites Halpern’s claim in his 1923 essay, “*Vos viln undzer estetiker?*” [What Do Our Aesthetes Want?].<sup>18</sup> Written some years after the conversation recounted in Vaynper’s memoir, and possibly expressing a certain change in Halpern’s views, “*Vos viln undzer estetiker?*” mocks an imaginary aesthete who desires that a man’s voice should be “as fine as wood-carvings in a medieval cloister and as thin as the longings of a flute player at evening time.” When the aesthete asks the speaker what he himself longs for, the answer is “*koydm kol nokh kashe mit fasolyes un az nokhdem vil ikh men zol tsunemen di hayzer do vos farshteln dem himl.*” [First of all, for a stew of buckwheat with beans, and then I want them to remove the buildings here that hide the sky.]<sup>19</sup> Medieval fine wood-carvings and flute players at evening time are evoked here because they are assumed to bear no relevance to modern life, to contemporary reality. These images suggest some generalized preconceived ideal of pure beauty that as such is unconnected and unconnectable to a poet’s *perzenlekhkayt*. Halpern appears to argue that if poetry wishes to go beyond longing for sheer beauty and spirituality whose fulfillment has become (or perhaps always was) unavailable, it requires a personalized voice embedded in a particular inner world (and, presumably, the sociohistorical reality inextricable from that world.) Whereas Heine contrasted pseudo-eternal spirituality with what he wished poetry to unite with, namely the Enlightenment (and the progressive or revolutionary politics associated with it), as well as sensualism and Protestantism, Halpern focuses on what one might see as the

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16 Reuben Iceland’s translation of *Die Romantische Schule* appears in vol. 5 of the 1918 edition. I cannot prove that Halpern read the essay, yet it was available to him and was widely read at the time.

17 For a discussion on Heine’s stance on the autonomy of poetry in relation to political poetry see Sammons, *A Modern Biography*, 85, 233, 245, 258. These two aspects of Heine’s view of poetry do not necessarily contradict one another, but rather re-articulate the notion that poetry (and the activity or experience it affords) differs from, but in significant part also relies on, empirical-world materials, actions, and experience. Still, there have always remained impasses in the critical commentary about Heine, as perhaps is the case for all poets professing fidelity both to their art’s aesthetic autonomy and its sociopolitical value. Thus, Sammons, reflecting on Heine’s understanding of the relation between poetry and the social world, or between poetry and action, claims that there is a “lurking split in Heine’s mind between poesy and the exigencies of reality.” See also Kuhn’s “*Unsichere Gesellen*,” 16-17.

18 On Benjamin’s view of surrealism see: “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, volume 2:1927-1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 207-221.

19 See *Otem* 1:2, 1923, unnumbered pages. Similar ideas are expressed in Halpern’s “*Di mayse iz aza*,” which serves as the introduction to Vaynper’s collected poems, discussed in greater detail further along in this chapter. See Zishe Vaynper, *Geklibene Lider* (New York: Oyfkum, 1932), i-xiv.

practical concerns that progressives and radicals of Heine's era saw their movements and values addressing: actual, modern human suffering and real physical needs, all expressed in a language far removed from the mellow ringing of cloister bells and the yearning sound of flutes.<sup>20</sup>

## b. A *Gestus* of Love and Death

In a recent study of the affinity between Halpern and Heine, Jeffrey Grossman offers another possible explanation of Halpern's notion of poetic *perzenlekhkayt*. Following Chana Kronfeld's analysis of Halpern's poetry in *On the Margins of Modernism*, Grossman claims that in terms of syntax Halpern draws stylistically upon the later Expressionists. However, Grossman stresses, Heine is actually where Halpern finds inspiration for "the more fundamental insight and practice of ironizing the received image and received tradition."<sup>21</sup> It is also in Heine, Grossman continues, that Halpern encountered a poetic voice that does not merely experience and record the natural world, but rather generates "its imagery and the 'reality' of his emotional experience from within his [the [poet's] own mind and language."<sup>22</sup> Grossman's analysis differs from Kronfeld's mainly in tracing Halpern's use of irony and what Kronfeld terms his "self-conscious contemplation of the lyrical 'I,'" to his engagement with Heine, rather than only expressionism. Analyzing an early poem of Heine's and another by Halpern, Grossman strives to show the affinity between the two, as well as Halpern's clearer modernist stance. The poems, "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*" [Burghers in Sunday Clothes Strolling] from *Lyrisches Intermezzo* (37), and Halpern's "Memento Mori," from his first book, *In nyu york* [In New York] 1919, indeed share similar tone, style and themes. I would like to take Grossman's analysis one step further by offering a reading of "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*," and then consider its affinity to Halpern's "Memento Mori."

### **Lyrisches Intermezzo 37<sup>23</sup>**

*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*  
*Spazieren durch Wald und Flur;*  
*Sie jauchzen, sie hüpfen wie Böcklein,*  
*Begrüßen die schöne Natur.*

*Betrachten mit blinzelnden Augen,*  
*Wie alles romantisch blüht,*  
*Mit langen Ohren saugen*  
*Sie ein der Spatzen Lied.*

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20 No essential contradiction necessarily exists between Heine's notion of sensualism and abundance and Halpern's stress on bare necessities, although Halpern, as a Jewish immigrant in 1920s New York, with no other means except his pen by which to support himself, may have been in a position to voice a more acute and urgent social and economic stress.

21 Jeffrey A. Grossman, "The Invention of Love? Or How Moyshe Leyb Halpern Read Heinrich Heine", in *Leket: Yiddish Studies Today* (Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf University Press, 2012), 149.

22 Ibid, 145.

23 Heinrich Heine, *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, ed. Manfred Windfuhr (Hamburg: Hoffman and Campe, 1973-1997), 1:169.



*Ich aber verhänge die Fenster  
Des Zimmers mit schwarzem Tuch;  
Es machen mir meine Gespenster  
Sogar einen Tagesbesuch*

*Die alte Liebe erscheint,  
Sie stieg aus dem Totenreich.  
Sie setzt sich zu mir und weinet,  
Und macht das Herz mir weich.*

[Burghers in Sunday clothes strolling  
Through meadow and wood and lane,  
Like frisky young goats caracoling,  
Salute nature's beauties again.

Their bleary owl-eyes blink in  
The romantically blooming spring;  
They cock long ears to drink in  
The song the sparrows sing.

But I – I am draping and glooming  
My windows with black like a pall  
The ghosts of the past are looming  
To pay me a daylight call.]<sup>24</sup>

From the realm of the dead where's she's sleeping  
My old love shining appears;  
She sits by my side and, weeping,  
She melts my heart in tears.]

As Grossman explains, the first two strophes of the poem introduce a Romantic motif from the ironic perspective of the speaker. Beginning with the third strophe, a self-reflective perspective turns the observing speaker into the object of his own observation. The speaker, Grossman continues, consciously adopts the position of the sensitive poet of authentic feeling alienated from the philistine burghers. “His gesture of ‘draping’ the windows in black cloth and exaggeratedly defiant use of the words ‘*Ich aber*’ (‘but I—I’), however,” continues Grossman, “point to his own emotional posturing, his desire to stage a mournful emotional state while cultivating an aura of death [...]”<sup>25</sup> The final evocation of the “old love” climbing out of the realm of the dead reinforces the literariness and the stagecraft of the speaker’s emotional state. Grossman further maintains that the language and imagery of the poem ironically observe the speaker’s “receptiveness” to the natural world, allowing the poem to reflect critically on the purposes, both artistic and social, for which this world was created. Grossman ends his analysis of the poem here, but its explication could go further to indicate that the figure of the speaker is itself a gesture, or better yet, a *Gestus* in the Brechtian sense, as I explain below, of the poetic mind that generates the poem’s imagery. It is exactly what

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24 The English translation is Grossman's in his “The Invention of Love,” 144. Grossman relies on and modifies Hal Draper's translation in *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine in Modern English Version* (Cambridge, Mass.: Shurkamp/Insel, 1982), 63-64.

25 Grossman, 144-145.

Grossman defines as the literariness and the staging of the speaker's emotional state, engendered not only by "*Ich aber*," but also by the theatrical act of draping the windows, the image of the spirits' pending visit and that of the weeping beloved rising from the kingdom of death, that bring into relief the poem's constructive and *gestic* character. Seen in this light, it is not exactly the contemplative nature or self-aggrandizement of the lyrical "I" in Heine's poetry that Halpern was drawn to, but the construction of the lyrical "I" as the *gestic* act: the artwork's necessary generation of an aesthetic illusion or fictionality, recognized as such, that provisionally captures, yet is also distinct from, empirical reality, and more precisely, from the already-existing concepts by which we tend to know reality. In short, Halpern sees Heine's poetry, not least its lyric "I," constructing the auratic distance that allows for critical engagement with reality.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, auratic distance—the charged awareness of an ineffaceable gap between poetry and life—is experienced precisely through the figure of the speaker. The ironic stance in Heine's poem is sharp-clear, and the poem's readers are asked to view the speaker's dark theatrical mood as a performative act. The gesture of draping the windows brings to mind the drawing of the theater curtain as a barrier between life and stage, audience and actors, that instates what Benjamin terms "the orchestra pit."<sup>27</sup> Now the spirits of Death can come and have their play with the speaker, but the readers are prevented from straightforwardly and emotionally identifying with this scene. The distance that Heine creates in this poem between audience and stage, reader and the poem's imagery quite accurately foreshadows, I believe, the Brechtian *Gestus*. Before looking more closely at the poem and examining the effect that this distance creates, let us examine the meaning of Brecht's theory and practice of *Gestus* itself.

The term *Gestus* originated in discussions the German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht had about music with his collaborator the composer Kurt Weil, and was first introduced in print by Weil in December 1928. As Kim K. Kowalke explains, "Weil and Brecht both conceived *Gestus* as a means of making manifest on stage the behavior and attitudes of human beings toward one another."<sup>28</sup> It later came to mean an instance of behavior or any kind of physical gesture that could be broken down, retarded, frozen or highlighted on stage to reveal a historically specific social condition rather than some inner psychological state.<sup>29</sup> *Gestus* is also closely related to another Brechtian term, *Verfremdungseffekt* (V-effect, or A-effect, alienation effect), that alongside *Gestus* is designed to prevent the spectator from immersing herself completely in the events on stage and allow her instead to adopt a critical and inquisitive attitude towards them. "The first condition for the A-effect's application to this end," Brecht writes in a 1940 essay, is "that stage and auditorium must be purged of everything 'magical' and that no 'hypnotic sensation' should be set up."<sup>30</sup> Brecht's language here and throughout his various writings on theater expresses the need or desire to distance his own work from what he terms the "hypnotic" and the "magical," and stresses instead the intellectual rather than the emotional side of the theatrical experience. Consequently, *Gestus* and A-effect could be seen as technical means aimed to

26 On Adorno's development of Benjamin's idea of auratic distance see Robert Kaufman, "Aura, Still," *October* 99 (Winter 2002): 45-80.

27 Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 2003), 1, 22.

28 Kim H. Kowalke, "Brecht and Music: Theory and Practice," in *The Cambridge Companion To Bertolt Brecht*, eds. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 250.

29 For example, in a 1940 essay on *Verfremdung* in acting, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect," Brecht stresses that "By social *Gestus* is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period." See *Brecht On Theater*, translated by John Willet (London: Methuen, 1964), 139.

30 "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," in *Brecht on Theater*, 136.

emotionally alienate audience and actors alike from the events on stage, turning the theater into a scientific laboratory, as it were, purged of all theatrical magic. However, *Gestus* and *A-effect* do not oppose the aesthetic or affect themselves, since it is a felt, sensorial experience that allows for the A-effect to induce in the spectator the realization that not all within the social domain is naturally and necessarily predetermined: in other words, the very sense of being estranged or shocked indicates that something related to the interplay of sense and intellect is still in play, though differently from delusion-producing styles and forms that Brecht disparages as “magic.”<sup>31</sup> *Gestus* is not about discovering what one already knows—usually, what the author of a play or a poem already knows, but is not yet known to others. If it were, then the “truth” about the social world would have been pre-determined, given even before the work of art came into being. What Brecht hopes to achieve through *Gestus* / *A-effect* is an estrangement from a rigidified form of theater and emotion, and not from emotion itself, as he explains in a 1935 essay, “The German Drama: Pre-Hitler.” The greatest flaw of this era of theater, Brecht stresses in this essay, is that its stage technique and dramaturgy do not allow the theatre company

to present on stage the great themes of our times; as, for example, the building-up of a mammoth industry, the conflict of classes, war, the fight against disease. . . Of course, a stock exchange could be, and was, shown on stage, or trenches, or clinics. But they formed nothing but effective background for a sort of sentimental ‘magazine story’ that could have taken place at any other time.<sup>32</sup>

The main flaw of the pre-Hitler German drama, Brecht argues, is that it fails to capture the truth of historical events, their dynamic character. The “great themes of our time” were presented on stage, but not in a way that went past the already-given formula of a commercial sentimental story. That kind of commodified and already conceptualized theater—and *conceptualized* within a culture whose reigning concept is exchange or commodity-value—could not engender in its audience a Kantian *as if* sensation—that familiar feeling that the theatrical event is actually real, while knowing that it is a mere aesthetic construct. It is through the use of *Gestus* and *A-effect* that Brecht wishes to reintroduce the theater as a form of art that differs from the kind of drama that sells sentimentality as a substitute for genuine emotion, and fiction as a stand-in for reality itself. In his 1936 essay, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” Brecht further explains the *A-effect* as a means of shattering “the European stage’s characteristic illusions,” that is shattering the delusion that nothing separates the stage from empirical reality, and that what is shown on stage is specific to a certain place and time while it could have actually happened at any other time, on any other stage, and in many other places. In short, Brecht suggests that the commodified theater presents itself as particular and unique, when it is actually controlled by the reigning concept of exchange value. In breaking down the flow of events through the many stylized gestures an actor performs, by making the audience aware of art’s illusion, Brecht wishes to recreate a critical version of aesthetic or auratic distance. Brecht is thus attracted to the Chinese actor’s ability to observe himself and to make himself look strange by looking strangely at himself, as he believes that this capacity prevents identification. But it could also be that the Chinese actor’s performance derives to some extent from a meditative stance of looking at oneself from outside, hoping to let through a certain calmness of both body and mind. The one who meditates hopes to be free, if only for a while, from obsessive thinking (such that has no direct referent), from being only herself as she knows herself to be. The ability to look at oneself from outside does not eliminate

31 See also Robert Kaufman’s discussion of Brecht in his “Aura, Still.” My discussion of Brecht here relies to a large extent on Kaufman’s.

32 *Brecht on Theater*, 77.

feeling, but makes it more truthful and accurate, as it eliminates or weakens all other unnecessary interferences of thoughts, emotional moods, and desires that are not relevant to the immediate performance. The actor does not do anything else but that key aesthetic activity and term, “play,” being constantly aware of what he does here and now. Obviously, this kind of awareness is very different from an over-sensitivity to what others, all others, may think of one’s performance. I would like to suggest that in watching Chinese players at work Brecht may have sensed that the attitude of being outside oneself is truly gestic, setting art apart from actual reality, allowing the actor to focus on his acting as an expression not of ego (or the demands made by the production, the cultural-economic atmosphere, or the audience), but of art. Brecht’s language of poetic distillation, which leaves space for processes of understanding and creates tension that is in fact highly affective, may be related, among other things, to what he sensed while watching Chinese theater.

Another essay, “Observations on the Chinese Art of Playing” (1935), deepens this understanding. Brecht stresses there what he understands as the awareness, in traditional Chinese theater, on the part of both actor and audience concerning the theatrical illusion. The actor uses symbols or rituals to convey meaning, and never appears to be in trance. His movements, the gestures that mark varied emotional attitudes, are sparse. His acting may seem cold, but, Brecht stresses, “*Nicht nur die Mystik erzeugt gefülle*” [It is not only mysticism that generates emotions].<sup>33</sup> Brecht is obviously looking here for a charged distance between the actor and his acting, as well as between actor and audience. The awareness that he finds in the Chinese theater concerns, finally, the recognition that what happens on stage is art, a recognition conveyed through the use of symbols, expressions, and rituals—through aesthetic means—and this recognition is crucial for Brecht’s notion of *Gestus* / A-effect.

Interestingly, there seems to be common ground in Brecht’s resistance to “mysticism” and Heine’s (and then Halpern’s) ironic rejection of pseudo-spirituality. It may even appear that the burghers in Heine’s poem are “hunting” for this kind of false “spirituality” in the way they enjoy nature. Heine’s demotic or crude, language arranged in simple sounding rhymes, causes discomfort, preventing a sensation that a “real” emotional event involving a true love for nature is enacted in the poem. After all, the burghers are none other than young “goats” who “*(M)it langen Ohren saugen / Sie ein der Spatzen Lied.*” This sentence breaks the rigid line formation, and awkwardly so, as the rhythm falls off beat. As readers of Romantic poetry, Heine’s audience would have expected something more conventionally sublime, or conventionally literary, especially from the two last stanzas, which focus instead on the speaker’s remoteness from the goat-like burghers. The plain rhythm, the raw and direct contrast between the burghers and the poetic “I” (two stanzas for them, two for him; they venture out to nature, he confines himself to his home and imaginings), make it hard, if not impossible, for a reader of the poem to truly identify with either half the experience conveyed in it.<sup>34</sup> It could be that not unlike Brecht’s understanding of the Chinese art of acting, Heine’s speaker coldly, or via estranged distance, presents his emotions, his tears and softened heart, his sense of supremacy over the others, and even over the poem itself, as gestic acts, that is, all of these are gestures that point back at themselves as poetic constructs. The reader may then become aware of the language’s irony, perhaps especially in the way its Romantic imagery appears. However, from a Brechtian perspective Heine may be going too far in making his *Gestus* unemotional and also unambiguous, resulting in the poem becoming

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33 Ibid.

34 In “*Seegespenst*,” another poem that Grossman mentions as a possible influence on Halpern, the speaker almost falls off a boat as he is drawn to an apparition of a beloved. The captain of the ship pulls him by his heel. Sammons uses this poem to demonstrate Heine’s critique of Romantic figures, but I would add that the poem also points at the danger that lies in not differentiating between the realm of the imagination and that of the empirical reality.

somewhat locked within itself, as if it were saying: the human relationship to nature has become so reified that no other way can be found to describe it. Nothing can be said that is not in the philistine's language, in a pre-given four-line-stanza formation that uses unambiguous demotic vocabulary, conjures up extant Romantic figures, and revolves around a defined poetic ego. This ego, although positioning itself as the philistines' other (*Ich aber. . .*), can come up with nothing but more stylized images of darkness, seclusion, and death in the last two stanzas. The language of the poem does not suggest anything that isn't already given in it, as there are no tangential associations emerging from ambiguous or as yet-to-be-decided words and word-formations. The reader can thus understand that this is the only language available at this historic moment, when the human relationship with nature, and the language of poetry, if not imagination itself, have become completely reified.

Such an understanding of the poem owes much to Adorno's renowned essay "Heine the Wound," and a brief discussion of it is needed in order to better understand the arguments I offered above, as well as Halpern's (and possibly also Brecht's) prior engagement with Heine.<sup>35</sup> In his essay Adorno claims that Heine's poems use "ready-made language" not unlike the language used in commerce and by the press, and reproduce Romantic poetic conventions the way modern industry mechanically reproduces its objects. Heine, Adorno emphasizes, "surrendered" to the socio-cultural reality of his time, although he also, if only unintentionally, "brought the commodity character of his art, previously latent, to the fore."<sup>36</sup> As meaningful as this unveiling is, Adorno wishes for something else, an "emancipation of the spirit"<sup>37</sup> that he cannot detect in Heine. Unlike Baudelaire, who "heroically wrests dream and image from modernity itself, from the experience of implacable destruction and dissolution," thus enabling an *experience* that can exceed conceptual determination (that can exceed exchange value's conceptual determinations), Heine's poems merely show the deterministic mechanisms at work. Thus, it can be inferred that his poems cannot enable their readers to imagine and affectively experience a song-alternative to the reifying dynamic of modernity.<sup>38</sup> But, and with a surprising turn in Adorno's essay—all this will have a different, critical, fuller "gestic" meaning and effect after World War II. Heine's "fluency and self-evidence," Adorno stresses, actually reveals the wound that is the failure of Jewish emancipation. "For Heine's fluency and self-evidence, which is derived from the language of communications," writes Adorno, "is the opposite of a native sense of being at home in language. If the language were really his own, he would allow the dialectic between his own words and words that are pre-given to take place, and the smooth linguistic structure would disintegrate."<sup>39</sup> Heine, then, was not at home in the German language; he was a Jew whose mother "did not have full command of German."<sup>40</sup> As a Jew, an outsider, Heine proved unable to resist the fashionably heightened language so attractive to the "mimetic zeal of the person who is excluded." However, after the Nazi genocide, when everyone has become as homeless as Heine the Jew, his poetry has come to reveal not only the commodification and reification of modern life, not only his own passion to seize the language that would allow him to be acknowledged as a German poet despite his ethnic and cultural origins, but also a universal state of homelessness:

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35 Theodor W. Adorno, "Heine the Wound," *Notes to Literature*, trans. by S. W. Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1: 80-85.

36 *Ibid.*, 82.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 83.

40 *Ibid.*

Heine's stereotypical theme, unrequited love, is an image of homelessness, and the poetry devoted to it is an attempt to draw estrangement itself into the sphere of intimate experience. Now that the destiny that Heine sensed has been fulfilled literally, however, the homelessness has also become everybody's homelessness; all human beings have been as badly injured in their being and their language as Heine the outcast was. His words stand in for their words: there is no longer any homeland other than a world in which no one would be cast out any more, the world of a genuinely emancipated humanity. The wound that is Heine will heal only in a society that has achieved reconciliation.<sup>41</sup>

The image of the weeping dead beloved in Heine's "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*" can now reveal the lack of true intimacy in human relations as a meaningful aspect of human life that has been made void. It is not only the speaker's ego, or the poet's reflection, that is unable to have an actual loving relationship; this has become everybody's lot. Adorno can see Heine's poem as truly poetic, since as Peter Uwe Hohendahl explains, for him poetic language "is a configuration in which communicative language transcends its pragmatic function in order to articulate the tension between the subject and the objectified world."<sup>42</sup> The wound that is Heine is thus related not only to Heine and the failure of Jewish emancipation (although the attitude towards Heine before the war is, according to Adorno, related to the "hatred for the Jewish middleman [that] ultimately paved the way for the unspeakable horror.")<sup>43</sup> It is the wound of an all-encompassing human failure of mutual recognition. After the historical divide of World War II, Heine's poetic language evinces something that lies beyond the unveiling of a reifying mechanism, and perhaps does not even halt at revealing the homeless condition of all human beings. Read after the Nazi genocide, "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*," in its rigid linguistic formation, ironic detachment, enforcement of the ego and imposed opposites, uncovers the alienation of the most private realm (whether of language itself, or that of love) as an expression of humanity's overwhelming failure—which, in the right, or rather the wrong, set of historical conditions, proved genocidal. To the degree that the world now shares in that fate, the wound cannot be dismissed as belonging only to a specific ethnic group. All are bound together in this wound, as a great barbaric crime was committed against each and every one of us, and thus *all* must be emancipated for any single person to be free. Heine's poetic language then—and this may be its greatest achievement—begins to suggest the possibility for a true emancipation, for a felt understanding that a *joint* human endeavor is needed to achieve true reconciliation.<sup>44</sup>

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41 Ibid, 85.

42 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 110.

43 Adorno, "Heine the Wound," 80.

44 Adorno's essay has often been challenged. Even if Heine's native tongue was western Yiddish and not *Hochdeutsch*, the native language of other German writers of the Eighteenth century was a local dialect no less removed from the *Hochdeutsch* than western Yiddish. Adorno, however, speaks especially of Heine's social position as a Jew as that which made him an outcast and evoked in him a mimetic zeal. Peter Uwe Hohendahl also challenges Adorno's notion of poetic language, claiming that Adorno's too rigid definition did not allow him to note Heine's achievements. However, Hohendahl attacks the definitions themselves (such as Adorno's supposed desire for pure poetic language, or his demand for an effacement of the ego) without addressing Heine's poetry as such. Hohendahl's discussion thus remains merely theoretical. See his *Prismatic Thought*, 105-117. Another comment must be added regarding Adorno's universalist stance. It could justly be asked how could all others who were not persecuted, and how could the perpetrators themselves, be as homeless as the Jews (and the other victims of the Nazi genocide). It is my understanding, as I have tried to emphasize in the discussion above, that Adorno does not claim that the Nazi genocide as an historical event has affected all humans in the same way, but rather that it was so atrocious as to deprive humanity of its humanness, and to shatter irreparably our idea of what it means to be human. As such, it made all of us homeless, even if not all of

How can all this be related to Halpern? Adorno is concerned with the pre-World War II capacity of Heine's poetry to move from the subjective to the objective, and with a certain related "reinforcement of the self."<sup>45</sup> To the extent that this is indeed true of Heine's poetry, which Halpern obviously read before the war, does Halpern's poetry also prove to reinforce the self, emphasizing its author's ego? Adorno insists that a true poem has a life of its own, that it transcends any immediate communicative function, and is not limited to its author's intention.<sup>46</sup> Does Halpern welcome uncritically what Adorno judges as problematic in Heine, does he reject it altogether, or does he rewrite it? What, if anything, can be learned anew about Adorno's judgment of Heine after reading Halpern? Let's consider an early Halpern poem that clearly engages Heine's poetics.

**c. *Tsi vet men dus glaybn Moyshe Laybn?* [Will Anyone Believe Moyshe-Leyb?]**

Included in his first volume of poetry, *In nyu york* (1919), "Memento Mori" is one of Halpern's best known poems. The poem consists of four stanzas, just like Heine's "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*," in which the second and fourth lines are rhymed according to the pattern of the German folk song (in Heine's "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*" the first and third stanzas are also rhymed). However, "Memento Mori" has an additional recursive fifth line refrain that contrasts with the solemn title by framing the poem as an intimate, soliloquized gesture. Thematically, "Memento Mori" echoes both Heine's "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*" and "*Seegespenst*" (from the first cycle *Die Nordsee*, 1925). As Ruth Wisse explains, these poems ironize Romantic clichés, and "Memento Mori" parodies the "suicidal yearning that weighed down the poetry journals" of the time.<sup>47</sup> The three poems share a gesture of intimacy with death and the supernatural, and position the speaker referred to in the third person as a creative and imaginative figure, unlike the "others." Nevertheless, "Memento Mori," as I show below, involves its readers in a rather unique way not found in the Heine poems.<sup>48</sup>

**Memento Mori<sup>49</sup>**

*Un az Moyshe-Layb, der poet, vet dertsayln,<sup>50</sup>  
 az er hot dem toyt af di khvalyes gezen,  
 azoy vi men zet zikh alayn in a shpigl,  
 un dus in der fri gur, azoy arim tsen —  
 tsi vet men dus glaybn Moyshe Laybn?*

us recognize this wound as ours, and only if all of us are truly emancipated, will each and every human being be set free.

45 Hohendahl, 111. See also Adorno in his essay "In Memory of Eichendorff," in *Notes to Literature* 1:55-79.

46 Intention is only one moment in the artistic process, Adorno stresses in an essay on Hölderlin, and is "transformed into a work only in exhaustive interaction with other moments: the subject matter, the immanent law of the work, and. . . the objective linguistic form. . . The more completely the artist's intention is taken up into what he makes and disappears in it without a trace, the more successful the work is." See "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry," in *Notes to Literature*, 2:110.

47 See Ruth Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*, 103. Eliezer Grinberg believes that *Die Nordsee* was the strongest influence on Halpern. See his *Moyshe Leyb Halpern in ram fun zayn dor* (New York: M.L. Halpern Arbeter Ring Brentsh. 1942), 17.

48 Grossman, who also compares Heine's "*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*" with "Memento Mori" notices that Halpern's poem, unlike Heine's, "stages from the onset the allegorical encounter with Death." Grossman, 146.

49 Moyshe Leyb Halpern, *In nyu york* (Warsaw: Kultur lige, 1927), 139. The name of the poem appears in Latin letters in the original. *Memento mori*, Latin for "remember that you must die," is evoked here ironically. The solemn associations to Christian art are, as I show below, deflated by Yiddish discourse conventions.

50 In order to maintain the repeated rhyming in the recursive last line I transcribed the poem in accordance with the western dialect pronunciation that was Halpern's native dialect.

*Un az Moyshe-Layb hot dem toyt fin dem vaytn  
bagrisn mit a hant in gefregt vi es gayt?  
un dafke bes s'hubn mentshn fil-toyzt  
in vaser zikh vild mit dem lebn gefrayt —  
tsi vet men dus glaybn Moyshe Laybn?*

*Un az Moyshe-Layb vet mit trern zikh shvern,  
az s'hot tsi dem toyt im getsoygn azoy,  
azoy vi es tsit a farbenktn in ovnt  
tsim fenster fin zayn a farhaylikter froy —  
tsi vet men dus glaybn Moyshe Laybn?*

Un az Moyshe-Layb vet dem toyt far zey muln  
nisht groy un nisht finster, nor farbn-raykh shayn,  
azoy vi er hot arim tsen zikh bavizn  
dort vayt tsvishn himl in khvalyes alayn —  
tsi vet men dus glaybn Moyshe Laybn?

[And if Moyshe-Leyb, the poet, tells  
That he saw Death on the high waves —  
Just as you see yourself in a mirror,  
And it was in the morning, around ten—  
Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?

And if Moyshe-Leyb greeted death from afar,  
With a wave of the hand, and asked how things are?  
Just when thousands of people were  
In the water, madly enjoying life —  
Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?

And if Moyshe-Leyb, tears in his eyes,  
Swears that he was drawn to Death,  
As a man is drawn at dusk in desire  
To the window of a woman he adores —  
Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?

And if Moyshe-Leyb paints Death for them  
Not gray and not dark, but dazzling and colorful,  
As he appeared, around ten in the morning,  
Far away, between sky and waves —  
Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?]<sup>51</sup>

Modeled on the folkish figure of the Hasidic *rebbe* Moyshe-Leyb of Sasov, who was known for addressing himself with the words “Moyshe-Leyb, Moyshe-Leyb, what have you done?” the appearance of *Moyshe Layb der poet*, who likewise refers to himself in the third person, becomes a unique kind of apostrophe in this poem—as the second person to whom it

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51 *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, Barbara and Benjamin Harshav eds. and trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 393.



refers is “Moyshe-Leyb” himself.<sup>52</sup> This ancient poetic figure of speech, addressing someone absent or nonhuman as if it/he were alive and present, is deflated by the folkish figure of Moyshe-Leyb.<sup>53</sup> Halpern constructs “Memento Mori” as a chain of recursive rhetorical questions highly reminiscent of the conventions of spoken Yiddish. “Moyshe-Leyb the poet” resembles a folkish performer who is on intimate terms not only with Death, as the Heinesque speaker is, but also with his readers, or viewers. The repeated questions “what if” and “will they (or anyone) believe Moyshe-Leyb?” are so simple, so common, that they bring to mind a game one plays with a child. Each of us adult readers becomes, if only for a fraction of a moment, the child (or perhaps a pre-modern member of an audience) to whom Moyshe Leyb tells a story. Let us imagine how it feels to see Death as we see ourselves in the mirror—Death still remains ominous, but we can imagine meeting Him and staying alive. In this way the poem ironizes contemporary Yiddish poetry's rigidified, self-important, melodramatic recourse to Romantic imagery. The images of romantic love and of Death become a theatrical mask, a physical gesture that is obviously artificial—these tropes are, to use two Brechtian terms, *refunctioned* into a *Gestus*. As such, the window of the Beloved at dusk, as well as the colorful and *unheimlich* Death, draw attention to their constructed nature, while also allowing a felt sensation of tenderness to creep in. The stale image of fictionalized love (and its association with death) is thus somewhat renewed, though independently of romantic love itself. The question then becomes: if Moyshe-Leyb claims that he saw Death as he sees himself in the mirror, will anyone believe him? That is, will *you*, the one reading these lines, believe him? The answer seems to be that in a way you would, at least more than you would believe Heine's rendezvous with Death. Heine's speaker remains distanced from both the strolling burghers and his readers—it is *his* speech and *his* imaginings that the poem bespeaks, not least to mark this very distance between him and all others. It is not because the persona Moyshe-Leyb's rendezvous with Death has more verisimilitude than Heine's speaker's that we believe him; rather, the figure of Moyshe-Leyb asking a repeated rhetorical question constructs “Memento Mori” as a semblance of an actual address, and as much as it is only a semblance, it encourages us to participate, though only formally, in an imagined playful conversation. Our participation in this play makes it, as it were, effectively more trustworthy or real.

The notion of *perzenlekhkayt*, an imaginative “I” that entails a world of its own or presents the actual world in a personified manner, was probably Halpern's way of articulating the kind of gestic presentation he had found in Heine's poetry. Halpern did not try to decipher the “true” nature of Heine's persona, nor was he bothered by the “subjectivity” of the great poet's poems. Addressing the interrelated problems of Heine's persona and subjectivity, Sammons claims that “Heine's basic emotional state is indeed subjective if not almost solipsistic, but its projection into a poetic fiction that gradually takes on a life and logic of its own is a process of objectification.”<sup>54</sup> Halpern would have probably agreed with Sammons, offering *perzenlekhkayt* as that thing which comes from the self and then exceeds the self, possibly, as suggested above, through gestic presentation. However, in “Memento Mori” Halpern experiments with a different kind of *Gestus*, even further extending and deflating Heine's ironized persona through the figure of Moyshe-Leyb the poet. The reader is encouraged to suspect the clichéd rendering of Moyshe-Leyb's rendezvous with Death, but at

52 See Avraham Noversztern, *Kesem ha-dimdimim: apokalipsa u-meshichiyut be-sifrut yidish* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2003), 115-120.

53 Harshav explains that the convention of using double names “was ridiculed as ‘primitive’ or lower class by Europeanizing modern Jews [ . . . ] Halpern's challenging return to such simple popular names (“Moyshe” rather than “Morris”) in their hyphenated form has a popular and intimate overtone.” See *American Yiddish Poetry*, 393.

54 Sammons, 23.

the same time join in and play, pretending that an encounter with Death is possible, even desirable. For the mellowness of Moyshe-Leyb's figure and the repetition of rhetorical questions let something more than irony to emerge. This mellowness or tenderness is a result of Halpern's choice to follow a form in which an intimate dialogue is often constructed in Yiddish, that is, a dialogue based on rhetorical questions. Halpern plays with a linguistic convention that, coupled with the figure *Moyshe Leyb der poet* (who shares his name and traits), presents the semblance of a particularized voice. The poem invites the readers to a song-play, making it possible for them to hear that voice as their own, and incorporating them into the poem's imaginative work. The gestic performance here, possibly unlike the one in Heine's poem, yields not exactly an alienating effect, but a sensed intimacy. The *unheimlich* meeting with Death, as "Moyshe-Leyb, the poet, tells / That he saw Death on the high waves — / Just as you see yourself in a mirror," becomes homey through the conventions of Yiddish dialogue formation put into a folk-song stanza. Based as it is on the famous Moyshe-Leyb of Sasov's saying, in itself an illustration of the repetitive discourse typical of Yiddish rhetoric ("Moyshe-Leyb, Moyshe-Leyb, what have you done?"), Moyshe-Leyb the poet's questions treat Death tenderly, perhaps too tenderly.<sup>55</sup> Later on in his writing career Halpern's poetry would become darker, its structure less smooth, its language coarser, and its irony more openly sarcastic. "Memento Mori" could probably not have been written much later in Halpern's short life; Death would no longer be "dazzling and colorful" in his poems, as Halpern may have felt that this kind of ironic and mellow intimacy with Death failed to capture both his personal struggle with poverty and the socio-historical reality of his time.

But another question needs to be asked: does the language and form of this poem transcend its author's intention, as Adorno believes is true of good poetic language? Does it risk being disliked or not understood? It certainly does not to the extent or in the manner that Hölderlin's poetry does. But it does introduce into the poem itself, and then into the reader's experience of it, a kind of ambiguity that transcends the author's intention—something has been created that is in excess of what is already fully conceptualized. The poem ironizes certain conventions recreating them anew, and it Yiddishizes Heine's form and style in transcending the merely subjective by introducing a Yiddish play-formation. However, "Memento Mori" remains, if only partially, within the boundaries of a folk-song, its language is smooth and amicable. Let us now move on to discuss how Halpern developed his own understanding of the language of poetry in relation to empirical human suffering.

#### **d. *Do is epes nit glatik bruderl* [Something Doesn't Quite Fit in Here, Brother]**

In 1932, the year he died, Halpern wrote another essay about poetry. Isolated within the literary milieu of Yiddish letters in New York, and having no regular income to support himself and his family, Halpern wrote a wild, convoluted introduction to the collected poems of Zishe Vaynper. By that time Vaynper, according to his own memoir, was not very close to Halpern, one of the reasons being Halpern's use of what the press termed as *grobe reyde* (coarse language).<sup>56</sup> Halpern argues in this introductory essay both against what Heine would call Romantic poetry (and what he would deem a kind of one-sided or overblown Romanticism distinct from Heine's own Romanticism), and against the pressing demands made on literature by Soviet Communism. It is clear that Halpern takes a further step in

55 The Rebbe of Sasov's saying may recall David's lament over Absalom ("my son Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son" [2 *Samuel* 19:5]). Whereas the Hebrew repetitions stress the condensed chiasmic linguistic structure and content, leaving almost nothing but grief, the Yiddish, starting with the double name Moyshe-Leyb, is somewhat more loose or even verbose.

56 See the discussions in the *Frayhayt* (Freedom) about Halpern's use of vulgar language on February 24, March 4, and March 15, 1923.

considering the affinity between poetry and the empirical world in arguing that real poetry is a song that tells the sorrows of this world. Towards the end of his essay Halpern demands that what he terms “your barefoot brother,” an expression taken from the poem that opens Vaynper's collected volume—“yours” refers here to an imaginary interlocutor—should not be fooled by untrue words, whether of poetry or politics:<sup>57</sup>

*Un oykh ayer borvesn bruder—lozt im op, ikh bet aykh. Nart im nit mit keyn papirener zun vos gramt zikh. Er darf di emese. Zayn eygn lebn shrayt dos im in di oyern arayn,<sup>58</sup> shoyrn mit ale koykhes, un az er vet tseshparn di vent fun zayn eygn pitom veramses vet im likhtik vern in di oygn—un vi zogt ergets Gorki—er mit ale di zaynike veln zikh oysshteln arum yam, mit zeyere diplomatin, politiker un firer—un ven yene veln shoyrn hobn alts arumgeret, vet men zey oystun naket un zey araynvarfn in vaser tsu zeyere brider di heyfish—un m'et eynmol far alemol makhn sholem tsu aldi gute yor.<sup>59</sup>*

[And your barefoot brother too—leave him alone, I beg you. Don't fool him with any paper sun that rhymes. He needs the real one. His own life screams that at him into his ears, with all its might, and when he pushes open the walls of his own Pithom and Ramses<sup>60</sup> his eyes will light up—and as Gorki says somewhere—he<sup>61</sup> and all his kin will stand around the sea, with their diplomats, politicians, and leaders—and when these will have already discussed everything, they will be stripped naked and thrown into water to their brothers the sharks—and all will be once and for all be done with.]<sup>62</sup>

The barefoot brother, like the working man on the train, needs not empty rhymes, or the kind of speech that comes out of the mouths of diplomats, politicians, and leaders. All those who claim to represent the Man, to mediate between him and what needs to be done in this world, should be thrown naked to the sharks. The comparison that Halpern draws here between the paper sun of (false) poetry and the propagation of lies in the public realm is striking. If the categorical difference between poetry and a politician's speech is that poetry, as an imaginative construct, does not claim to speak the already-known truth and thus cannot lie, (since it advertises that its kind of truth is based in acknowledged play in and with illusion itself), then, for Halpern, a poetry completely detached from reality resembles the deluding language of politics. “*Un oyfn vor,*” [and the truth be told], Halpern continues, “*nit dem heldn-tenor in der opera, nor der betler mit di blinde oygn oyfn yarid, zingt dem troyer fun der velt.*” [not the heroic tenor-protagonist in the opera but the blind-eyed beggar at the

57 In his “*Der borveser bruder mayner*” [Barefoot Brother of Mine, an expression referring to a Jewish anarchist], Vaynper tells of a revolutionary barefoot brother who asks the poem's speaker, a poet like himself, to join him in holding the red flag. The speaker refuses, offering his poem and nothing else to his barefoot brother. Vaynper, *Geklibene Lider*, 5-6. In his response to the poem, discussed below, Halpern seems to claim that while the poet should not join in those who claim to represent the “barefoot brother” in the political arena, there is more he could offer, even within the realm of poetry itself, than suggested by Vaynper's poem.

58 On the idea of *shrayen* (screaming) in Halpern's poetry see Kronfeld's discussion of Halpern's poem “*Mayn Shrayedikayt*” (My Screaminess) in Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 196-198.

59 Moyshe Leyb Halpern, “*Di mayse iz aza,*” xii.

60 Pithom and Ramses are the two storage cities the Israelites had to build for Pharaoh, see *Exodus* 1:11.

61 The text is not clear, but it is most likely that “he” here does not refer to the barefoot brother, but to some other, more powerful “he,” who should be thrown to the sharks, together with the politician, leaders, etc.

62 The last words in this paragraph form a very sarcastic swear in the Yiddish.

market-place sings the sorrow of the world.”<sup>63</sup> The paper sun that rhymes<sup>64</sup> and the representatives who lie hide what needs to be told, that is, the world’s actual suffering. Telling the truth may help our barefoot brother break open the walls of his own Pithom and Ramses, i.e. his—or his people’s—state of slavery. Thus, Halpern suggests a connection between a poetry of truth and objectivity, sung by the blind beggar, on the one hand, and subjective freedom, or human agency, on the other. A feeling of acute urgency and commitment on the side of the poet pervades Halpern’s essay: a poet should sing of his own painful *velt*, using his unique *perzenlekhkayt*. But is there anything more to be said about the nature of the truth that needs to be told or sung? Here is one very interesting answer that Halpern gives:

*Ikh veys nit, tsi der hadson, di preri un dos kendl mist baym toyer gefeln undz zeyer shtark. Vi hot gezogt eyn poyer tsum andern, ven zey hobn gekukt oyf a landshaft in museum: do is epes nit glatik bruderl, a boym un shoklt zikh nit, a taykh on vaser a trunk tsu tun, un a bergl mist un keyn khazer nishto. Ober a fakt, di ban hot a fayf geton un di shif vos firt beheymes hot undz mitgenumen aher. Un istz efsher ligt a meser fun a koyler in a vinkl oyf yener zayt un veynt, vayl Avrom Ovinu durkh a lokh fun himl hot taynes—er hot, zogt er, zayn zun gelozt lebn s’zol zayn a folk, far di mesers fun der velt oystsufirn got’s shlikhes—un do iz vider eyens, vos hot bashvindlt. Khazeyrim hot er gekoylet pinktlakh; oxsen—oykh; nor fun unzere gedarft koylen oyf zayn kheylek zibn hundert mit akht-un-nayntsik, un mir tsvey feln.<sup>65</sup>*

[I don’t know if we feel any great fondness for the Hudson, the Prairie and the pile of garbage by the wall. As one farmer told another when they looked at a landscape in the museum: something doesn’t quite fit in here, brother, a tree that isn’t swaying [in the wind], a river without water to drink from, and a pile of garbage without a single pig around. But it is a fact that the train whistle blew and the boat that carries livestock took us here as well. And perhaps a slaughterer’s knife lies in the corner on the other world and cries, while Father Abraham our father complains through a hole in the sky—he has, says he, let his son live so he’d become a nation so that the knives of the world would carry God’s mission—and there’s that one again, that had cheated his way out.

Pigs he had slaughtered accurately; oxen—too; only from amongst us he should have killed his share of seven hundreds and ninety-eight, and the two of us are still missing.]

An intriguing notion of art seems to take shape in this associative paragraph. Poetry that portrays the Hudson river and the Prairie, or even Jewish life in Eastern Europe, alluded to by that pile of garbage near the wall, does not feel real here, cannot yield aesthetic experience, and thus does not tell the truth. It is possible that the farmer at the museum is unable to relate to the landscape in the picture because he isn’t familiar with the conventions of visual mimesis, but it may also be that this is because certain vital characteristics of life are missing from the picture, and their absence does not allow the viewer to feel that the work he is watching truly relates to nature, i.e. to the actual world as he knows it to be. It is not a reiteration of nature that the farmer misses, as he is willing to visit the museum and observe the picture, aware of the fact that he is away from nature itself. He simply does not want to be lied to, and Halpern immediately continues with the truth: “*Ober a fakt,*” but truth be told

63 “*Di mayse iz aza,*,” xii-xiii.

64 The paper sun is possibly a reference to Stalin, as “sun” was one of the appellations applied to him.

65 *Ibid,* vii.

(literally, but it is a fact): we came to this land in the same ship that carried livestock, and the knife that has slaughtered so many of us throughout history still awaits us. “Us” relates here to the Jewish people, but the utterance “and the two of us are still missing,” modifies the transcendental and national assertion that precedes it. For it is not only or not exactly “we, the Jews” who await slaughter, but us, the two of us Jewish immigrants, living in New York in 1932, and it is our lives, and probably the life of many others like us, Jews and perhaps others, who are in some kind of danger. Halpern then turns surprisingly to Friedrich Schiller, whom he presents as another father of the nation not unlike *Avrom ovinu*. Schiller's poem “*Die Bürgschaft*,” Halpern claims, a few years before the German Bertold Brecht would say the same, is no less than a lie:

*Un az ikh halt shoyrn bay di oves, vil ikh zogn, az Shiler's "birgshaft" iz oykh a lign.  
Yankev hot take ibergelozt di malokhim mit der layter un gelofn varfn a bombe, ober  
eysov hot dos lebn far im nit farmishkent un der tiran (in bunt kloymersht der dritter)  
hot im oyfgehungen.*

[And speaking about the Fathers, I would like to state that Schiller's “Bürgschaft” is also a lie. Jacob has indeed left the angels with the ladder and ran off to drop a bomb, but Esau did not put his life in pawn for him and the tyrant (as if he were the third party to the bond) hanged him.]

Schiller's renowned ballade “*Die Bürgschaft*” tells of Damon who is sentenced to death for attempting to kill the tyrant Dyonisius. Damon requests to a stay of execution in order to attend his sister's wedding, while his friend remains behind as a pawn that guarantees his return. Overcoming many obstacles, Damon returns to save his friend. The tyrant is so impressed by the two men's comradeship that he revokes his sentence and asks to be considered their third friend. Brecht wrote a poem that parodies “*Die Bürgschaft*,” ending with the words “*Am End' war der Tyrann gar kein Tyrann!*” [In the end the tyrant was tyrant no more!].<sup>66</sup> But for Halpern not only is the tyrant still a tyrant, there is also no true friendship between Jacob and his brother Esau. While relating directly to the biblical story and its traditional exegesis (Jacob being the father of Israel, while Esau represents the Others — first the Edomites, then Rome, and finally Christianity), Halpern's Jacob is a revolutionary. The tyrant is entirely new to the biblical story, as is *di bombe*, the bomb, two additions indicating that the failed brotherhood of Esau and Jacob should not be understood merely as an archetypal story. Could it be then that Halpern wishes to invoke the condition of Jewish revolutionaries in Europe, dropping bombs, and then forsaken by their non-Jewish comrades and the wider society? Could this passage be telling of all those who are left to fight alone for the benefit of all others? Let us keep in mind that this broad parody of Schiller, certainly broader than Brecht's poem, somehow evolved out of empty rhymes and a farmer's visit to the museum. By now, towards the end of his life, it is becoming clear that the need to be truthful in relation to the repression, spiritual and physical, of the working people, revolutionaries, Jewish immigrants, all in one person or separately, has become extremely urgent for Halpern. However, he insists that art's mission is not to *tell* this truth, as the communists may have believed. Art's truth, according to Halpern here, may have more to do with a certain felt experience the farmer missed so much in his first visit to the museum. How

66 See “Über Schillers Gedicht ‘Die Bürgschaft’,” in Bertolt Brecht, *Werke: große Kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Werner Hecht et al., eds. 30 vols. (Berlin; Weimar: Aufbau Verlag; Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988-1998), 11:272. Further referenced to this edition are abbreviated GBFA followed by volume and page number.

can one go about creating this experience? How can art convey the feeling that it is somehow related to actual pigs and piles of garbage? And how can it engender in us an “as if” sensation and an understanding of personal and socio-historical suffering?

Halpern continues to introduce the *misnaged in der poezye* (the *misnaged*, the one resisting, in poetry). While literalizing the concept of resisting Hasidism, which is the historical meaning of *misnagdim*, Halpern seems to be less concerned with invoking anti-Hasidic sentiments than in resistance itself. This is how Halpern describes the *misnaged* in poetry:

*dos iz a gilgl fun a beyzn shabes-goy, — azoyner az er heytst ayn in oyvn farshtekt er umistn dem koymen, s'zol tshaden, — men zol darfn di fenster efenen un s'zol vern a krيره in shtub. . . un a poet bay im darf hobn kranke lungen mit a horb un darf arunmshvimen s' gantse lebn oyf a lokshnbret in mikve, er zol zoykhe zayn tsu geyn faroys far ale kalikes fun der velt.*

— Vuhin?

*Ahin, vu der meshugener Diogenes iz gegangen mit zayn lamtern in mitn heln tog. . .*<sup>67</sup>

[(This is) a reincarnation of an angry shabes-goy,<sup>68</sup> who when lighting the oven stuffs up the coils on purpose so that it will smoke, — and so that it would be necessary to open the windows, and to send a chill through the house. And a poet, according to this angry gentile, should have sick lungs and a hunchback, and swim around on a noodle board in the Mikve<sup>69</sup> all his life so as to be worthy of representing the world's disabled.

— Where to?

— There, where the crazy Diogenes went with his lamp in broad daylight. . .]

The one who resists, or perhaps the resisting element within poetry, opens the windows to make the house uncomfortable to be in. This *misnaged* also insists that poetry should be written by or as a representation of the sick and deformed, or from a position of discomfort and illness. A poet should be a *kaliker*, a disabled person, and swim where it is impossible to swim, on a noodle board. Yet, despite the circular movement of the swimming, the one resisting would still have somewhere to go — where crazy old Diogenes used to go with his lamp in broad daylight. Famously, as the myth tells, Diogenes sought a human being with his lamp. Despite the obviously grotesque and comic nature of this passage, and at least partly because of it, a certain felt-urgency gets through Halpern's language. Let us then examine these images more closely: First, the mind is kept alert and restless by the cold coming in through the open windows, then the legs move, yet the hands hold on to the noodle board to prevent the body from sinking—a noodle board, colloquially something used for hitting others, prevents the one who swims in the confined ritual bath from drowning. All this enables a ceaseless search for that which seems to be obvious and clear, but is not, for what is supposedly already known, i.e. what it means to be human, not a commodified notion of humanity (one merely representing the reigning conceptualization of value, i.e. labor-time and the judgment that the latter should represent the horizon of value), but the *kalikes* (disabled persons) that we all are. It is resistance to a beautified notion of poetry and humanity; an insistence on the true and actual condition of human beings that Halpern's *misnaged* calls for. And isn't Adorno calling for the same thing? Let us look at some

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67 “*Di mayse iz aza,*” iii.

68 *Shabes-goy* is a non-Jew who performs certain types of work for Jews on Shabbat.

69 *Mikve* is a bath used for ritual immersion in Judaism.

interesting similarities between Halpern's *misnaged* and Adorno's notion of barbarism.

In his essay "What Barbarism Is?" Robert Hullot-Kentor explains that Adorno believed "art, as Wallace Stevens wrote in *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words* (1941), must be a violence against violence; but if this violence is to be something more than more violence, what history presents art with must be returned to it pacified in form as memory."<sup>70</sup> Hullot-Kentor explains that for Adorno barbarism, when it is not sheer violence, is that which allows us to begin to grasp the world of objects, that is reality itself, by obstructing the reign of reason:

Gaining the world of objects would occur in acts of insight into reality, as a critique of reason's own "spell," of its socially necessary illusions, its "bedazzling veils"—whether the "money veil" or the "technological veil"—whether the spurious necessity of logical construction, or of the exchange relation, or, most of all, in aesthetic experience, and not in however many chapters seeking to grasp the totality of society, whose 'total mediation' blocks reality.<sup>71</sup>

Reason, when it becomes an end in itself and transcends the actual interest of humanity, cannot be overcome by more reason, but primarily by art. Hullot-Kentor continues to explain that Adorno follows Walter Benjamin's study of the baroque play of lamentation, the *Trauerspiel*, where Benjamin argues that aesthetic form translates history into truth. In Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* this becomes the understanding that "art as form is the unconscious transcription of the history of human suffering."<sup>72</sup> Adorno clarifies there that aesthetic form functions to make historical content truth through a dialectic of construction and mimesis, in which, as Hullot-Kentor explains:

expression is achieved as an interrupted gesture. . . as a movement at a standstill—as if the arm were moving, but the shoe not; or, the shoe, and not the arm. This is how art, unlike any other object we can make, becomes a surface that refuses to let its content remain hidden.<sup>73</sup>

Art, then, in halting the natural movement of nature or the seemingly natural development of history, allows a glimpse into the way history comes into being.<sup>74</sup> For the true nature of the historical chain of events cannot be revealed to its actual actors, to those who take part in it, because a certain charged distance is needed—what Walter Benjamin calls "unique manifestation of a distance" in his "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."<sup>75</sup> Only when we bring our participation in history to a state of tense arrest, if only for a brief and fragile moment, can we examine the part we and others play in constructing it. Art, as a dialectic of mimesis and construction, is the only man-made object that can make a movement at a

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70 Robert Hullot-Kentor, "What Barbarism Is?" *The Brooklyn Rail*. June 8, 2011, accessed December 17, 2013. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/02/art/what-barbarism-is>.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Adorno derives this notion of "dialectics at a standstill" from Benjamin's "dialectical image" which is found perhaps most powerfully within art, and gives us access to the movement of history by arresting it in a way that we can become aware of that movement even while understanding that, usually, its very movement is what prevents us from seeing it. See, for example, Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (also known as "On the Concept of History", from the German *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*) in *Illuminations*, 253-264.

75 See Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations*, 188.

standstill.<sup>76</sup> Art can generate in us true life-like feelings as we experience its movement, yet our constant awareness of art's constructed nature and of its artifice momentarily making us feel *as if* historical movement has been made present to us as both movement and the arrest of it, that makes it a movement at a standstill. That is why, for Adorno, it is vital that art would not be a mere continuation of extant reality, that is a reification or affirmation of it, but a resistance to its status-quo continuation via the arrest of it. "In art," Hulot-Kentor explains, "only what impedes can emancipate. . . A work of art that fails to become its own-most enemy remains the imitation of the muteness of history."<sup>77</sup>

The resisting one in poetry—a reincarnation of a *shabes-goy*—as well as the disabled poet, are all about barbarism. Hulot-Kentor's image of the relationship between the arm and shoe or Adorno's contemplation of the clouds seem, at least here, more civilized than Halpern's Jewish vocabulary of the *misnaged* and *shabes-goy*. Halpern goes to the extreme, as it is the pile of garbage that is missing, among other things; it is sickness and disability in the filthy ritual bath, as well as the actual danger of drowning or suffocation, that can generate a movement at a standstill. The poet, and possibly also the reader, need to be acutely involved in the work of art for it to generate some truth. Art should feel like a matter of life and death, and this in itself is barbaric, not least because it would seem to trivialize those matters that literally are matters of life and death, and thus more generally because it opposes reason so forcefully, or what could be seen as a reasonable approach to the mere imaginative construct that art is. This does not necessarily contradict the understanding that "what history presents art with should be returned to it pacified in form as memory." Halpern's images testify to his understanding of art's constructed nature, although he pushes the barbaric potential as far as he can in his rough style and coarse metaphors. It is thus that art becomes "its own-most enemy," that is through *grob*, coarse language, and emotional involvement which is almost unbearably painful. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine Adorno finding any real interest in Halpern's poetry or in this outrageously grotesque essay as works of art that resist themselves, arrest their own movement—but only because we tend to imagine Adorno as an admirer of a certain type of modernism. At its core, Adorno's notion is that real works of art are their own enemy by challenging themselves, including over the question whether they even have a right to exist. When that questionings's explosive force is made into form that continues exploding, then, Adorno believes, we've got real art. It is art whose "barbarism" appears partly in that it seems willing to "eat" itself, and history, and whatever else it confronts, alive.

Let us now examine a Brecht poem that Tom Kuhn treats at the beginning of his essay dedicated to both exiles, Heine and Brecht. This poem, an exemplary work of "movement at a standstill", illustrates Brecht's own engagement with Heine, the kind of violence that art must be, and the way it is returned to history "pacified in form as memory." It may help illuminate the way Brecht's poetics (and Adorno's understanding of poetry) differs from the kind of violence that is to be found in Halpern's work.

*Als ich kam in die Heimat  
Und sah den Rest so stehn  
Da bekam ich einen Schrecken  
Und wollte schneller gehn.*

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76 For the notion of "movement at a standstill" or dynamic stasis see Robert Kaufman, "Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third "Critique" in Adorno and Jameson," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000), 722.

77 Ibid, 14.



*Doch wär ich auch schnell gegangen  
So schnell wie einer, den's bangt:  
Aus solcher Trümmerstätte  
Wär ich nicht hinausgelangt.*<sup>78</sup>

[When I came to the homeland  
And saw the remains standing there  
I was frightened  
And wanted to go faster.

Yet even had I gone faster  
As fast as someone who's afraid:  
From such desolation  
I wouldn't have escaped.]

The affinities to Heine, as Kuhn demonstrates, are clear here: “[T]he moment of return and even just the two syllables, *als ich*, are sufficient to recall passages of *Der Tannhäuser* or of *Deutschland — Ein Wintermärchen*.”<sup>79</sup> It is also the folk-song formation, and as Kuhn continues to explain, the casual diction, full and off-rhymes that are reminiscent of Heine, as well as the unusual communicative directness and the simultaneous encounter of the personal and the political. However, “Heine’s rambling sentiment and discursive exuberance are here screwed down to an extreme laconic brevity. . .”<sup>80</sup> What Kuhn defines as laconic brevity is shaped and directed by Brecht’s understanding of poetics, which differed from Heine’s and was in agreement with Adorno’s. In narrowing down Heine’s poetics so dramatically Brecht achieved what he called *die schöne widersprüchliche Einheit*, the beautiful contradictory unity, that the language of poetry can form. Unlike “the smooth linguistic form” that Adorno attributes to Heine, a beautiful contradictory unity comes into being when the language of poetry impedes its own possibility for smoothness of structure. There is an almost unbearable tension in Brecht’s poem, a tension between the feelings of loss and fear and the song-like musicality of the rhymed stanzas. The vocabulary and syntax rely on the spoken language, while the concise structure and bare rhythms arrest the natural progression of speech, and continuously mark the artistic nature of these lines. A kind of ascetic sorrow emanates from the poem when the familiar vocabulary and form of the folk-song is narrowed down to become its own skeleton. The poem, Kuhn suggests, is itself a ruin of other poems, and I would like to add: it is a *Gestus* of a song. Its circularity further supports its gestic nature, as the speaker tells that even if he had run away from those ruins that so frightened him, he couldn’t have escaped them—“*Doch wär ich auch schnell gegangen. . . Aus solcher Trümmerstätte / Wär ich nicht hinausgelangt.*” The simplicity of the content, its down-to-earth message, actually calls on us to make sense not only of what is conveyed through the language itself but also of what lurks in it as that indefinable something that makes any escape unimaginable. The language itself is inescapable—“*Als ich kam. . . Da bekam ich*”—these inverse sentences feel like a trap. They are followed by two sentences beginning with “*und*”—the over-balanced construction of the lines and their sparseness yield a feeling of apprehension. Very little is being said; much is felt to be hidden; the inescapable horror is made even more horrific through that which is not said. As fear starts to invade, it seems it

78 GBFA, 15: 195. Cited in Kuhn, 193. My translation.

79 Ibid. As Kuhn stresses, in Heine it is always *und als ich*, in closer adherence to a iambic meter.

80 Ibid, 194.

would be impossible to break free from the poem itself. The tension between the laconic brevity of the form and the emotionally and historically loaded content seizes us.

Reading Brecht's poem clarifies the notion of movement at a standstill, as it is formed through the tension between the evident gesture of speech and all that stands in its way (its own brevity, the circular content, the fear that emanates as a result). It is violence against violence that has come back as memory of all that was ruined. The ruin that is the poem exists as an object in itself, it does not explain the destruction, as much as presents it vividly, or even makes it anew—here is what is left, and we feel it to be our own memory (or, at least, our own pain). Brecht introduces pain and fear that are deeply historical—the biographical poet having returned to Germany after the war. The physical, cultural ruins are actual. The mask of the poetic ego does not stand in the way of true emotion, but rather stresses feelings of fear and entrapment. But what about Halpern? Brecht remakes a Heinian *Gestus* into something extremely terse, in a movement typical of modernist-era re-imaginings of Romantic poetry. Halpern would at times almost go to the other extreme in extending what Kuhn terms as “Heine’s rambling sentiment and discursive exuberance.” We saw this in “Memento Mori”’s formation as a recursive rhetorical question and in the very persona of Moyshe Leyb the poet. In another, later poem, discussed below, Halpern would go much further in his rambling sentiment and discursive exuberance. However, even if for stylistic reasons Brecht and Adorno inclined towards terseness and brevity, and viewed achieved form as doing so, their notions of *Gestus* and barbarism wouldn't necessarily be limited to the style and form of tautness and brevity. I would like to suggest that one could apply these notions to expansive style as well, arguing that it, too, could be exploring aesthetic form that aims to arrest movement.

#### **e. *Vi lang vel ikh shteyn un zikh vign* (How Long Will I Stand and Rock Myself)**

As a final movement in this chapter I would like to examine the nature of Halpern's coarseness: what is it that the resisting one, the *misnaged* in his poetry, really resists? How does he do so, and to what extent is that violent resistance indeed barbaric? In what follows I discuss a long poem included in the second of the two posthumous volumes of Halpern's poetry.<sup>81</sup> No date is written on the poem's manuscript found among Halpern's Papers in the YIVO archives, but its coarse language and prose-like style, as well as its inclusion in the posthumous edition of his late work, suggest it was written in the last years of Halpern's life. It is worth noting that although by the time this poem must have been composed Halpern had already experimented with less tightly structured forms, he chose to write this four-stanza-ballad in rhymed couplets, as the folk-song never ceased to inspire his work. The first of the poem's four stanzas reads:

*vi lang vel ikh shteyn un zikh vign in regn azoy  
vos geyt dos mikh on vos se ligt af der erd du a froy  
baym shayn fun a gasnlamtern in ot aza nakht  
ot-ersht hinter ir hot men dakht zikh di shenktir farmakht  
un ikh hob gezen vi zi shtelt baym lamtern zikh op  
mit hent un mit aksl vos hengen af ir vi der kop  
kh'hob afile gehert vi zi tsitert un klapt mit di tsey  
un bet men zol kumen un varfn ir zol men a shteyn*

81 The poem is cited in the version found in the YIVO archives. See Halpern's Papers, no. 1608. The version printed in the posthumous volume includes punctuation marks added by the editors. Apart from that, the two versions are the same.

—*ir mame a dinstmoyd a finsterer dorf-samovar  
hot gelozt mit a shtivl tseblozn zikh fun a huzar  
vayl di velt darf a hur vos dervaremt vi bilike tey  
mit lipn gefarbte un lendn geshvolene tsvey.  
zey hobn zikh beyde vi hint ergets dortn gefort  
un zi muz zikh valgern do on a heym on an ort  
un ir nomen — a post-pekl vu der adres iz farshmirt  
in a hintergas mist afn veg vos a shkafe farlirt.*

[How long will I stand and rock myself in the rain  
what do I care that on the ground here lies a woman  
under the glow of a streetlight on such a night  
just now someone probably closed the bar door behind her  
and I saw how she paused by the light  
with arms and shoulders that hang on her like her head  
I even heard how she shivered and her teeth chattered  
and she begged that someone would come and throw her a stone<sup>82</sup>  
— her mother a servant girl, a dark village-samovar,  
let herself get all bubbly hot over a hussar’s boot  
for the world needs a whore that warms you up like a cheap glass of tea  
with lips painted and two swollen hips.  
The two of them wandered around there like dogs  
and she had to drift here without a home, without a place  
and her name—a mail-parcel with a smudged address,  
In a back alley a pile of garbage that a mare dropped on the way.]<sup>83</sup>

Could there be anything more stylistically removed from Brecht’s poem of return? The mostly literal translation offered here does not retain the rhyming couplets of which this stanza and the entire poem are constructed, yet those end rhymes and occasional internal rhymes cannot hide the demotic and coarse nature of the language. The “unusual communicative directness” that Kuhn finds in both Heine and Brecht is here intensified, almost breaking with any understanding of poetic form.<sup>84</sup> Unlike much of twentieth-century poetry that is in part a movement towards “unformed” poetics through risking being seen as hyper-artificial or hyper-estranging, Halpern’s language here risks being seen as over-vernacular, uninventive, uncontrolled, and perhaps even reified. For what is the difference between this language and that of the Yiddish press of the time? Perhaps only that it is coarser, *grober*, more obscene, and rhymed. The rhymes can be seen as the only means of maintaining a poetic form, but they may also suggest a rather unpoetic recitation of plain, unimaginative, amateurish rhymes (*azoy-froy, nakht-farmakht, op-kop*). If the language of the poem indicates a tension between pre-given words and the poet’s own words, it doesn’t do it the way Brecht’s poem does, along with perhaps most other virtuosic, experimental, or modernist twentieth-century poetry. Instead of condensing the language, or merely gesturing towards an imaginable heinesque poem (or turning such a poem into a gesture), Halpern

82 Halpern subverts here the expression “*varf dem hunt a beyn*” (literally: throw a bone to the dog.) Throwing a stone instead of a bone is obviously a more violent metaphor. The woman is as if saying: throw me, the bitch that I am, a stone, almost asking to be actually stoned.

83 My translation. I wish to thank Chana Kronfeld for her suggestions.

84 As indicated above, there is an obvious stylistic difference in the “communicative directness” of Heine and Brecht, yet Brecht’s at times terse style is no less communicative than Heine’s more verbose diction.

expands the means of expression, forming a narrative while loosening its connecting thread, associatively concatenating his speaker's speech. What Benjamin Harshav terms "Halpern's political talk-verse" resembles in this poem a deflated prophetic soliloquy.<sup>85</sup> "*Vi lang vel ikh shteyn*" the poem begins, and the sentence goes on and on. In between so much is being said about the woman, even though the opening couplet professes to ignore her. The syntax becomes convoluted and unclear, especially when the speaker is telling of the circumstances of the woman's birth—"*ir mame a dinstmoyd a finsterer dorf-samovar / hot gelozt mit a shtivl tseblozn zikh fun a huzar*"—[her mother a servant girl, a dark village-samovar, / let herself get all bubbly hot over a hussar's boot.] This over-loaded word formation conveys feelings of anger and confusion in the face of it all. Possibly, nobody is listening, but these words nevertheless need to be said urgently. The result is no less than barbaric, barbaric as that pile of garbage dropped by the working mare. The non-poetic choice of words, coarse syntax, and vulgar imagery cause a persistent discomfort as the poem offers a glimpse into a social reality. In fact, Halpern extends Heine's poetics by forming "a coarse linguistic structure" that turns out to have an intriguing relation to, rather than being an oppositional rejection of, Heine's "smooth linguistic structure." This coarseness also appears distant from Brecht's *schöne widersprüchliche Einheit* at least in the poem discussed above. Elsewhere in his poetry, in his ballads and songs, Brecht would be less terse, more coarse even, but he would not go so far as writing such an unstructured, possibly unclear, stanza. Where then might we locate the tension between the poet's own words and words—and other aspects of poetic form—that are pre-given? Where lies the strength of this "coarse linguistic structure," or *grobe reyde*, as poetry?<sup>86</sup>

An initial answer may emerge at the very beginning, with the question/meditation: "*vi lang vel ikh shteyn un zikh vign in regn azoy / vos geyst dos mikh on vos se ligt oyf der erd do a froy*" [How long will I stand and rock myself in the rain / what do I care that on the ground here lies a woman]. How long will I do nothing at all while this woman, who is not an allusion to anything, certainly not to the biblical metaphor of a whoring nation, but a poetic representation of a literal whore, lies here on the ground. "I" should probably not care at all for her, "I" cannot care, as "I" have enough troubles of my own, as "I" can probably do nothing to help her, but it could be that the poet's "I" does care. This woman on the ground abruptly replaces the speaker as the axis around which the stanza evolves. Exactly in the middle of the stanza, the "I" that sees the woman on the ground starts to imagine her parents, chart her unavoidable fate, and in doing so removes himself and his own troubles to the background. It is she, who has no name or home, nor any other place she could go (not unlike the speaker, who is unable to move away from her, or from where she is), who enables an opening into the social world, the world of "objective reality" on the other side of self-enclosed subjectivity. She is there, motionless, perhaps already dead, as the poem experiments with what it means *not* to care. "What do I care?" By the end of this stanza it seems that the speaker does care, or else he wouldn't have said so much about her. He doesn't move on, but stays put, fixed in place by this woman both physically and in his thoughts. We, on the other hand, may still be wondering: how long will he indeed stay there, and for what reason or purpose? In what way does it concern him, or us? Why should we accept those messy lines and crude metaphors and rhymes? "[T]he world needs a whore that warms you up like a cheap glass of tea," and *tey* (tea) rhymes with *tsvey* (two), *samovar* with *huzar* (hussar), not the most elegant of rhymes, and it all ends with a smudged address on a mail-parcel and a pile of garbage in the almost undecipherable last two lines. We may ask: it

85 On Halpern's "political talk-verse" see footnote 41.

86 Halpern's language caused significant discomfort to his readers from the very start, although the criticism against it would increase with time. See Noyekh Shtaynberg, *Yung amerike*, 206-7 and the debate over *grobe reyde* (coarse speech) mentioned above.

may indeed be the case that the speaker came across a miserable prostitute in 1920s New York, but what can we, both then and now, do about it? There is nothing new about prostitution, its origins and grim reality, and we may still remain more concerned about our own lives and the challenges we face in the modern world.

The poem's second stanza reads:

*Azoy hot di froy baym lamtern ot-akersht geredt  
un gekritst mit tseyen un aleyen zikh in ponim geglet  
un oysgeshtrekt nokhdem di eygene dare tsvey hent  
tsu eynem an altn azoy vi zi volt im gekent  
un vos hot der alter geton? R'hot geshart mit di fis  
un hot ir gevizn vi groy un bavaksn er iz  
un epes geplaplt dabay fun a shverd mit a fon  
dan hot er in luftn a drey mit a finger geton  
un tsugerukt nenter zikh un di oygn tsheshpreyt  
gekukt oyf ir hut un gekukt oyf ir yakl un kleyd  
gekukt vi es gist zikh dos vaser fun ir un es rint  
gekukt un gefreyt zikh gepatsht in di hent vi a kind  
un vider vi frier gelozn in regn zikh geyn  
dem kop tsvishn d'aksel azoy—mit zikh eynem aleyen  
un hot men im mer nisht gezen—hot men bloyz nokh gehert  
dem shar fun di shikh oyf der naser farshteynerter erd.*

[Thus spoke the woman under the street light  
and ground her teeth and caressed her own face  
and then stretched out her own two skinny hands  
to some old guy as if she knew him  
and what did the old guy do? He shuffled along with his feet  
and showed her how old and grown he was  
while murmuring something about a sword with a flag  
then twisted his finger in the air  
and moved up closer, his eyes wide open  
he looked at her hat and looked at her jacket and dress  
looked how the water poured down her and dripped  
looked and rejoiced, clapped his hands like a child  
and again as before set off in the rain  
his head between his shoulders just so—all alone with himself  
and you couldn't see him anymore—you could only hear  
the shuffling of feet on the wet stony ground.]

The episode is portrayed here, like the stanza preceding it, almost in a single sentence. Its *donnée*, we gather, especially when we reach the end of the poem, have occurred before the poem's own opening scene, and the poem's reverse unfolding of events suggests that what we read is an associative narrative that the speaker forms while looking at the woman on the ground. We may still not know what it has to do with the speaker, or with us. The way the story is being told is so plain and unadorned and the woman herself so unattractive, that the old man's total lack of empathy may even be understandable. There is nothing exciting about this prostitute. The man "*gekukt oyf ir hut un gekukt oyf ir yakl un kleyd / gekukt vi es gist zikh dos vaser fun ir un es rint / gekukt un gefreyt zikh gepatsht in di hent vi a kind*" [he looked at her hat and looked at her jacket and dress / looked how the water poured down her

and ran / and rejoiced, clapped his hands like a child]. Did he rejoice and clap his hands like a child because his lot was better than hers, despite his suggested inability to flag his sword? Or precisely because he felt he could not take advantage of her offer that he was happy or relieved to find out there was not much to take advantage of? Either way, the stanza tells of a brutal reality in a brutal way; language itself, abundant with *un* [and] and other repetitions (the man *gekukt*, looked, three times; *dos vaser gist un rint*—the water not only poured but also dripped) intensifies the coarseness of it all. Halpern’s rough style makes it hard to find pleasure in the language. Readers of Halpern’s work would know that he could write more “beautiful” poems, and create better rhymes, so why this poem now? We must read further:

*Vos nokh is geshen? s'iz iber di ban in der hoykh  
 un di froy hot dabay lomir zogn azoy vi a roykh  
 a tsiter geton ober ikh hob fun shirem afir  
 in ot-o-der rege getrakht efsher bloyz vegn mir  
 un vegn dem ayzernem ban-veg vos iber der gas — — —  
 azoy vi men zet a geshtalt hob ikh plutsim der has  
 derzen far di oygn dem finstern has fun der velt  
 mit a blits durkh di tseyen vi a shed ven r'iz beyz un er shelt  
 un mit aza brazg vi di ban iber mir in der nakht  
 hot er mir geshvoyrn az emes iz alts vos ikh trakht  
 un ikh hob dokh bloyz vi a goylem mit oygn aroyf  
 gekukt tsi es rukt zikh vu-ergets a fenster nisht oyf  
 in eynem fun ot-o-di zeks-ziben-shtokige vent  
 nor eyder ikh hob zikh aroyf-un arop-tsu gevent  
 hob ikh shoyen dem brazg fun di kleyder di nase derhert  
 di froy baym lamtern iz demolt gefaln tsu dr'erd.*

[What else happened? The train passed above  
 and the woman, let’s say, like smoke  
 shivered but I in that same moment from under the umbrella  
 thought perhaps only about myself  
 and about the steel train-tracks over the street — — —  
 as someone sees a human figure I suddenly saw Hatred  
 in front of my eyes, the dark hatred of the world  
 with flashing teeth like a demon when he’s angry and cursing  
 and with such a banging sound like the train above me at night  
 so he swore to me that all that I thought of was true  
 and just like a dummy I looked up  
 to see if somewhere a window was swinging open  
 in one of those six-seven-floor walls  
 only that before I turned up and down  
 I heard the bang of the damp cloths  
 the woman by the lamp then fell to the ground.]

By the end of this stanza we learn that the woman collapsed on the stony ground, soaking wet, humiliated, poor and alone. The third stanza, however, also reintroduces the speaker—*ober ikh* [but I] in a way that cannot but recall Heine’s *Ich aber*—though how far is Halpern’s *ober ikh* from Heine’s *Ich aber*! Both “I”s mark a turn toward the speaker’s self. However, while *Ich aber* indicates the speaker’s supremacy over the burghers, the difference

between their laughable enjoyment of nature and the speaker's imagining of Death and Love (his imagining, actually, of his art). *Ober ikh*, on the other hand, does not differentiate the speaker in the same way from the whore who had fallen on the ground.<sup>87</sup> This "I" here starts to think about himself, which brings him immediately to think about the iron train, a synecdoche in Halpern's writing for those forces of modernity that repress all of us. It is not the colorful Death that Halpern's speaker sees, nor an old deceased love, but the personification of Hatred, a demon that, like the *misnaged* in poetry, supports truth:

*... hob ikh plutsim der has  
derzen far di oygn dem finstern has fun der velt  
mit a blits durkh di tseyn vi a shed ven r'iz beyz un er shelt  
un mit aza brazg vi di ban iber mir in der nakht  
hot er mir geshvoyrn az emes iz alts vos ikh trakht. ... ..*

[... I suddenly saw Hatred in front of my eyes, the dark hatred of the world / with flashing teeth like a demon when he's angry and cursing / and with such a banging sound like the train above me at night / he swore to me that all that I thought was true]

As the Romantic images of Love and Death are replaced by the demon of Hatred, truth sneaks in. Everything that the speaker thinks or imagines is true, *emes*, the demon insists. The woman's misery is real. The train is real. The stanza itself is made of one long almost unpunctuated sentence, combined repeatedly with the conjunction "un" [and]. The feeling is one of urgency. No time to be elegant about the truth, and also no need. The appearance of the demon of hatred is rather abrupt and seems a somewhat mechanical means of advancing the narrative. The resemblance between the sound of the demon's curses and the noise of the train is also rather crude, or unclear, and all in all the entire scene yields an amateurish feeling in terms of the poetic craft invested in it. The next stage in the narrative, that of looking up "*tsi es rukt zikh vu-ergets a fenster nisht oyf / in eynem fun ot-o-di zeks-ziben-shtokige vent*" [to see if somewhere a window was swinging open / in one of those six-seven-floor walls] is not necessary in terms of the narrative progression, and its function here is not entirely clear. It may be another indication of the speaker's lingering as he is unable to move away from where he stands next to the woman, while another *brazg*, bang, is heard, this time a result of the woman's soaking-wet clothes hitting the ground as she falls. It must be a real bang: we already know that everything is real, even if it had never happened in this particular way. It is real for the speaker, therefore also for us. The ironic "*ich aber*" in Heine becomes in this stanza an "I" that "*fun shirem afir*" [from under the umbrella], that is from a legitimate shelter and hiding place, from behind the mask we are all wearing, imagines that his imagining of a stranger's pain is true in itself, and in its relation to his own life, as they are both part of the same homeless modern reality.<sup>88</sup> The speaker's very inability to move forward is a salient indication of the fact that he has nowhere to go, not unlike the prostitute on the ground. The poem then ends:

87 Obviously, the "I" here presents us with a poem while the woman does not have this prerogative. This difference between them is not seen as a justified advantage that he has over her, an advantage depending on his intellectual supremacy or any other. The words "*ober ikh*" ignite a deeper understanding of the inevitable connection between the speaker and the woman.

88 See Chana Kronfeld's discussion of Halpern in her *On the Margins of Modernism*, 196-202. In her analysis of Halpern's "*Mayn Shrayedikayt*" (My Screamingness) Kronfeld describes the interconnections between the speaker's personal "I" and society, arguing that the sick derelict in the poem serves "as an objectified version" of the speaker's screaming artistic self, "while at the same time presenting society's attitudes toward the artist and toward the poor and the homeless.

*Tsi bin ikh avek un vi vayt dos gedenk ikh nisht mer  
ken zayn az ikh hob zikh azoy-o ahin-un-aher  
arumgedreyt bloyz. Kh'hob dokh ibergeleyent di shild  
vu se shteyt az der roykh fun Havana-tsigarn iz mild  
vi der otem fun mames oyf kinder vos veynen bay nakht  
un di dozike krom (oyb ikh hob nisht keyn toes gemakht)  
iz dokh dray gasn vayt. Un ikh hob dokh afile gezen  
di kestlakh in fenster dort, khotsh es iz finster geven  
un geveynt hob ikh oykh—dos gedenk ikh. Geshtanen. Geleyent.  
Un gevigt zikh azoy un mit ofene oygn geveynt  
mir hot zikh gedakht az ikh her vi es ruft oyfn kol  
mayn tate vos shtarbt un dos hot mikh dermont on amol  
ven er hot geveynt bay der ban un vi blaykh r'iz geven—  
er hot efsher derfult az er vet mikh shoyn keynmol nisht zen  
sara shverkayt dos vert ven men shteyt un men trakht ot-azoy  
fun a tatn a mes bay a fremder geshtorbener froy.*

[If I've left and how far away I've gone I can't recall anymore  
it could be that just here and there  
I wandered. I read, after all, a street sign where it said  
that Havana-cigar smoke is mild  
like the breath of mothers over children who cry at night  
and that same store (if I'm not mistaken)  
is three blocks away. And I even saw  
the boxes in the window there, though it was dark  
and I also wept—this I recall. Standing. Reading.  
And rocked myself this way and with eyes wide open wept  
it seemed to me that I heard how loud he cried  
my father as he lay dying and it reminded me of that time  
when he wept at the train station and how pale he was—  
he might have felt that he would never see me again  
it becomes such a heaviness when one stands and thinks just like that  
of a father who's a dead man by a dead woman who's a stranger.]

The copious or excessive weeping threatens to violate poetic *décorum*. Although both genuine and ostentatious showing of sentiment pervades romantic and post-romantic poetry, the speaker and his father's weeping are bluntly rendered, accentuating the entire poem's demotic language and speaking/saying form. This is not a stream of consciousness narrative, though it bears a certain affinity to such a style, and it is not a speech delivered from a podium, but rather a convoluted associative concatenation in which the excessive weeping is part of the overall roughness. The chain of associations moves from the woman's falling to the ground to a commercial street sign—an image already used by Halpern in his "*Fun mayn Royzeles togbukh*" ["From My Royzele's Diary"], signifying the commodification of modern life.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, the image of children and maternal love leaves a trace of delicate feelings, as it reminds one of a *vigliid*, lullaby, an association intensified by the speaker rocking himself while reading the sign.<sup>90</sup> The rhythm does not change dramatically here,

89 See *Moyshe-leyb Halpern*, vol. 1 (New York: Moyshe Leyb Halpern komitet, 1934), 62.

90 Halpern was sent at an early age to Vienna to study commercial art. It could be that the commercial sign here reminds the readers familiar with the poet's biography of Halpern's first immigration, and also of the stories



although a certain smoothness is felt in the aggregation of syllables: “*Un gevig zikh azoy un mit ofene oygn geveynt / mir hot zikh gedakht az ikh her vi es ruft oyfn kol / mayn tate vos shtarbt un dos hot mikh dermont on amol / ven er hot geveynt bay der ban un vi blaykh r’iz geven—*” The sounds of “ge,” “z,” “vey,” “n,” and “m” soften these lines to make them more lullaby-like. *Vign zikh*, rocking oneself, is also what the speaker does when the poem begins, while he contemplates the dead woman. As the memory of his father enters his mind, the *vign* takes on the meaning of a child rocked, or rocking himself, to sleep. A certain imminent sense of death is unavoidable. It is now his father of whom the speaker is thinking, and how hard it is to be not only orphaned, but also a homeless immigrant reading a commercial street sign while standing by a dead woman he doesn't know. As he does in “From my Royzele’s Diary,” Halpern strives to contrast commodified human relations with real pain, suggesting the connection between modern economy and prostitution. She was only a cheap glass of tea, not an expensive cigar, but if this poem is worth anything, we must realize by now, as *has* (Hatred) knows all too well, she is the only thing that really exists. There is no meaningful difference between a cheap whore, the immigrant speaker, and us—we are all orphans and homeless in this world. Now that the poem ends with a final couplet, its syntax becomes crystal-clear: “*sara shverkayt dos vert ven men shteyt un men trakht ot-azoy / fun a tatn a mes bay a fremder geshtorbener froy.*” [it becomes such a heaviness when one stands and thinks exactly like this / of a father who's a dead man by a dead woman who's a stranger.] The woman is still a stranger, but that she is a stranger to the speaker does not make her death and pain any easier for him to sustain—her suffering is almost unbearable because he would always be thinking of his own crying, weeping dead father, left behind, when he encounters a death that is so intimately related to his own condition. *Ober ikh* cannot but feel and think that that commercial sign comparing cigarheinesque smoke with a mother’s breath over her child is somehow related to my and her suffering. Halpern here imposes his speaker’s *ikh* or ego, bringing in a possible biographical fact in a different way altogether than Heine’s *ich aber*, although it could be that Heine’s *ich aber* is in its way an implicit imagining of real human experience. The simplicity of the last couplet, as the demotic vocabulary that characterizes the poem loses all the syntactic obstacles that until now had impeded it, clarifies the emotional impact. It is indeed hard to stand by and do nothing but think of one’s own dead father, to stand by unable to move anywhere, not knowing if there is anywhere worth going to. The poem ends in an impasse as everything is barbarically mixed; all distinctions are lost. What remains is the inseparability of the pains that the poem brings together. Heine’s irony is enhanced, as it were, barbarically. Halpern’s pain is the accumulation of weeping, plain language, and rudimentary rhymes (*geven-zen; ot azoy-froy*). The children weep, the father weeps, the speaker weeps again and again. This is not to say that Halpern’s weeping ceases to be aesthetic, to be part of the semblance-experience the poem constructs and offers. Rather, that semblance experience is a kind of irony in itself, because to get closer to reality it has to move away from it by creating images. The rhymes, the coarseness, and other aesthetic means in Halpern’s poem are created to get to reality. A difference or distinction reflected in one of the poem’s levels of pain is the awareness that the sharing of pain is really happening and yet the pain in the poem, and even the pain of the memory of the parent’s death, are of a different order than the immediate pain of the person lying on the street. The coarse linguistic structure brushes the poem against reality itself, the distance between art and life remains, and on reflection, even appears to have been intensified. Yet there is an indelible strength to the coarseness of the imagery, vocabulary, and structure—they all point towards the ability to experience aspects of reality that might have been unavailable but for the poem itself, even if we’d had conceptual knowledge of the

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of his refusal to succumb to the rules of commercial art. See Wisse, *Little Love in Big Manhattan*, 76.

“facts” themselves. While the poem hints at its relation to folk-song and perhaps especially to the ballad, those charged relations—especially vis-à-vis the ballad—have been brilliantly deformed, so that the ballad-form’s very charm reverberates hauntingly here around the deformation, pointing to what has been extirpated: a world—and art—characterized by charm. The poem itself becomes the angry *shabes-goy* opening the windows to send a chill through the house (the rooms, the stanzas), so that we feel as homeless and orphaned as the speaker and the dead whore. As is the case in another of Halpern’s greatest poems, the male speaker dares to speak the voice of a woman while collapsing any pre-given gender-inscribed barriers.<sup>91</sup> It is not he who speaks about her and claims her voice as his—the truth is that he has empathy for her, that he imagines himself in her place, that he refuses to see her lot as different from his own, and all this gives him the moral strength to speak of her pain.

If the Brecht poem discussed above becomes “its own-most enemy” through terse linguistic gestures that turn it into a ruin, Halpern’s poem is anything but terse. Brecht may have believed that terseness was necessary for him to make a mimesis of modern human suffering, but Halpern, as I have tried to show, finds other aesthetic means to make us feel that the poem is taking leave of charm. And that very awareness means that the poem is still gaining power from poetry’s historical relation to charm, pleasure and delight. It has now become a negative form of charm in the very act of abandoning it; and this is “barbaric”—the pleasure of being aware, of feeling empathy, the shock of feeling “at least now I know this.” It is a bodily jolt that may not be the way we usually describe pleasure, but is still connected to pleasure. Halpern makes his poem “poetic” in very complicated ways: the tense, staggered, disjunct rhythms, the coarse language; all that is constructed to feel, at least momentarily, non-constructed. Indeed, it registers as a biblical prophetic soliloquy given by a talky Yiddish folk-performer. While Brecht’s poem drastically reduces the heinesque folk-poem, introducing much tension between the words and no less beauty, Halpern’s verbosity risks losing some of the quiet power that Brecht’s poem possesses; but without the talky and coarse linguistic structure Halpern could not have broken the barriers between “my” suffering and “her” suffering as he does. If “my” suffering could perhaps be expressed more poetically, hers could not, as it needed to be spoken in *her* language. Halpern has also written differently in such poems as *Der foygl mertsifint* (the Bird Mertzifint) and *Mayn shrayedikayt* (My Screamingness), poems which use language in a way that calls for much more deciphering, and are more compressed; there must therefore be a reason for his choice to write many of his poems, and especially this one, in the most simple, unadorned, yet at times convoluted Yiddish.<sup>92</sup>

It appears that the need to speak of someone who “*muz zikh valgern do on a heym on an ort*” [“has to drift here and there without a home, without a place”] requires a language that is also placeless and homeless, a language whose literary whereabouts are unclear, a language related to the language of Heine’s poetry, but only as a poor, indeed a homeless, relative. Unlike the Heine poems that Adorno stigmatizes for their uncritical imitation of what counted, in Heine’s time, as “literary” or “poetic” language or form, Halpern does not rely on what already signifies as poetic. Questioning the boundaries between poetry and real pain, between poetic expression, actual expression, and sentimental weeping, between her lot and mine or ours, the poem acts against itself as a pacified memory, or a *schöne widersprüchliche Einheit*, although it is also both. It so brilliantly and powerfully renders a lacerating kind of beauty, which is of course what Brecht does in different tones too: the social barbarism can only be recognized when the reader feels that the poem, in whatever stylistic mode it uses to achieve this, gets to the barbaric social truth, including the truth that

91 See “*Fun mayn Royzele’s tog-bukh,*” in *Moyshe Leyb Halpern*, vol. 1, 62-62.

92 See “*Der foygl mertsifint*” in *Moyshe Leyb Halpern*, vol. 1: 95; and “*Mayn shrayedikayt*” in *Moyshe Leyb Halpern* vol. 2: 166-7.

there's something barbaric about realizing this social reality in what is inevitably pleasurable, that is, aesthetic sensation. When the lullaby enters the poem, and especially in the last two lines, Halpern's poem gains some quietude. Sorrow overcomes it all, not anger, not a desperate attempt to tell. We are left, then, with the truth: it becomes such a heaviness when one stands and thinks exactly like this of a father who's a dead man by a dead woman who's a stranger since all human beings have been badly injured. It is worth noting that this is written before the great divide of World War II. Halpern shows that there is no home for anybody already in 1920s New York, and perhaps anywhere else in the modern world—his disenchanted ballad does not halt at presenting the reification of modern life; it particularizes pain in the form of a dead prostitute and a displaced Jewish immigrant, and then blurs the barriers between them. We may even say that Halpern's language stretches exactly where Heine's poetic language would go after the war, where there is, in Adorno words, "no longer any homeland other than a world in which no one would be cast out any more, the world of a genuinely emancipated humanity."<sup>93</sup>

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93 Adorno, "Heine the Wound," 85.

## Chapter 2: All that Was and Wasn't Said: Zach, Avidan, Brecht

ואל נשכח: הימים, ימי שנות החמישים, היו ימים קשים. כמה וכמה מהכותבים הצעירים היו "בוגרי" מלחמת העצמאות כמו קודמיהם, הבריגדה (עמיחי, גלבע) או "עולים חדשים" ובהם שנשלחו מיד ברדתם מן הספינה לקרב על הדרך לירושלים (הקרב על לטרון) [...] היו אלה ימי שלטונה הכול-יכול של מפא"י ה"היסטורית", על סיסמותיו הנמלצות של בן-גוריון בכנסת... ימי הרעיון הכושל בדבר "כור היתוך" – אבל בזול: לא על-ידי חינוך נאור הוראת לשונות זרות ומתן תמיכה כספית לכל הנוקק לה. ימי "ברית שלום" הנרדפת, דיר יאסין, קיביה וכפר קאסם, ימי אנשים שטרם בגרו, שלא ידעו עדיין לאן נקלעו (בוודאי לא ל"ארץ ציון וירושלים"), ימי גירוש האוכלוסייה הערבית והריסת כפריה [...] ימי המחלוקות על היחסים בין המדינה החדשה לברית המועצות: "בלי חרות ומקיי", והיעלמותם של תינוקות תימנים, ימי הופעת "העולם הזה" של אורי אבנרי, שביתת הימאים [...] מרד ואדי סאליב, ועוד ועוד. בקצרה, ימים אידיאליים לשירה דיסידנטית, שלא נכתבה [...] רק מלחמת לבנון הראשונה עוררה גם אותנו לכל מה שהחמצנו בשירינו בתקופה המתוארת.<sup>94</sup>

[And let us not forget, these were the hard days of the Fifties. More than a few of the young writers were "graduates" of the War of Independence like their predecessors, of the Brigade<sup>95</sup> (Amichai, Gilbo'a) or "new immigrants," among them some, who immediately upon disembarking the ship, were sent to the battle over the road to Jerusalem (the Battle of Latrun)<sup>96</sup> [...] These were the days of the omnipotent rule of the "historic" Mapai, and Ben-Gurion's highfalutin slogans in the Knesset [...] The days of the bankrupt idea of the "melting pot" – but one cheaply attained: not through enlightened education, the teaching of foreign languages and granting support to whoever needed it. The days of the persecuted "Brit Shalom,"<sup>97</sup> Deir Yassin, Kibia, and Kafr Kassem,<sup>98</sup> the days of people who had not yet come of age, who did not know where they ended up in (certainly not in "The Land of Zion and Jerusalem"),<sup>99</sup> they days of the expulsion of the Arab population and the destruction of its villages [...] The days of the disputes over the relationship between the new state and the

94 Natan Zach, *Mi-shana le-shana ze: pirke biyografia sifrutit* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uchad, 2009), 12-13. All translations of prose and poetry alike are mine, unless stated otherwise.

95 The Jewish Infantry Brigade Group, more commonly known as the Jewish Brigade, was a military formation of the British Army comprised of Jews, mostly from mandate Palestine, that served in Europe during the World War II. The brigade was formed in late 1944, and fought the Germans in Italy. After the war, it assisted Holocaust survivors to immigrate illegally to Israel.

96 The Battles of Latrun were a series of military engagements between Israeli defense forces and the Jordanian Arab Legion on the outskirts of Latrun between May 25 and July 18, 1948, during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Despite assaulting Latrun on five separate occasions Israel was ultimately unable to capture Latrun, and it remained under Jordanian control until the 1967 War.

97 Brit Shalom was a Jewish movement formed in 1925 who advocated the establishment of a by-national Jewish-Palestinian political entity in Mandate Palestine.

98 The Deir Yassin massacre took place on April 9, 1948, when around fighters from rightwing Zionist paramilitary groups (*Etsel* and *Lechi*) attacked the Palestinian village Deir Yassin near Jerusalem. Around 81-110 villagers were killed during and after the battle, including women and children. Around 60 civilians were killed during the 1953 retaliation attack on the Palestinian village of Kybia. The Kafr Qassem massacre took place in the Palestinian village of Kafr Qassem situated on the Green Line on October 29, 1956. It was carried out by the Israel Border Police (Magav) and resulted in 43 civilians dead, including women and children. Four more people were killed later that day.

99 Words taken from the Israeli National Anthem, *Ha-tikva* [The Hope].

Soviet Union: “Without Herut and Maki,”<sup>100</sup> the disappearance of Yemenite babies,<sup>101</sup> the days of Uri Avneri’s *Ha-olam Ha-ze Magazine*,<sup>102</sup> the sailors’ strike<sup>103</sup>. . . the Wadi Salib riots,<sup>104</sup> and much more. In short, ideal days for dissident poetry, that was not written. . . Only the first Lebanon War awoke us as well to all that we had missed in our poems during from the said period.]

Decades after the publication of his first poems, Natan Zach’s critical assessment of his own work and that of his generation may seem extremely candid and brave. However, the above-cited assertion from Zach’s 2009 literary memoir is far from being unprecedented. The contention that Statehood Generation poets, such as Zach himself, Dahlia Ravikovitch, David Avidan and Yehuda Amichai, whose first poems were published in the 1950s, have mostly ignored the turbulent sociopolitical reality of their time, and not only by refusing to join the collective national effort, started as soon as the early 1960s and is still prevalent.<sup>105</sup> The generation of Israeli poets who published their first volumes of poetry in the early 1960s already expressed discontent with the achievements of their immediate predecessors. “What characterizes the ‘Sixties Generation’ in poetry,” says the poet Meir Wieseltier in a 1970 radio talk show, “is resistance to naïve poetry. Alterman, Shlonsky and Uri Zvi Grinberg are naïve poets. . . The erotic super-man motif proves that Avidan is also a naïve poet.” Dalia Herz, whose first volume of poetry was published in 1961, a year after Zach published his *Shirim Shonim* (Different Poems, also translatable as “other poems” or “various poems”), defines Zach’s poems in the same radio talk show as mere “word play.”<sup>106</sup> Herz then calls for “a poetry that shows more interest in reality as subject matter” and claims that in the Sixties “the emphasis moved from an interest in the power of language and word to reality. In the Fifties poets wanted to be clever, whereas now the poet wishes to be wise about himself, society and situations.”<sup>107</sup> What Wieseltier defines as naiveté, lumping together moderna and revisionists modernists from the interwar years with Avidan’s poetry of the 1950s, is actually an

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100 “Without *Herut* and *Maki*” is a phrase coined by David Ben-Gurion during the negotiations over the formation of the first Israeli coalition. Ben-Gurion ruled out the participation of the right-wing party of *Herut* and of the communists (*maki*).

101 Zach is referring here to an affair involving the alleged disappearance of thousands of babies of new immigrants to the newly founded State of Israel, mainly from Yemen, between the years 1948 to 1954. Many parents believe their babies were adopted without their consent, although it is more likely that the babies passed away and the parents weren’t properly informed. Zach is relating to this affair as if it were a known and proven fact, possibly to present himself as belonging to the right political camp (of the Left).

102 *Ha-olam ha-ze* (This World) magazine was founded in 1937 under the name *Tesha Ba-rev* (Nine in the Evening) but was renamed *Ha-olam ha-ze* in 1946. In 1950 it was bought by Uri Avneri and three others. Under Avneri’s leadership, the magazine became famous for its highly unorthodox and irreverent style. Its news focussed on investigative reports, often presented in sensationalist fashion.

103 The sailors’ strike started on November 1951, after the sailors at Haifa wished to break from the powerful *Histadrut*, the General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel.

104 The Wadi Salib riots were a series of violent street demonstrations in the Wadi Salib neighborhood of Haifa in 1959, sparked by charges of ethnic discrimination against and Mizrahi Jews.

105 See, for example, Hamutal Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof*, and Hanan Hever, “Natan Zach: ‘Al tachshov li zot le-avon’,” in *Hanan Hever kore shira* (Tel Aviv: Keshev, 2005), 159-162.

106 Tsamir claims that Herz’s early poems parody Zach’s, and to a lesser degree Avidan’s. See Tsamir, 209-34.

107 *Ma’ariv*, December 17, 1970. From Yoram Porat’s literary radio-review column.

accusation of self-indulgence (at least in the case of Avidan) and lack of true engagement with the materials of reality, whether psycho-emotional or sociopolitical.<sup>108</sup> Herz focuses on Zach, finding in his work an exaggerated interest in language per se and in poetic “wisdom.” Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Zach himself adopts this view, at least in part and belatedly.

In his aforementioned memoir, Zach draws the readers’ attention to Nissim Calderon’s 1985 book, *Perek kodem* (A Previous Chapter) which discusses Avidan’s poetry of the early 60s in the context of the political and cultural atmosphere that prevailed at that time. In this book Calderon explains that Zach avoids concrete, particular reality because that reality is marred by nationalist ideology and phraseology. “There was a need to start writing nameless facts,” claims Calderon, “because names covered the facts, the facts were enlisted in favor of a national call or submerged in khaki-trousers-and-*tembel*-hat folklore.”<sup>109</sup> Calderon further asserts that “a sea of Israeli phraseology” on the streets, at school, in the newspapers, as well as in literary works, did not allow Zach and his generation a clear view of the facts.<sup>110</sup> Calderon continues:

זך חש צורך להתקשר אל מקום וזמן היסטוריים ותרבותיים ופוליטיים וגיאוגרפיים מסוימים. אבל כאשר הצורך הזה נחסם, אי אפשר היה לממש אותו, הוא לא רצה לבדות זמן ומקום. והוא בוודאי לא רצה להתייחס אל הבדיה הספרותית כאילו היא מקום לא-בדוי [...] הביקורת כלפי עולם מנופח של ודאות ישראלית חיונית לזך כמו אוויר לנשימה. אבל מי שמנסה לעשות מן הביקורת הזאת עולם—מנסה לשבת על כידון. ישירים שונים, הם חקירות, השוואות, הצעות לשיטות-הגנה, הצעות לעמדות-פתיחה—הם הרבה דברים, ורק לא עולם אפשרי.

[Zach felt a need to relate to **concrete historical, cultural, political and geographical time and place**. But when that need was blocked, was impossible to realize, he did not want to invent a time and a place. And he certainly did not want to treat the literary fictionality as if it were a non-fictional place [...]. Critiquing the pompous world of Israeli certainty is as vital for Zach as air. But whoever tries to turn this critique into a world—tries to sit on a bayonet. Different Poems are investigations, comparisons, suggestions for defense-tactics, suggestions for opening gambits—they are many things, except for a possible world.]<sup>111</sup>

As much as Zach is critical of existing social reality, his critique is impeded, according to Calderon here, by no less than the Hebrew language itself. Zach could not act upon his critical instincts because common usages of language in the public sphere made sociopolitical reality impossible to decipher, get through, assimilate. As the Hebrew language of the 50s and 60s was pervaded by trite sloganeering and highfalutin nationalistic jargon, Zach and his colleagues had an urgent need to *escape* that language and its place(s), but they could not

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108 Wieseltier is certainly not the only one to criticize Avidan’s presumed or actual male (and national) chauvinism, an accusation that explains at least in part the lasting ambivalence towards Avidan’s work throughout his writing career, especially among readers and critics of the Left. See a review of Avidan’s early critical reception in Nissim Calderon, *Matsave yesod be-shirato ha-mukdemet shel David Avidan 1954-1962* (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 1978).

109 Nissim Calderon, *Perek Kodem: Al Natan Zach be-reshit shnot ha-shishim* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me’uchad: 1985), 58.

110 Ibid, 59.

111 Ibid, 59. Emphasis in the original.

reinvent the language, as it were, in order to make a different, inventive use of it and the material world the language ostensibly had taken into itself. For these reasons, Calderon continues, there is nothing “Israeli” about Zach’s poetry of the 50s and 60s, or anything that consists of “a pure literary language.”<sup>112</sup> What does exist in his work is an oppositional attitude, often expressed by the speaker’s repeated “I do not know,” that casts a doubt not only over “Ben-Gurion’s highfalutin slogans,” but also over the “celebratory Hebrew of geography teachers,” the “well-baked Hebrew of Alterman and Shlonsky,” or the learned style of Agnon and Hazaz. It is a poetic language that shows remarkable linguistic restraint, “uncolored by any particular color,” a language that is impossible to translate to other languages, a language, Calderon further avers, that begins to form a new place for “educated people” in Israel.<sup>113</sup> Perhaps in trying to solve the contradiction between Zach’s inventive use of the language and his alleged inability to create a “world,” Ariel Hirschfeld avers in a 1996 article that Zach created a new place in Hebrew letters, “a soul that is tied to the language. This abstract place, that is always essentially ‘diasporic,’ held the subversive element necessary for all art.” That is why, according to Hirschfeld, others could have leaned on Zach to draw the “power of freedom from him.” Hirschfeld does not explain his assertions any further, and the question remains what does it mean for a language to form a “new place” (for expression? for thought? for felt understanding?), but not “a world,” hence no real, actual possibilities of resistance? If for Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, the poet on whom the previous chapter focuses, a poetic world, or *velt* in Yiddish, is deeply related to a poet’s *perzenlekhkayt* (personality or personhood), namely to an imaginative “I” that presents the actual world in a personified manner, for Zach in his early work such a world could not be provided or mediated in any consistent manner. The poems in *Shirim shonim* are indeed experimental in that they do not maintain the same poetic style and form throughout, and do not yield a unified and constant *Weltanschauung*. Meir Wieseltier further claims in a 1980 essay on Zach that there are no actual people or even actual names in Zach’s poems, only copious general nouns—“the mountain/s,” “the tree,” “the fruit,” “the colors,” “the father,” “the mother,” “the girl,” and so on. The unavoidable reason, according to Wieseltier, is that Zach seeks neutrality or blandness (*stamiyut*), emptiness and “transparency” in such nouns, and opts for “non-commitment—recoiling from the commitment that the specific demands.”<sup>114</sup> The poets of the 1950s generation, Wieseltier maintains, not unlike the major visual artists of the 1930s through the 1950s in Palestine and then Israel, avoid observing human beings and human-relations as unique and ever-changing, implementing ready-made stereotypes instead.<sup>115</sup>

112 Ibid.

113 Ariel Hirschfeld’s “Yonek hashra’a kemo Dracula—ma’halakh shirato shel Zach,” *Ha’aretz*, May 1, 1996. [זך העמיד את מרכזה של השירה העברית על “מקום” מסוג חדש-ישן בעברית. . . נפש הקשורה בלשון. המקום המופשט הזה, שהוא לעולם “גלותי” במהותו, שמר על מקדם החתרנות ההכרחי לכל מעשה אמנות. משום כך היה זך לא מנהיג כוחני או אסכולתי אלא מעין נקודת משען שעליה יכלו רבים להשעין את מבטם ולשאוב ממנה את כוח החירות להרים את עולמם. הוא היה פתח ל”שירים שונים” באמת.]

114 Ibid, 423. See also Michael Gluzman’s discussion of the growing gap between statehood generation poetry and the wider public, a gap that led to melancholic feelings, in his “Sovereignty and Melancholia: Israeli Poetry after 1948,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* (The New Series) 18 (Spring/Summer 2012): 164-69. I believe that what Gluzman identifies as melancholy is also Zach’s response to the fact that the newly established state of Israel failed to become the truly democratic configuration many people have wanted it to be.

115 Meir Wieseltier, “Chatakh-orekh be-shirato shel Natan Zach,” *Siman Kri’a* 10 (1980): 406. Wieseltier is

The common understanding that Zach and other poets of the same generation recoiled from “a commitment to the Specific,” or failed to be “accountable,” may have paved the way for a later contention that the major male poets of the 50s generation collaborated with the ideological mechanisms of the newly established State of Israel. Drawing in complicated ways on postcolonial theory, Hamutal Tsamir understands Zach’s early poetry (but also Avidan’s and Amichai’s) to be a manifestation of the Zionist national subject, only masking itself as universal.<sup>116</sup> Uri Hollander claims, following Tsamir and Hanan Hever, and not unlike Calderon and Wieseltier before them, that Zach’s poetry failed to suggest ways in which the world could become a better place.<sup>117</sup> Hollander maintains that Zach’s early poetry forms a “political act” in that it disguises contemporary sociopolitical reality due to what Hollander defines as “Zach’s fiction” (*ha-b’daya ha-zachit*), that is, a literary illusion disconnected from the phenomenal world.<sup>118</sup> In sum, critics of varied Leftist affiliations, and retrospectively even Zach himself, seem to say part or all of the following: a certain 1950s poetic subject or ego, which is either naïve or overly self-centered, is expressed in a poetry whose engagement with language is too formal in that it shuns concrete and specific materials of both a personal nature (the biographical and emotional) and those pertaining to sociopolitical reality. Experimental and inconsistent, the claim goes, it is a poetry that does not suggest a “world” of its own and takes no coherent stance against oppression. Somehow, Zach’s experimentalism is seen to be a cause of incoherence, as Calderon and Wieseltier seem to suggest, and all critics mentioned above agree that such a poetry could not have affected its readers’ political attitudes, and could not reveal what was unknown or insufficiently known about the sociopolitical reality. Following this line of criticism, begs the questions: what can be understood from the wish or even directive for the concrete and tangible to become available through poetry? Are the poems in *Shirim shonim* indeed too abstract and self-indulgent to tell anything meaningful of their sociopolitical reality? How much is this a poetry that “recoils from the commitment that the specific demands?” And how much is it experimentally committed to poetry’s indeterminate determinacy, that is to poetry as an imaginative construct that uses the materials of the empirical world but is not bound by the limitations that govern our actions in the actual world?<sup>119</sup>

The call for poetry to be specific or concrete may be influenced by Anglo-American modernist poetry, but may also have been affected by a particular interpretation of Bertolt Brecht’s work. Brecht’s poetry and theater became increasingly influential throughout the 1960s in Israel,<sup>120</sup> and Brechtian tone, diction, and style are easily detected not only in Zach’s

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possibly also conducting here an oedipal battle against the leader of the previous generation in Israeli poetry.

116 See for example in Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof*.

117 Uri Hollander, *Ha-musika shel ha-ma’hapekha: Natan Zach 1955-1966* (PhD diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2010), 38-52.

118 Hollander insists, in a somewhat blurry and confusing manner, that Zach’s early poetry doesn’t hide its Israeli sociopolitical context.

119 See Robert Kaufman, “Aura, Still,” 61.

120 According to the theater historian Dorit Yerushalmi, the earliest influential productions of Brecht’s plays were *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Szechwan*), in the *Cameri Theater* in 1955 (translation: Lea Goldberg, director: Yossef Milo, set design: Teo Otto, music: Paul Dessau), and the 1962 production of *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Calk Circle*) in the *Haifa Municipal Theater* (translation: Natan Zach, director: Yossef Millo, set design: Teo Otto, music: Frank Pelleg’s adaptation of Paul Dessau’s music. On the



work, but also, and perhaps more consistently, in Avidan's poetry, I argue below. Brecht's poetry, theater and thought continue to guide central trends in both Israeli poetry and criticism today, partly through the influential work of the poets Itzhak Laor and Aharon Shabtai, and partly through the critical work of literary scholars such as Hever, who cites Brecht as one of the sources for his distinction between political poems and ideological poetry.<sup>121</sup> Before I address the questions regarding Zach's engagement, I would like to offer a brief introduction to Brecht's ideas on realism in lyric poetry, ideas that pervade Israeli literary history as well.

### a. Realism in Poetry and the Israeli Robinson Crusoe

Brecht wrote about realism mostly during 1938-40, and primarily in the context of three seminal essays by the Marxist critic Georg Lukács on realist and avant-garde modes of writing.<sup>122</sup> The first of these essays, "Greatness and Decline of Expressionism" (1934), formed the backdrop to an intense debate on Marxism and modernism conducted in the pages of the Left-emigré, Moscow-based *Das Wort* (The Word) in 1937-38, although Brecht's interventions on the Expressionism debate were not published at the time and the majority of them appeared only ten years after his death.<sup>123</sup> In these essays, realist writing for Brecht means "unmasking the ruling viewpoints as the viewpoints of the rulers. . .,"<sup>124</sup> and as Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles explain, the primary aim of realism "is to display casual structures at work in society, and Brecht welcomes *any* formal devices or techniques that will enable the writer to achieve that aim, irrespective of whether they have been categorized as realist or modernist." In this respect Brecht differs from Lukács, who recommends that contemporary realist writers adopt the representational techniques of early nineteenth-century novel, as they take form especially in the work of Balzac. Brecht also maintains, contra Lukács, that the social function of realism is historical and relative, and that different means should be applied as time changes to create realist works of art. However, Brecht is at the same time critical of modernism, and is particularly scathing about avant-garde painters who, he believes, construe modernist abstraction as an end in itself.<sup>125</sup> Thus, in order not to lapse into modernist

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*Cameri Production* see Dorit Yerushalmi, *Derekh ha-bimuy: al bama'im ba-te'atron ha-yisra'eli* (Or Yehuda: Dvir and Heksherim Institute of Ben-Gurion University, 2013), 193-195. On the Haifa Production see her "From Vision to Action: A City Finds a Theater," in the art catalogue *All the World's a Stage, Behind the Wings of the First Municipal Theatre* (Haifa: Haifa City Museum, 2012), 8-16.

121 See Hanan Hever, *Paytanim U-viryonim*, (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 45.

122 By the early 1930s Brecht began to formulate his critique of realism, notably in his 1931 monograph *The Three Penny Lawsuit*. See *Brecht on Art and Politics*, ed. Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles (London: Methuen, 2003), 205.

123 *Brecht on Art and Politics*, 215.

124 In "The Popular and Realistic" from 1938 cited in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, 205.

125 Interestingly, Wieseltier starts his 1980 essay on Zach by claiming that Palestine-born or raised painters (and writers) of the 1930s through 1950s denied and avoided "the human." Wieseltier must have had in mind the group of modernist and abstract visual artists known by the name *Ofakim chadashim* (New Horizons), active between 1948-1963, that some of its founding members were educated in Palestine and not abroad.

Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the most interesting affinities between poetry and the visual arts of the 1950s-1960s, and particularly as it relates to the work of *Ofakim chadashim* that, as its name suggests, wished to open new horizons to the world that lies beyond Israel.

subjectivism, Brecht's proposes that art be grounded in social science: "[R]ealist writers must concentrate on revealing the dynamic forces that underpin everyday social life, and base their texts not on intuition, but on the careful study of the laws of nature and society."<sup>126</sup> This way, artists would be able to offer more "insight into capitalism by revealing social contradictions that impel the reader to make abstract judgments with a view to influence society."<sup>127</sup>

The reception history of Zach's early poetry sketched out above shares some common traits with Brecht's call for poetry to generate insight into societal mechanisms of power, and thus enable or even impel readers to truly understand the forces that suppress them. This newly achieved understanding, the argument goes, will alter readers' actual stance towards the issue of political action intended to change the world. Poetry which is interested in abstraction as an end in itself, or for that matter in language as an end in itself, yields no beneficial outcome and actually serves the extant power structure because it does not show how mechanisms of power actually work. Below I challenge these assumptions with the help of Brecht himself, but first let me examine one poem from Zach's *Shirim shonim*, "Robinson Crusoe," in light of what has been said so far. Tsamir analyzes this very poem to support her claim that through poetic abstractions "Zach's subject" removes himself from his past, family, place and time, as well as from a prophetic or divine call that previous Hebrew poets held. The poem, according to Tsamir, creates an illusion that Jewish Israelis are native to the land and suppresses all memories and traces of immigration and of the conflict with the native Palestinians over the territory. It is thus a poem that supports dominant power mechanisms instead of challenging them.

#### רובינזון קרוזו<sup>128</sup>

העיפות פגה ובמקומה החלה נושבת הרוח.  
תחילה לאט, אחר כך יותר ויותר.  
אחרי ככלות הכול זה אי נושב, אמר בלבו וסקר  
את צמרות הדקלים המתעופפים. צלילי המוסיקה היוו  
רקע עמום אך מאוד לא בלתי-רצוי להרגשת נוחות  
ברורה. כיונתי גם את העונה, ממש את השעה  
והרגע, אמר בלבו במין שמחה מסתרת על שנולד,  
על שהוא קיים, על הליטוף היעיל של הרוח החודר אל  
מתחת לבגדים הקלים (בעונה זו של השנה). שום דבר  
המרחיק מכאן, שום אסוציאציה, שום זיכרון המטשטש את  
המגע המידי הזה עם מה שנמצא כל כך לידך  
עד שאתה יכול למששו בידך, אמר בלבו.

126 *Brecht on Art and Politics*, 210-211.

127 *Ibid*, 211.

128 Zach, *Shirim shonim*, 83.

[Robinson Crusoe

The weariness evaporated and the wind started blowing instead.  
First slowly, then more and more.  
After all this is an inhabited island, he said to himself and perused  
the flying palm-treetops. The sounds of music were  
just a faint, though very much not an unwanted backdrop to a clear sense  
of comfort. I've also set the season, even the hour  
and the minute, he said to himself with a kind of furtive joy for having been born,  
for existing, for the efficient stroke of the wind that penetrates  
under the light clothes (at this season of the year). Nothing  
that removes you from here, no association, no memory that blurs  
this immediate contact with what is so near you  
that you can touch it with your hands, he said to himself.]

This is arguably one of the best poems in *Shirim shonim*, not least because it uses so carefully the ironic witticisms and wordplays that often seem trapped within themselves in some of the other poems in this volume. A stylistic clarity and what feels to be even today, more than forty years after its first publication, like a natural and neutral diction and tone, are reminiscent of Brecht's later poetry. In fact, a good example would be the very poem discussed in the previous chapter, which starts with the words "*Als ich kam in die Heimat.*"<sup>129</sup> Brecht's poem, as discussed above, tells of the speaker's return to his ruined homeland, realizing that even if he had run away from the ruins that frighten him immensely, he couldn't have escaped them. Here too there is a certain inescapable melancholy, and a sense of suspense. The language seems to be purged of anything that could hinder its eloquence, and its movement forward feels inevitable, as if the poem couldn't have proceeded in any other way. "The weariness evaporated and the wind started blowing instead," the poem starts, as life begins, or as a dream does, or perhaps even death—it is unclear, as much as the stated affinity between the evaporation of weariness and the blowing of the wind remains unexplained. Something mysterious is happening, that much is certain. The wind blows "first slowly"—though it may be more natural or idiomatic, at least in Hebrew, to speak of *ru'ach kala* (light wind) than of *ru'ach ittit* (slow wind)—then "more and more." More wind blows? The wind blows faster? Or perhaps the wind blows more as opposed to blowing less? The language is indeed less clear than it appears. "After all," the poem continues, "this is an inhabited island," and *noshav* (inhabited) sounds very much like *noshev* ("wind-blowing" or "wind-blown"), a sound-affinity which may falsely explain why the treetops are more than simply moving, or waving (*mitnofefim*, as flags do), in the wind, but actually fly (*mit'ofefim*).<sup>130</sup> Does the wind rip off the treetops or blows into them? Wither way, the poem obviously depicts a non-realist, even surrealist experience; at the same time a biblical allusion

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129 *Als ich kam in die Heimat / Und sah den Rest so stehn / Da bekam ich einen Schrecken / Und wollte schneller gehn. // Doch wär ich auch schnell gegangen / So schnell wie einer, den's bangt: / Aus solcher Trümmerstätte / Wär ich nicht hinausgelangt.* GBFA, 15:195. Affinities between "Robinson Crusoe" and Brecht can also be seen in the tone and style of *Hollywood Elegien* and *Buckower Elegien*, among others.

130 In normative Hebrew *mit'ofef* is more likely to mean fly, whereas a word from the same root, *me'ofef* could also mean blowing in the wind. Palms could suggest exotic coconut-palms, but possibly also local date-palms.

to *Exodus* 16:35 lurks behind the seemingly plain language—“And the children of Israel did eat manna forty years, until they came to a land inhabited.”<sup>131</sup> The biblical *erets noshavet* (a land inhabited) becomes here an *ie noshav* (an island inhabited). And as “the sounds of music were faint, though very much not an unwanted backdrop to a clear sense of comfort,” these sounds suggest the existence of a human culture, of someone playing; or it maybe just a recollection, a fantasy, taking place while something else happens elsewhere from where the music was actually heard. The double negation impedes the flow of the sentence, yielding doubt (but also irony)—is the music truly wanted or somehow also unwanted? Is it supposed to be unwanted but is actually desired? Could then the alleged clearly-felt comfort be trusted? The tone of the extremely “dry” and slightly awkward syntax and the no less desiccated and strange word-choice let in a sensation of tense mystery and gloom despite the stated sense of comfort, the hidden joy for having been born, for existing, that “he” feels. And why is the joy “furtive”, *mesuteret*, a biblical, poetic word of higher register? “I’ve also set the season, even the hour / and the minute, he said to himself,” though the deadly-dreamy atmosphere makes it feel that “he” didn’t actually time anything. The not-so-poetic parenthetical expression—(“in this season of the year”)—makes it seem as if nothing but the very essential truth is being conveyed, including the time of the year. It all creates an illusion of safety, as if everything is being kept within the bounds of the poem, and nothing disturbs its alleged pleasantness, nothing threatens to barge in. Obviously, all this engenders the opposite feeling: The discrepancy between the very strong wind and the merely “efficient” and pleasant one, although somehow hidden by the factual tone of the poem, is clear. Perhaps not unlike the Brecht poem, though via different poetic means, “Robinson Crusoe” yields the felt understanding that something goes wrong, that the speaker himself is escaping something as he runs away from somewhere.

There is, the poem continues, “[n]othing that removes you from here, no association, no memory that blurs / this immediate contact with what is so much near you / until you can feel it with your hands, he said to himself.” On one level, it is not only he, the poem’s “Robinson Crusoe,” who feels this way, but also the reader who is trapped in a poem that has no identifiable time and place despite the speaker’s insistence on controlling the here and now. The single allusion to *Exodus* may not be enough to contextualize the poem. The question, implicitly raised by Tsamir and others, is then how can a poem published in 1960 Israel ignore everything that surrounded it? After all, in his 1963 essay *Sifrut b(e)li olam* (Literature Without a World) Zach himself contends that literature needs a world “and by world,” he explains, “I mean, simply, a known social and scenic reality, given in a certain historical, cultural, political and geographical time and place.”<sup>132</sup> Tsamir sees a contradiction between these stipulations and what she terms Zach’s “disengagement” from any kind of specificity. Zach, according to Tsamir, claims that the subject’s individuality and universality, specificity and concreteness are necessary for the subject not to lose himself in mass society, but this demand actually necessitates its opposite—alienation and disengagement from the specific time and place (a contradiction that, she believes, largely characterizes Statehood

131 See *Exodus* 16:35: וַיֵּשְׁרְאוּ אֶל אֶרֶץ נֹשֶׁבֶת.

132 Zach, “*Ha-shira she-me’ever la-millim*,” 129. First published in the literary journal *Yokhani*, July 1963.

Generation poetry).<sup>133</sup> However, Tsamir's assertion about the necessary connection between the claim for specificity and its denial isn't that clear. More importantly is it really the only way to understand the poem and Zach's essay? Let us start with the essay; reading carefully, it seems that in "Literature Without a World" Zach does not necessarily require an explicit time, place and set of characters, but "the magic power that turns word-formations and sentences into a world of wondrous lives in their own right."<sup>134</sup> Zach continues to mention Kafka (and his less-than specific K) as a writer who makes one feel as if he or she faces a vivid, actual reality and were in the company of living human beings. What Zach thus means by his call for what can be defined as realism, or a literature *with* a world, should be understood more widely as literature that *creates* a world, rather than one that pretends to simply mimic it:

אנחנו בארץ, המיטיבים עדיין לזכור ספרות אשר ביקשה להציג את האדם כמשתקף עד תום במעשיו, בסגנון דיבורו ה"ריאליסטי" או בתנאי סביבתו, חייבים לחזור וללמוד כי "שקיפות" כזאת אינה בנמצא. גם לא בארץ קטנה, וכי חיי אדם אינם ולא היו מעולם שקופים עד כדי להרחיק מהם את המבט המסתורי המבקש את הממשות שמהחורי מראית העין, את החיים שמאחורי מה שעיתונים, כרוזי בידור ועסקנים למיניהם רואים בעיוורונם כחיים.<sup>135</sup>

[We in this country, who still remember well a literature that sought to present the human being as fully reflected in his actions, in his "realist" manner of speaking, or in the conditions of his environment, must learn and relearn that such "transparency" does not exist, not even in a small country, and that a person's life is not and never was transparent to the point of removing from itself the mysterious gaze that seeks the being beyond the seeming, the life beyond what newspapers, entertainment posters and various wheeler-dealers blindly see as life.]

A literature that does not halt at what only seems to be realistic is called for, one that holds on to a certain *mysterious* gaze that sees beyond what all sorts of commercial elements falsely present as real and genuine. Does "Robinson Crusoe" succeed in doing that? The fact that almost no memory or association, whether belonging to the protagonist or to the language itself, gets through the poem's condensed form conveys a feeling of entrapment. It may seem that "he" had escaped somewhere else to come to this inhabited and windy island. This could explain the fatigue. The unrealistic fantasy of having control over the season, the hour, even the very minute, may suggest a traumatic experience that results in a blurring of the borders between reality and its other. If this is the case, then his escape is not complete or successful. A hasty escape may account for the light clothes, as "he" couldn't have taken anything more substantial from wherever he came from to this place. He may have had to flee with nothing on and empty-handed. It is also possible that he didn't escape at all. This Robinson Crusoe does not want or cannot remember anything, that much is true, but not because he necessarily triumphed over his memories and associations. The felt melancholy

133 See the chapter dedicated to Zach in Tsamir, 59-87.

134 Natan Zach, *Ha-shira shme'ever la-millim*, 130:

"הכוח המאגי ההופך צירופי מלים ומשפטים לעולמות של חיים מופלאים משל עצמם."

135 Ibid, 164.

can be the result of a demand to repress his former home, a family, language even (could that be the reason for the linguistic inaccuracies mentioned above?). Zach himself, a German immigrant born to a non-Jewish mother, may have had to forget. There could also be a fear lurking of what this island may be hiding, since “after all” it is inhabited, just like the land of Canaan in the biblical allusion, and some of the same territory now named the State of Israel, it is “stormy” and dangerous. Who can tell when the imminent attack will commence? It is only right now, for a mere split second before something bad happens, that the speaker can pretend to have a Zen-like meditative sensation of the moment.

Zach's protagonist is not Defoe's Robinson Crusoe—he knows the island to be inhabited, he is not as active and productive as Defoe's Robinson is, and there is a certain sense of aloofness that invades the poem, but Zach is obviously importing into his poem the longstanding literary, cultural, and sociopolitical reception history of Defoe's novel that famously goes from Rousseau and others to Marx. Zach's Robinson does not arrive at “a land without a people for a people without a land,” as the Zionist slogan famously suggested, and the Zionist ethos of independence and rejuvenation is here severely questioned. Being a *Gestus* of Robinson Crusoe, the poem engages with the notion of “adventure,” but also reflects on imperialism, slavery, the fantasy of being alone and independent. The “here” that can be touched is actually nothing; neither the poem and nor the dream or illusion that may be conveyed in it.

The allusive felt anxiety that the poem emits is possibly the thing most tangibly felt, besides the sensation that something real had happened, so real, *als ob* (as if) real, in Kant's term, that you could actually feel it with your hands, although nothing real had actually happened. As a purely imaginative construct this poem is the only “thing” available to us, its readers, and the consequent felt understanding is the only thing “real” and genuine about it. It is thus hard to accept Tsamir's contention that the poem simply tells of the Zionist national subject as he refuses to remember where he came from and who else besides him occupies the same territory. The way the poem gestures to Defoe's Robinson does not allow such a literal understanding, as its language shows too much self-awareness, and yields so much suspense and gloom. Zach's is not a victorious Robinson, able to provide all his needs on a new territory, with only one Friday at his side. If at all, Zach's “Robinson Crusoe” is a painful and ironic retort to Zionist claims. However, the feeling of anxiety and gloom that invade the poem do not halt at any specific criticism or understanding, and despite all the poem retains a certain indecisiveness, or suspense, that cannot be completely resolved. In this sense it is more than a sharp criticism of Zionism.

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On August 24, 1940, after having read a collection of poems by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, Brecht pens in his journal an entry about art, poetry, and reality. It is worth noting here that Wordsworth was far from being considered a revolutionary poet by Brecht and his circle.<sup>136</sup> Brecht writes:

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136 This journal-entry follows a long and intensive exchange of ideas between Brecht and Walter Benjamin. See Kaufman's “Aura, Still” for an explication of the evolution of ideas concerning lyric's aura that came out

I skimmed a small volume of Wordsworth in Arnold's edition. Came on 'She was a phantom of delight' and was moved by this now remote work to reflect how varied the function of art is, and how dangerous it is to lay down the law. Even such labels as 'petty bourgeois idyll' are hazardous. There are indeed some petty bourgeois tendencies which are directed towards the perpetuation of and consolidation of the petty bourgeoisie as a class, but within the petty bourgeois there are also other kinds of tendencies that conflict with those. The individual petty bourgeois currently patrolling the fields of England equipped with a shotgun and a molotov cocktail. . . has up to a point legitimate enough grounds for blaming his Wordsworths; yet it is just in dehumanized situations like these that

'a lovely apparition, sent  
to be a moment's ornament'

helps to conjure up some other situations more worthy of the human race.<sup>137</sup>

Brecht realizes here that a "petty bourgeois" poem, written by an artist considered to be merely liberal, even conservative, and in any case not revolutionary can actually help us imagine, and perhaps especially "at times like this" (Brecht writes during the Battle of Britain in WWII), a better future for the human race. Brecht realizes that interventionist commitment does not contradict formal aesthetic autonomy, but rather the reverse. The function of art is immensely varied, and art, Brecht further writes, "is an autonomous sphere, though by no means an autarchic one." Brecht then goes on to ask whether art enriches "the individual's capacity for experience" or "the capacity for expression." The same can be asked of Zach's poem. Let us now look at another poem from *Shirim shonim*, "Petach le-shir" ("An Opening for a Poem"), that engages in an intriguing dialogue with "Robinson Crusoe," and observe the possible relations between the poem's aesthetic form and the reality from which the poem draws its materials. It is not the only poem nor the first one in this collection to include the word "war" (*milkhama*)—"Sergeant Weiss," "a War Confession," and "The Nightingale Song" precede it; but "An Opening for a Poem" most urgently involves a war happening *now*. As its name suggests, it is also an *ars poetica* poem, not unlike "Robinson Crusoe." Its style and form are looser, the lines longer, as is the poem itself. It is also conveyed in the form of a soliloquy, which in itself may suggest a desire to speak out and say something felt to be urgently important. Here the speaker does not ask the readers or his imaginative interlocutors to be "quiet for a moment" as in "*Rega e'chad*" (One Moment), the poem that opens *Shirim shonim*; he simply starts his speech by stating what the poem is about:

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of an interchange of ideas between Brecht and Benjamin, and between Benjamin and Adorno.

137 *Bertolt Brecht Journals*, trans. Hugh Rorrison (New York: Routledge, 1993), 90-91 (emphasis in the original). For the German original see GBFA, 26:417-18, 661fn. [Journale 1, august 24, 1940]. The below citations are taken from the same pages.

השיר הזה הוא שיר על אנשים:  
 מה שהם חושבים ומה שהם רוצים  
 ומה שהם חושבים שהם רוצים.  
 מחוץ לזה אין הרבה דברים בעולם  
 הראויים שנתעניין בהם. והוא שיר על מעשי בני-אדם,  
 מכיון שהמעשים חשובים יותר  
 מן הדברים שאינם נעשים. וכל אדם רוצה  
 שיזכרו את מעשיו זמן רב אחרי ששכחו  
 את הדברים שלא עשה.  
 ועוד הוא שיר על ארץ גדולה ורחבה וברדת  
 החשכה, בהעטפה דמדומים כמו רחמים, יכול אדם  
 לטעות ולחשוב שהיא מדבר ולכן זהו ממילא גם שיר  
 על מדבר ועל בני-אדם ההולכים בחול חס המהלך  
 בדמם והוא שיר על אנשים בכל: כיצד  
 הם מרגישים כשהלילה הכחל שר את פזמון השירות  
 וכיצד הם טועמים חול במטוס החרוך הנופל ומזמר  
 כמו שיר קינה בוער. במקום לדבר, זהו שיר  
 על בתים שנהרסים ואחרים המוקמים תחתם  
 אולם כבר אינם דומים לקודמיהם: משוררים ישירו  
 על בתים כל עוד יהיו משוררים בעולם, אולם, אולי,  
 לא כל עוד יהיו בתים בעולם. ואחרונה, אלה הם שירים  
 על מלחמה ונכתבו בעצומה ועל שלחן כתיבה ובלי נחמה.

### [An Entrance to a Poem

This poem is a poem about people:  
 What they think and what they want  
 and what they think they want.  
 Except for that there are not many things in the world  
 worthy of us taking interest in them. And it is a poem about the actions of human  
 beings,  
 since actions are more important  
 than what isn't acted out. And everybody wants  
 their actions to be remembered long after all they haven't acted out  
 has been forgotten.  
 And then again it is a poem about a big and wide country and when darkness  
 falls, when it is wrapped in twilight like mercy, a person can  
 mistake it for a desert and thus it is also inevitably a poem  
 about a desert and human beings walking in the hot sand that is walking  
 in their blood and it is a poem about human beings in all: how  
 they feel when the blue night sings the song of the caravans  
 and how they taste sand in the scorched airplane that falls and sings  
 like a burning poem of lament.  
 Instead of talking, it is a poem

138 Zach, *Shirim shonim*, 97.



about houses being destroyed and others being built in their place  
but no longer resemble what was there before: poets will sing  
about houses as long as there are poets in the world, but, maybe  
not as long as there are houses in the world. And lastly, these are poems  
about a war and they were written in the midst of it and on a desk any with no  
consolation.]

This is a poem, or a song, about people, and about what people think and what they want and what they think they want—but do we believe the speaker that what people think they want is of true importance? That is, isn't what people think they want an illusion we should disregard and concentrate on what they *really* want and *truly* think? Perhaps, as this is a poem about what people do, actually do, although it can be inferred from the previous sentence that there is as yet unknown connection between what people think, want, think they want, and what they actually do. And what people do is the most important thing, after all, perhaps since the irony is too strongly felt to allow one clear understanding. The poem calls for a linear unfolding of its arguments—it is almost naïve in its form and choice of words, which is somewhat simplistic (“And everybody wants / their actions to be remembered long after all they haven't acted out / has been forgotten.”) But then it turns out to be a poem also about “a big and large land,” not about some inhabited windy island, and when this land turns dark, when it is “wrapped in twilight like mercy,” the first image in the poem, a reverse Fata Morgana appears—one may mistake this land for a desert. Possibly, then, it isn't inhabited, or only by nomadic tribes. This is why it is a poem about people who walk in the hot sand (and the hot sand is walking in them—these must be real desert people, or possibly soldiers.) As “the blue night” sings the “Song of the Caravans” (*Pizmon Ha-shayarot*)—a popular name given to a song written in 1945 by Haim Heffer to a popular Russian melody, telling about the illegal immigration of Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine—it becomes not a song about the native inhabitants of the desert, but about those who displaced them while seeking refuge for themselves. The word *shayarot* (caravans) joins together the desert dwellers with the Jewish refugees and the Jewish underground fighters. This song, whose real name is “*Ben gvulot*” (Between Borders), describes the “caravans of brothers” that “we” (Jewish underground fighters) accompany in starless nights to the “homeland.”<sup>139</sup> But *Pizmon Ha-shayarot* is not the only song being sung, as a crashing scorched airplane, rather than a shooting star, sounds in its fall like a “burning poem of lament.” The poem turns darker and darker—“Instead of talking, it is a poem / about houses being destroyed and others being built in their place / but no longer resemble what was there before.” And the darker it gets, the more musical, rhymed and imaginative it becomes, starting with the twilight that resembles mercy (*dimdumim k(e)mo rachamim*) and then the rhymes of *a'nashim bakol—kshe-ha-layla ha-kachol—kachol-chol; mezamer-bo-er-le-daber* (human beings in all—when the blue night—blue-sand; sings-burns-talking). So now it is a poem, or a song, or a poem of lament to be exact, about houses destroyed and rebuilt somehow differently by *other* people. After all, the speaker did say, if only at a certain point, that actions precede hear in importance what was

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139 The lyrics of “*Ben gvulot*” and various performances are available online (accessed December 17, 2013): <http://www.zemereshet.co.il/song.asp?id=119>.

not done at all. And a poem, what is it? “Poets will sing / about houses as long as there are poets in the world, but, maybe, / not as long as there are houses in the world.” How should this obtuse and sarcastic sentence be understood? Does it mean that for the sake of poetry poets are more important than houses? Or does it mean that poets will stop singing about houses once there were no more houses anywhere? In the latter case, it may be dangerous, for there not to be houses anymore, at least as much as poetry is concerned. After all, this poem is, “these poems” it actually says, “are about a war (or warfare) and were written in the midst of it and on a writing desk and with no consolation.” Meaning these poems (all of *Shirim shonim* perhaps?) are about people walking through the desert, about refugees, whose homes were destroyed. These are also poems, poems in plural as there are many people, and maybe more than one war, and more than one house destroyed whom others inherit. And these are also poems about writing poetry, with no solace, as the poems themselves, and whoever speaks in them or writes them can do nothing, nothing at all, at least by writing the poems themselves, to stop the war and all the misery it involves.

*Petach le-shir* suggests by its very name that it opens a way for poetry, potentially showing the way for how and when it should be written. It starts with an aphoristic style, listing truisms that sound trite and simplistic but then it turns into a song, or better, an ironic emulation of a song—twilight raps around it, the imagining of a desert, the blue night singing of caravans and the airplane singing a lament all feel both poetic and a little awkward. The Hebrew root *shir* (song, poem) is repeated ten times in the second part of the poem (starting with *ve-od hu shir* [“and then again it is a poem, or “and moreover it is a poem”]), stressing the speaker's insistence on the imaginative nature of these lines and at the very same time emphasizing their demotic and extremely communicative tone and style. As a result a tension is formed between the poetic or song-like nature of these word-formations, and their affinity to a soliloquy, or speech. Instead of a talk or a speech, what is needed, this poem seems so to say and show, is a song, or poem though a song in itself will do nothing to change what people do. Maybe what they think, but this is also utterly uncertain. Again, the poem's syntax of deceptive ease and elegance, so reminiscent of Brecht, builds rather than releases tension. It obviously enriches “the individual's capacity for experience” as it makes one feel the confusion, pain and lies that warfare brings with it. And not just any war; the *shayarot* (caravans) and the destroyed houses under which new ones are being built, as well as the scorched airplane, all suggest a very specific time and place, namely Israel/Palestine between 1945 and 1956. This time span is marked by two wars after the great WWII. The poem literally imitates the language of those who “know” what is most important (what people do) and think they are wise enough to see how it relates to human nature itself, but are actually trapped in doing nothing in face of war. *Petach le-shir* suggests that a song, unlike a speech or talking, can at least see through sociopolitical reality, but is still far from being the action that is so needed, and therefore it is written “with no consolation.”

In sum, *Shirim shonim* contains at least some suggestions for what art can and cannot do, for what poetry can offer when language is used for so many other purposes, whether promoting warfare, eliminating memory, or creating a threatening nationalist story that involves the erasure of all memory and pretends to offer a tangible reality instead. Poetry, it seems, can reuse language itself to enrich our feelings and understanding. In so doing, it does

not tell us what to think and feel, nor does it offer knowledge and solutions; it merely stretches the language into song. And now, one must think for oneself. All this changes when Zach published his third volume of poetry, *Kol he-chalav ve-ha-dvash* (All the Milk and the Honey), in 1966. Reading a poem from this volume, Hever asserts that Zach's poetry has become less ironic, more specific and thus more committed (to the sociopolitical reality). Hever further avers that Zach's impersonal ego from the 50s starts to fall apart, and it is implied that the poetry has thus improved.<sup>140</sup> Tsamir and Hollander basically agree with this observation. Shimon Sandbank believes the shift in Zach's poetry, and consequently in Israeli poetry, to have occurred more clearly in Zach's next volume of poems, *Bimkom Chalom* (Instead of a Dream, 1966), and asserts that "truth" or "heart wisdom" came to replace former "magic," or, as he explains, "the referential function of the language triumphed over the poetic function, or in the language of human beings: the truth triumphed over the poem."<sup>141</sup> I believe, not unlike Wieseltier, that Zach's poetry (already in many poems of *Kol he-chalav ve-ha-dvash*) is often sentimental, and the poetic language, style, and tone less condensed, and less Brechtian. Interestingly, Calderon, who also observes some of these changes, relates this shift to a change of heart that Zach went through. Calderon bases his opinion on an article that Zach published in *Ha'arets* immediately after the 1967 War.<sup>142</sup> Zach rebuts in this article Kant's renowned "Perpetual Peace" essay, in which Kant sets the conditions for peace to exist for long periods of time. Zach no longer believes in the possibility of peace, and he blames this on the Arabs as well as all other nations, and even human nature itself. I tend to agree with Calderon that this new perspective was indeed followed by a dramatic stylistic revision. Zach refutes Kant's "Perpetual Peace" at the very same time that his poetry lets go of its "magic" and start telling the "truth", in Sandbanks' terms, or, as I would put it, renounces its commitment to Kant's aesthetic moment, that is the moment when a feeling of "this work of art is beautiful" seizes us so immensely that we believe, albeit provisionally, that *everyone* would appreciate it the way we do. This moment is the basis for peaceful, non-coercive negotiations in the public sphere, according to Kant.<sup>143</sup> When Zach stops believing in peace, in the possibility of solving conflicts non-coercively, his language of poetry changes. In the discussion of Zach's early poetry outlined above I wished to suggest that the language of *Shirim shonim*, especially in some of its poems, engages the sociopolitical reality through singing the spoken Hebrew of its time. This way it remains committed to the "magic," or poetry, and in doing so tells more of the sociopolitical truth rather than less. When Zach would change his mind again and start writing "political poems," his language would not return to its former "deceptive ease and elegance," because it would still be less committed to poetry's magic. A more thorough discussion of the nature of Zach's later language of poetry and its relation to the sociopolitical reality will have to be developed in another essay, while this may be the right moment to turn to David Avidan, and take a longer ride with him, from the early 1950s through to the early 1970s.

140 Hanan Hever, "Natan Zach: 'Al tachshov li zot le-avon,'" in *Hanan Hever kore shira*, 159-62. Wieseltier, on the other hand, marks a great decline in *Kol he-chalav ve-ha-dvash*.

141 Shimon Sandbank, "Kola shel nefesh medaberet be-shir," in *Mi-shana Le-shana ze*, 315.

142 Zach, "Perpetual Peace: Following the War," *Ha'arets*, June 30, 1967.

143 On Kant's aesthetic moment see Ross Wilson, *Subjective Universality in Kant's Aesthetics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

## b. A Caveat: This Journey Is Meant to Empty You

More than ten years before the 1967 war, by the time his first volume of poetry, *Brazim arufe sfata'im* (*Lipless Faucets*, 1954) was published, David Avidan had already severed his ties with the Israeli Communist Party.<sup>144</sup> Avidan was soon to abandon the revolutionary tone and motivation found in his youthful poems, used in the Communist and Socialist press, little of which, at least in style and tone, remains in *Lipless Faucets*. Such is the poem *Ha-ketem nish'ar al ha-kir* ("The Spot Remained on the Wall," hereafter "*Ha'ketem*"), a rewriting of Brecht's "*Die Unbesieglische Inschrift*" ("The Invincible Inscription," 1934) from the *Chroniken* section of the *Svendborger Gedichte*.<sup>145</sup> Instead of the inscription "*Hoch Lenin!*" (Up With Lenin!) written on the wall of an Italian prison cell during the October revolution of 1917, Avidan presents a mere *ketem*, a spot or a stain, that the speaker tries to erase from the wall. *Ha-ketem* presents a radical distillation of Brecht's poem, and raises many questions as to the reasons for and effects of this distillation. At first glance, at least, it appears, as Calderon explains, that Avidan relieves the Brechtian inscription of its ideological and objective content.<sup>146</sup> The only thing that can be said with any confidence about the stain, Calderon stresses, is that it causes distress.<sup>147</sup> However, Avidan's poem does not present any subjective or internal grounds for suffering, nor any clear feeling of mental distress, and the answer to the riddle it presents cannot lie, I believe, in it being an existential retort to Brecht's revolutionary motivations. Here are the first two stanzas of the poem:

### <sup>148</sup> הכתם נשאר על הקיר

מישהו ניסה לגרד את הכתם מעל הקיר.  
אבל הכתם היה כהה מדי (או להיפך – בהיר מדי).  
אם כך ואם כך – הכתם נשאר על הקיר.

144 Calderon, *Matsave yesod*, 25. In 1977 Avidan tried to get elected to the Knesset on the Labor party ticket, but failed; see a short news report in *Davar*, March 6, 1977.

145 *Die Unbesieglische Inschrift: Zur Zeit des Weltkriegs / In einer Zelle des italienischen Gefängnisses San Carlo / Voll von verhafteten Soldaten, Betrunknen und Dieben / Kratzte ein sozialistischer Soldat mit kopierstift in die Wand: / Hoch Lenin! / Ganz oben, in der halbdunklen Zelle, kaum sichtbar, aber / Mit ungeheuren Buchstaben geschrieben. / Als die wärter es sahen, schickten sie einen Maler mit einem Eimer Kalk / Und mit einem langstieligen Pinsel übertünchte er die drohende Inschrift. / Da er aber mit seinem Kalk nur die Schriftzüge nachfuhr / Stand oben in der Zelle nun in Kalk: / Hoch Lenin! / Erst ein zweiter Maler überstrich das Ganze mit breitem Pinsel / So daß es für Stunden weg war, aber gegen Morgen / Als der Kalk trocknete, trat darunter die Inschrift wieder hervor: / Hoch Lenin! / Da schickten die Wärter einen Maurer mit einem Messer gegen die Inschrift vor / Und er kratzte Buchstabe für Buchstabe aus, eine Stunde lang / Und als er fertig war, stand oben in der Zelle, nun farblos / Aber tief in der Mauer geritzt die unbesieglische Inschrift: / Hoch Lenin! / Jetzt entfernt die Mauer! Sagte der Soldat.* GBFA, 12:12.

146 See Calderon's treatment of the poem in *Matsave yesod*, 24-27. Calderon explains that Brecht's poem was widely read in socialist and communist circles in Israel in Mordechai Avi -Sha'ul's translation. According to Calderon, Avidan read the same translation. Calderon, *Matsave yesod*, 24, fn. 6.

147 Ibid, 26. See also Maya Bejerano, "*Ha-ketem nish'ar al ha-kir: Shira ke-hofa'a Chaya; He'arot le-shir shel Avidan*," in *Akhsahv* 66 (1999): 39-40.

148 Avidan, *Kol Hashirim*, 1:31.

אז שלחתי את הצבע, שימשח את הקיר בירוק.  
 אבל הכתם היה בהיר מדי.  
 ושכרתי את הסיד, שיסיד את הקיר למשעי.  
 אבל הכתם היה כהה מדי.  
 אם כך ואם כך – הכתם נשאר על הקיר.

### [The Stain Remained on The Wall

Someone tried to scratch the stain off the wall.  
 But the stain was too dark (or on the contrary – too light).  
 Either way – the stain remained on the wall.

So I sent the painter to cover the wall with green.  
 But the stain was much too light.  
 And I hired the plasterer, to plaster the wall a whitewash white.  
 But the stain was too dark.  
 Either way—the stain remained on the wall.]<sup>149</sup>

The resemblance to Brecht's "The Invincible Inscription" is evident, as are the differences. In the *Svendborg Poems* "The Invincible Inscription" is adjacent to other poems which record active cases of resistance in the struggle of the working class, and raise questions about the function of writing in the history of that struggle.<sup>150</sup> In "The Invincible Inscription" Brecht metaphorizes the dynamic by which the more the forces of reaction try to erase the revolutionary messages of *Hoch Lenin!*, the more they re-inscribe it, until they need to remove the walls of the social prison they themselves have built in order to remove it completely. Brecht thus infuses a deft doubleness to the status of poetry: it's message is galvanizing for the people's sense of agency, and is presumably therefore intolerable to the oppressors, and yet there's still a necessary sense of "play" that can't be defined in causal terms in what the poem tells of, and in terms of what the poem itself is. This sense of play comes not least from the terse language that patly emulates the directness and conciseness of the inscription itself, as well as shares its commitment. However, both the act of writing the inscription in the poem and the poem itself have also a bit of magic, or at least aura, that is something indefinite about them, something that prevents them from being an actual revolutionary act. How does Avidan's *Ha-ketem* relate to all this, as there is no inscription, no soldier, no prison, only a wall and a stain that the speaker (not the prison authorities) tries to remove with the hired help of a painter and a plasterer, as well as by himself? What kind of commitment does *Ha'ketem* convey? Perhaps most evident is that Avidan replaces Brecht sense of agency with helplessness. Secondly, the word *ketem* inevitably brings to mind the phrase *ketem musari* [moral stain], as well as the biblical allusion to the hand-written inscription on the wall from the Book of Daniel. Obviously and necessarily Avidan's *ketem* is not an existential retort to Brecht. Let us now read the last two stanzas of the poem:

149 *Modern Hebrew Poetry*, trans. Bernhard Frank (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1980), 133. Translation modified by me. The fused words are in the original.

150 See Antony Phelan, "Figures of Memory in the 'Chroniken,' in *Brecht's Poetry of Political Exile*, edited by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180.

אז לקחתי סכין-מטבח ונסיתי לקרצף את הכתם מעל הקיר.  
והסכין היתה חדה עד-כאב.  
רק אתמול השחיו אותה.  
ובכלזאת.

ואגרפתי גרזן והלמתי בקיר, אך הפסקתי בעוד מועד.  
אינניודע, מדוע עלה לפתע על דעתי,  
שהקיר עלולפול, אבל הכתם בכלזאת ישאר.  
אם כך ואם כך — הכתם נשאר על הקיר.

וכשהעמידו אותי אל הקיר, ביקשתי לעמד בסמוך לו.  
וחפיתי עליו בחזה רחב (מי יודע: אולי).  
וכשהתזו את גבי, נגר דם רב, אבל רק מצד הגב.  
יורים.

ואני כל-כך האמנתי, שהדם יכסה על הכתם.  
מטה-יריות שני.

ואני כל-כך האמנתי, שהדם יכסה על הכתם.  
אם כך ואם כך — הכתם נשאר על הקיר.

[So I took a kitchen knife and tried to scrape the stain off the wall.  
And the knife was painfully sharp.  
It was whetted only yesterday.  
Andyet.  
And I clutched an axe and beat on the wall, but stopped in time.  
I dontknow why suddenly it occurred to me  
That the wall mightopple, andyet the stain will remain.  
Either way — the stain remained on the wall.

And when they stood me against the wall, I asked to stand close to it.  
And I covered it with a broad chest (who knows: maybe).  
And when they sprayed my back, much blood spouted, but only from the back side.  
Fire.  
And I believed so much that the blood would cover the stain.  
A second barrage of fire.  
And I believed so much that the blood would cover the stain.  
Either way — the stain remained on the wall.]

After the painter and the plasterer fail to cover the stain the speaker himself tries to remove it, and following the sequence of efforts made by the prison authorities in Brecht's poem, he does it with a knife. He then realizes that even if the wall topples down, the stain will remain. Interestingly, Avidan's poem both retains a sense of Brecht's "lapidary" and concise or even crude style, and simultaneously suggests ballad form. Brecht had written many ballads, but the "Invincible Inscription" is not one of them. Avidan, then, obviously wishes to bring into engagement at least two aspects of Brecht's writing, the balladic on the one hand and the direct, dry, and concise tone and style on the other. *Ha-ketem's* balladic nature is first manifested in the recurring refrain at the end of each stanza: "Either way—the stain remained on the wall" ( in Hebrew the repeated sounds of *im kakh ve-im kakh ha-*

*ketem*. . . , are even more poetic, or better, more balladic, in their coarse chiming) which is reminiscent of the ballad's refrain. The two parenthetical expressions—"or on the contrary—too light," and "who knows: maybe," as well as the indecisiveness regarding the stain being too light or too dark add to the same effect. Likewise the division of the poem into three, five, and two eight-line stanzas which break into two four-line stanzas. The last four lines are divided into two couplets, each one ending with the word *ketem*—all reminiscent of ballad-stanza form and rhyming patterns. On the other hand, everyday plain expressions such as *mishehu nissa* ("someone tried"), the slang causative *az* ("so", as in "so I sent for," and "so I took a kitchen knife" from the second and third stanzas) as well as *kol kach* (so, so much, as in "and I believed so much"), sound somewhat coarse and thus more Brechtian (in the context of the "Invincible Inscription") than balladic. Avidan's use of compounded words—*uvekholzot* (andyet), *allullipol* (mightopple), are certainly more suggestive of modernist poetics than of folk poetry.<sup>151</sup> So is the construction *hitizu et gabbi* ("they sprayed my back"), meaning not that the speaker's back was sprayed with bullets, but that it *itself* had been torn to bits and pieces, or made fluid, and was thus scattered around. This strange use of the verb *hitizu* certainly suggests a modernist writer stretching the meaning of words beyond what everyday and normative usage enables. Still, all this does not make the poem any less balladic, first, as the gruesome image of the sprayed back fits the gothic turning point at the end of the traditional ballad, and second, because the overall feeling of unavoidable doom that permeates through the poem is no less reminiscent of the sense of Fate that so frequently infuses ballad tradition. This feeling of inevitable failure drastically removes *Ha-ketem* from "The Invincible Inscription"'s attestation to the power of people, or even one person, to fight oppression. Here is a person whose body has been broken to pieces, who can *do* nothing more. It is a pessimistic attitude that could attest to the failure of either the revolution of 1917, from which Brecht drew the inspiration for his poem, or its descendants, or any revolutionary act, but it could also suggest some more intricate engagement with the materials of the sociopolitical reality. Possibly, it actually keeps faith, though, with that part of Brecht's poem that captures the Fate, the Doom, of Reaction: there is no way one could erase the stain, as there is no way one could have expunges the *Hoch Lenin!* Inscription. Just as Brecht's poem establishes a play between the inscription within the poem and the inscription that is the poem, within Avidan's poem the "stain" is meant to be impossible to erase, bothersome, and so is the poem itself—it also meant to feel like a kind of stain.

Furthermore, the last stanza reveals that the stained wall is actually a wall against which people are being executed, possibly, by a firing squad (as indicated also by the word "*yorim*" translated as "fire," but literally meaning "they are shooting.") The speaker believed his blood would cover the stain, possibly alluding to the *Halachic* demand to cover the blood of a kosher animal after slaughter, for in the blood abides the soul. However, if the wall is used for executions, the speaker may not be the first one to be shot at against it, and the stain he so much tries to remove, hide or cover, could actually be someone else's blood sprayed from previous execution(s) and, we should add, wars. It is by blood that he hopes to cover another blood stain, and thus his efforts to expunge the stain can be a form of collaboration

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151 They are also very suggestive of what German, arguably more than most other languages, constantly does. Avidan, who was not a speaker of German, may have still had that in mind.

with the very same people who shoot him, and a failed attempt to erase the memory of other people and other killings. If this is a plausible reading of the poem, then blind collaboration with violence, and not the unavoidable failure of resistance, neither a refutation of Brecht's poetics and commitment, lies at the poem's core. The speaker's efforts at hiding the stain will only bring more death, as we'll be the ones put to the wall. Even then, the stain will remain, as more blood cannot cover bloodshed.

By reintroducing the ballad formation in a Brechtian style, *Ha-ketem* reopens the question of realism in poetry. Brecht had written across a beam in his Svedborg house "truth is concrete," and the "Invincible Inscription" in its stylistic resemblance to the inscription itself moves toward grasping concrete sociopolitical and historical facts. Avidan, supposedly on the other hand, thins-out the feeling that his poem wishes to say something about the concrete contemporary reality, and leads the poem into the more ancient, folkish, and "imaginary" realm of the ballad.<sup>152</sup> However, I believe that Avidan's gesture towards the ballad form allows a departure not from all that is concrete and historical, but from the realm of pre-used conceptions of what is real. Avidan may have felt that rewriting Brecht's revolutionary poetics in Israel of the early to mid 1950s would reveal nothing new, and merely reiterate what has become a Socialist or a Marxist cliché. And clichés, as Calderon explains, were already abundant in various discourses at the time. Thus, in order to avoid becoming yet another empty verbal expression, poetry, *Ha-ketem* suggests, needs to remember Brecht's ballads, or even Heine's ballad form, as it is felt through Brecht's poetry.<sup>153</sup> Brechtian *Gestus* which, as I suggested in the previous chapter, may have received its initial inspiration from Heine, takes yet another form in Avidan's work. Avidan's performativity here lies not in remembering a specific, named past, but in turning the invincible inscription of "*Hoch Lenin!*" into an invincible stain, the stain that got stuck to us in those incipient years of Israel's independence. The distillation of politics and content in the poem is actually an incredibly concrete gesture of making the poem a concrete shot to the gut, and to the brain, asking what could this stain be? Avidan obviously assumes that many of his readers know Brecht's poem, and through his rewriting of it the poem says that the Brechtian gesture here is to say that our Jewish Israeli love affair with Brecht, and even Heine, is grotesque because we cannot even see it. We have no right to adopt the invincible inscription of Brecht's poem, because even though our situation vis-à-vis the Palestinians is by no means simple, we must question our basic narrative, and see whether we have the right to deem ourselves prisoners writing revolutionary resistance slogans on the cell of a prison that someone else has thrown us into. Even if we did not choose to be jailers, we have become such, and the stain we cannot erase is the blood of a people whom we are also murdering and expelling, and try to be sovereign over. The stain, the abstract rewriting of Brecht's inscription, mocks the claim that the new state recently founded is liberal, progressive,

152 *Brazim arufe s(e)fata'im* includes many "ballads" such as *Ha-rechovot mamri'im le'at*, *Ballada al ha-tsel*, *ha-assir*, and, possibly, one could argue that, all other poems in this collection are related to the ballad formation.

153 That is to auratic poetry, see again Kaufman's "Aura, Still." This is not to dismiss other writers of ballads with whom Avidan engaged, and in particular Natan Alterman and Alexander Penn, only to stress that the style, ton, and vocabulary of Avidan's poems suggest a deep engagement with Brechtian poetics. On the affinities between Avidan, Alterman and Penn see Calderon, *Matsave yesod*. See also Chaya Shacham, "'Siman shel emansipatsya' o 'akt shel milkhama'?' Al zikata ha-parodit shel shirat avidan el shirat alterman," in *Mechkare yerushalayim besifrut ivrit* 13 (1992): 261-294.



enlightened, that it is a triumph for self-determination. Those claims are not necessarily inherently false, but stained in a way increasingly impossible to clean. What right, then, do we have to think ourselves admirers of Brecht when we haven't started to address the stain on our wall?

Could there also be an urgent *actual* reason for the stance Avidan takes with respect to Brecht? Avidan published *Lipless Faucets*, in which *Ha-ketem* appears, in 1954, two years before the 1956 war, when Israel would be deeply involved in retaliatory attacks in response to Palestinian refugees' raids and against cross-border attacks by Egyptian-controlled irregular forces and commandos. Gradually, these dynamics, alongside other causes, would change the political atmosphere within the Jewish Israeli public. The Czech arms deal of 1955, which supplied Nasser's Egypt with advanced Soviet aircraft, tanks, and other military equipment, encouraged Moshe Dayan, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli army in the years 1953-1958, to aggravate the border conflicts, claiming that an escalated use of force would deter the Arabs from attacking Israel.<sup>154</sup> The fear that the Arabs wanted to "throw the Jews into the sea" did not abate in the years between 1948-1956, and the notion that only force could thwart these intentions gradually became axiomatic. By 1955 Jewish Israelis considered the notion of a peaceful settlement based on the 1947 UN partition resolution to be evidence of aggressive, not peaceful, intentions.<sup>155</sup> At this place and time, that is Israel of the 1950s, Avidan's work bravely performs a performative poetic *Gestus* that strives to become more performative and auratic in risk of seeming merely "intellectual" in its abstractness. And that very abstractness is actually a formal brutal engagement with what is truly brutal, namely current sociopolitical reality itself.

Calderon believes that Dayan's Hebrew, a *sabra* (a native-born Israeli's) dialect, supposedly or actually devoid of highfalutin expressions while exalting death on the battlefield and military prowess, did not find its way into the literature of the time.<sup>156</sup> However, there are some obvious correlatives between Dayan and Avidan, who was also a *sabra*, whose language may have resembled Dayan's in its directness and clarity, and whose poetic and journalistic writing had certain affinities with Dayan's proclivity towards power, military "heroism," and masculine potency. When Dayan speaks, for instance, of the need to "to make the war" not to "conduct a battle or a war," stressing that a commander is not a "clerk in uniform and the battle is not a sequence of decisions," it is hard not to think of Avidan's philosophy of action and movement.<sup>157</sup> For example, in a 1958 article in the center-labor *Davar* daily newspaper Avidan expresses a desire for power, intellectual acuity, and individual courage that he opposes to procedures, agreements, and ineffective resolution

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154 See Shabtay Tevet, *Moshe Dayan* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1971), 346, and Calderon, *Perek kodem*, 77. See also Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), for a thorough account of the retaliation attacks that had led to the war of 1956 by both escalating the conflict over the borders and enforcing a power paradigm.

155 See Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Beinin analyzes the process of nationalization occurring both in Israel and in Egypt, culminating in the mid 1960s. See also his discussion of the defeat of the left in the 1959 *Knesset* elections, *ibid.* 218-34.

156 Calderon, *Perek kodem*, 99. See Amos Oz on Dayan's attitude towards death, as well as an interview....

157 See an interview with Dayan in *Al ha-mefakdin ha-holkhim ba-rosh*, (Jerusalem: Sherute ha-hasbara be-misrad rosh ha-memshala [Propaganda Services in the Prime Minister Office]), 1968), 4.

mechanisms that he identifies with the rule of democracy. He even cites a junior ex-army-officer whom he heard saying of a “certain military personality, that had lately expressed certain political opinions” that this military personality had “that unmediated faculty of grasping things by their spine.”<sup>158</sup> Whether the ex-officer refers to Dayan or not maybe uncertain, but it is clear that Avidan supports the faculty of “grasping” over and against managerial and administrative procedures.<sup>159</sup> Indeed, Avidan may have wanted to grasp things without first having “to understand” them, to be able to act, move fast, always be ahead of things—but it would be wrong to assume that he actually advocated anti-democratic and militaristic attitudes. What Avidan cared about was the individual’s ability to “grasp,” a faculty that he associated with making things (ideas, possibly, more than actions) move forward, especially if that individual were a poet. Furthermore, Avidan associates “grasping” with art, that is the individual’s potential for either creating art or becoming its audience, and with independent thinking. This is exactly what he tries to do in *Ha-ketem*, grasp Brecht by the throat, grasp his readers, gestically introduce reality, show the stain. “Democracy” for him in this article is nothing but a way of making individuals into a mob, thus attenuating if not completely eradicating the individual’s ability for independence and creativity, for grasping what so desperately needs to be grasped.

It would be interesting to compare this attitude with a seminal essay by Brecht—“The German Drama: Pre-Hitler” from 1935 where Brecht states that his kind of theater “holds that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and reasoning, of making judgments. . .”<sup>160</sup> The work of art, here, Brecht’s drama, allows the audience to experience itself not as a mob. The theater becomes a place for philosophers, which will not only explain the world but change it, Brecht maintains while paraphrasing Marx’s Thesis 11. However, Brecht’s desire for the individualized audience to accept what he thinks is the right understanding and would be the correct action is contradicted by his own insistence that the theater should be entertaining. “Entertaining” could be another word for “auratic” here, as Brecht clearly does not refer to commercial entertainment, but to a felt joy that art’s play makes us experience. Put differently, only art can generate in the individual the pleasurable *feeling* that she or he has just “grasped” something without having first (that is before understanding for herself, and not after) to negotiate its meaning with other people and previously held conceptions and procedures. “Grasping” could then be another term for the kind of felt understanding that art enables. I believe this is what Avidan intends when he writes about “grasping things by their spine,” even if he attributes this ability to a military officer with political pretensions, which are, as can be assumed from the context, not exactly democratic. It could be that Avidan’s provocation here is simply a characteristic inclination of his, or it could be his way of warning all of us against leaving the faculty of “grasping” to army officers (and especially those with political aspirations.) “Grasping” should be a much wider activity, shared by as many people as possible, as will be immediately explained.

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158 Avidan, “Ha-demokratya u-shnayim mi-pulchane’ha,” *Davar*, June 27, 1958, 3.

159 Thus he preferred to be on the battle field in Sinai than at the chief of staff’s headquarters during the 1956 war.

160 *Brecht on Theater*, 79.

### c. A Language That is Greater than Myself

We can now return, from another perspective, to the question of the Other in Avidan's work, discussed previously in the analysis of "*Ha-ketem nish'ar al ha-kir*" ("The Stain Remains on the Wall.") In a compelling interpretation of Avidan's poetry, the poet and anthropologist Zali Gurevitch claims that what seems to be in Avidan's poetry the exclusion of all Others, is actually its very opposite. Gurevitch, like Bejerano, centers his arguments on Avidan's playfulness. "The game's purpose," he claims, is to "grasp it from an external view point." Avidan is thus not interested in the self, but rather in turning himself into a concept (a move that can be seen in his naming a later selection of poems "Avidanium".) Gurevitch continues:

את "מוטב כבר שנלך בגדולות"<sup>161</sup> אפשר לפרש לא רק כהצבת האני כגיבור עד כדי היותו יסוד אובייקטיבי המעיד על גדולה, אלא להבין שהגדולות גדולות ממני, ומוטב, אם כבר, שנלך אליהן, להכרה שמעבר לאני ועלילותיו. השפה גדולה ממני, הדיבור גדול ממני, אפילו אני גדול ממני. המעבר מחייב תזוזה של תשומת הלב מדיבור לשמיעה, משליטה לקליטה. הדיבור השירי אינו הפועל אלא הנפעל, לא הרקדן אלא הריקוד. הוא אינו כלי בשירות האני אלא להיפך, עניינו לרוקן ולהסיר את הפרעת האני המתערב בעניינים ולא נותן לשמוע, לא נותן לדיבור להידבר. . . רק כשהדיבור מדבר בך השירה שרה. . . ועל כן ההיפוך הגדול, הקובע, הוא היפוך המשחק עצמו—במקום להביס את האחר, לתת לו לדבר מתוכך. המשחק עובר ליחס בין המדבר לדיבור ולא בינו לבין מדבר אחר.

[You can explicate "we'd better reach for greatness" not only as presenting the I/self as a hero to the extent that he becomes an objective element that attests to its greatness, but as understanding that greatness is greater than me, and it would be better, while we're at it, to move toward it, to an awareness beyond the self and its deeds. Language is greater than myself, speech is greater than myself, even I am greater than myself. The transition demands a shift in attention from speaking to hearing, from taking control to taking in. Poetic speech does act but is acted upon, not the dancer but the dance. And this is why the great crucial reversal is the reversal of the game itself—instead of defeating the Other, you let him speak from inside of you. The game becomes the relation between the speaker and speech itself and not between him and another speaker.]<sup>162</sup>

A dialogue, as it were, between the speaker and speech, instead of between him or her and another speaker, may suggest endless possibilities. It is not the poet's ego, or imagined speaker, that creates an Other or speaks on her behalf. We've seen this happening in Halpern's poetry—a speaker that is so closely attached to some other person, or to a certain human condition shared by him and others, that any division between "I" and "you" is radically undermined. We cannot expect Avidan to do the same, not only, perhaps, because of the kind of person he was, but also because times have changed. His language is the same language through which notions of ethnic and cultural supremacy are being expressed, as well as fears that "the others" aim to destroy "us." Avidan writes from within the Israeli Hebrew

161 In Hebrew: "*Mutav kvar sh-nelech bi-gdolat*," based on *Psalms* 131:1, "*Ve-lo hilakhti bi-gdolat*."

162 Zali Gurevitch, "Hipukho shel Avidan," *Ha-aretz*, January 1, 2010.

language, not unlike the early Zach, and his poetry celebrates the Hebrew language as an achievement of the Jewish sovereignty in the nascent state of Israel. One reads his poems and realizes what can be done with this wonderful language, which is, as Gurevitch explains, greater than oneself, but also greater than any kind of other. The question is, then, what can the relationship that Gurevitch finds between the speaker and speech itself, or shall we say, poetry, truly allow for? In order to answer this question let us consider an essay Avidan included in his 1964 Collected Poems *Mashehu bishvil mishehu* (“Something for Someone”).<sup>163</sup> Avidan addresses his potential reader:

תהיה מי שתהיה ומה שתהיה, אתה למרות-הכול בן התרבות המערבית. בעלכורחך נשתלה בך ההשאה, כי מעלתו הגדולה של תלמיד-חכם ואזרח משכיל היא להיות "מלא וגדוש". ובכן, הזהרה: המסע, שאתה יוצא אליו. . . אינו מסע-רכש או מסע-תקניות. שירים אלה, ויהיו אשר יהיו, אינם בשומפנים "מוזן-רוחני". הם לא נועד "למלא" אותך, אלא [ . . . ] "לרוקן" אותך. הנכס היחיד, שאתה עשוי להתעשר בו אגב מסע זה [ . . . ] היא תחושת-ייתרון סמוייה [ . . . ] אשר תימהל לפתע בתוכך. בסיום-המסע (כלומר באחת ההפסקות ההכרחיות שבין הסוף לבין ההתחלה המחודשת) אולי תחוש, שאתה יודע יותר על מלים מאשר ידעת קודמלכן. מלים יודעות עליך הרבה יותר משאתה יודע, או איפעם תידע, עליהן [ . . . ] לא, רק לא "מלא וגדוש, כי אז תאבד לי ולעצמך ללא חזור. להפך: בתום מסע זה הייתי רוצה לראות אותך קל יותר, נייד יותר, מהיר יותר, פקוח יותר, נפעם יותר, ריבוני יותר.<sup>164</sup>

[Whoever and whatever you are, despite it all, you are a product of Western culture. In spite of yourself, a conviction was planted in you that the greatest virtue of the scholar and the educated citizen is to be “full to the brim.” Well, a caveat: the journey you are about to embark on [ . . . ] is not an acquisition-trip or a shopping-spree. These poems, whatever they may be, are undernecircumstances “spiritual-nourishment.” They are not meant to “fill you up” but [ . . . ] to “empty” you. The only asset that you may gain in the course of this journey [ . . . ] is a hidden sense of advantage [ . . . ] that will suddenly become blended within you. By the end of the journey (that is, during one of the necessary stopovers between the end and the renewed beginning) you may feel that you know more about words than you knew beforehand. Words know about you much more than you know, or willever

163 Gurevitch bases his explication of Avidan on this essay (titled *Od mashehu*, One more thing), and especially on the motto to the essay, a saying of the eighteenth-century Hassidic rabbi of Mezeritch. The motto goes as follows (*Kol ha-shirim*, 296):

רצוני להראות לכם את הדרך הטובה ביותר לומר תורה. אל ירגיש אדם את עצמותו כלל, אלא יהא כולו אוזן השומעת מה שהדיבור מדבר בו. משיתחיל שומע דברי עצמו, יפסיק מייד.

[I would like to show you the best way to say Torah. A man shall not feel his self at all, but will be all an ear that hears what the world of speech speaks in him. Once he starts hearing his own speech, he will cease immediately.]

The discussion here is less interested in the mystical implications of the rabbi’s saying, than in the understanding that Avidan wishes to remove his poetry from any pre-given understanding of the Other, or, for that matter, the self.

164 David Avidan, *Kol ha-shirim*, 1: 297. The non-normative spelling is Avidan’s own.

know, about them [. . .] No, just not “full to the brim,” because then you’d be lost to me and to yourself irrevocably. On the contrary: By the end of this journey I would like to see you lighter, more mobile, more open-eyed, more excited, more sovereign.]

In this apparent amalgamation of Zen and Theodor Adorno, and possibly from Dante to Keats, the whole history of art, Avidan claims for his poetry the power to free its readers from the conceptually predetermined constraints of extant knowledge, thus allowing them to have an “aware existence.” Nothing is to be sold and acquired, for poetry is not, or not merely, a commodity, Avidan seems to say, bringing to mind Marxian analysis of the commodity as a predetermined value fixed in the *conceptual* abstraction of the labor time required for each product produced, over against that required for every other product produced in the same market. When all socio-economic value is thus pre-deterministically judged as exchange or commodity-value, and when we are led to believe that this already-fully-conceptualized and therefore inescapably determinate mode of judging ought to apply to *all* our experiences, then not much scope is left for relatively free, undetermined, reflective, critical thought. Poetry, Avidan insists, is something else. It does not belong to this realm of given, predetermined and hence determinate, concepts. That is perhaps the meaning of Avidan's phrase about “words’ greater knowledge about us,” than our knowledge about them; and we can likewise sense the phrase's additional gesture towards the possibility of experiencing provisionally emancipated “words” that, freed from having only their predetermined conceptual meanings, would allow us to begin to “know” the “more” that such words would tell of. Avidan's phrase, to put this differently, resonates intriguingly with Adorno's famous aperçu that “Art knows us better than we know ourselves” [*Aesthetic Theory*]. As language is the most obvious and immediate medium for communicable conceptuality, most of the time it communicates concepts that have already determined our cognition of the materials we aim to think about; and the whole process tends to have as its alpha and omega, the determinate judgment of everything as if it were nothing but exchange or commodity-value. Avidan stresses, “just not full to the brim,” and I would like to suggest that “full to the brim” corresponds primarily to pre-conceived knowledge, or concepts, with a tantalizing suggestion that a truly “filling” engagement with the emancipated “words” that poetry makes possible, always first requires an emptying out or suspension of words' predetermined meanings. “Knowing more about words” would thus appear to be Avidan’s way of speaking about critical-reflective aesthetic judgment. That is when words—recast in the forms of poetic art—take as their point of departure the form of already-known language and concepts, but *only* the form. We somehow understand, in aesthetic semblance-experience, that we are provisionally free to engage and judge a poem's words or apparent speech-acts, its rhythms and measures and images and other formal gestures, in ways that could not be countenanced in the real world. We enter another realm where experimentation is possible—or even the basic mode of being. Words are here free to do their own bidding or non-bidding, they don’t have to sell anything, to make anything, to do anything already somehow predetermined, for they are now characterized by the play of imagination rather than the determinacy of already-

established concepts. And because the poem's emancipated words feel, in our semblance-experience of them, so real, we let them carry us, surprise us, stretch beyond what we knew about them beforehand.

All this, I would like to suggest, is related to Gurevitch's claim regarding the relation between the one who speaks and speech itself. Speech itself corresponds to aesthetic-semblance experience, and its experimental nature enables the emptying out of any pre-given conceptualization of what the other is. It also allows for anybody to take part in its play, anybody, that is, who can and is willing to read the poems. As for Avidan, the other is first and foremost a potential reader of his poetry, in as much as he considers himself to be a reader more than anything else.<sup>165</sup> And a reader of his poetry is someone willing to cast aside not only what he knows about others and poetry, but also about oneself.

Interestingly, Avidan defines his potential reader as an educated Western, or rabbinic, citizen. Citizen he must be of the newly established state. When reading this poetry we are asked to allow ourselves to forget what we've learned as well as the imperative to learn, and allow our journey, the one we believe has ended once we became, for instance, the proud citizens of the Jewish state, to keep going on and on until we gain a barely-felt sense of advantage, but advantage over whom? And why should our gain (or loss) be defined in such competitive, and if I may add, Western masculine, terms? I would like to suggest that if one hears the song-promise of what poetry's emancipated words might make possible for thought, it then becomes hard not to hear Avidan's suggestion that we might be led to what words would mean beyond the meanings that the history of the West until now has delimited for them. The said advantage, then, is an advantage over myself as I know myself to be. And the last of Avidan's words in the above quotation, *riboni* (sovereign), is especially meaningful, as it makes it even more evident that it is not only the agency of the individual that is at stake here, but the nascent sovereignty of the Israeli state. Let us read further:

הקורא-הריבוני הוא נכס-שאיין-לו-תחליף לכל תרבות. סופר יכול להיות אולי יותר מקורא-ריבוני, אפילו לעתים הרבה יותר, אך לעולם אין הוא יכול לשהות במדרגתו של קורא-ריבוני [...] אל תיפתה, איפוא, באף לא שלב של מסעך אתי, לנסות להציב את עצמך במקומי, לפחות לא יותר משאני מנסה להציב את עצמי במקומך. נסה לראות במה שחולף לעינד (לא לנגד עינד) קוואור קטוע, המבקיע בערגה מיוסרת-אף-משועשעת אל עבר מחוז-ודאות גואל ואבוד בתוך החשיכה הגדולה, הסוגרת על שנינו. אבל עמוזאת, חשוב עליי כעל אדם זר. אינני אתה ואינד אני, משום שאין אני יכול או רשאי להילוות אליך, כשם שאין אתה רשאי או יכול להילוות אלי.

[The sovereign reader is an indispensable asset for any culture. A writer can perhaps be more than a sovereign reader, sometimes even much more, but he can never reach the level of a sovereign reader [...] Do not be tempted, then, in any stage of your journey with me, to try to put yourself in my place, at least no more than I'm trying to put myself in your place. Try to see in what passes by your eyes (not before of your eyes) a fragmentary lightline that breaks through yearningly-though-bemusedly towards a redeeming and lost region of certainty within in the great darkness that closes in on us both. Nevertheless, think of me as a stranger. I am not you and you are not me, because I cannot or may not accompany you, as you may not or cannot accompany me.]<sup>166</sup>

165 Avidan, *Kol ha-shirim*, 1: 297-98, and the following discussion below.

166 Ibid.

Avidan stresses here that it is as a *culture* that “we” so desperately need sovereign readers, or is it citizens? And poetry is “a fragmentary lightline” that merely suggests a lost possibility for redemption; the darkness that closes in on us cannot allow for anything more than that; but without sovereignty, Avidan seems to say, there is no chance of perceiving even that lost hope. Put differently, and perhaps more accurately, it is a hope for being sovereign, that is, for the ability to see, to see with a provisional autonomy or to see with a lack of external conceptual predetermination; in short, to see *beyond* that which already is or seems to be, and to imagine that which can be. And in order to do that, Avidan insists, both writer and reader must maintain their separateness, since the established ways of “accessing” the other are so established that they unintentionally mock what Otherness really is, so that a first way back towards such otherness might indeed be an unsettling process of emptying-out. Only then will any kind of true grasping be possible, grasping, that is, without being first preconditioned by what I believe I think, or what others think, or are. This is also one of the reasons why Avidan's poetry is so devoid of psychological explanations and biographical information, as well as of much reference to others. As explained above, the strength of this approach should be understood and judged in relation to the time, place, and language, as well the literary context, in which it was created.

#### **d. The Criminal offense of Neglecting the Temples**

In an introduction to two plays he published in 1962, Avidan confesses to having only recently understood a disturbing “though fascinating” paradox: that “the number of good artists in the field of the written word is much larger, despite the field's small scale. . . than the number of people who can and may serve as reasonable partners in dialogues and discourses beyond the sovereign reign of the writing desk.”<sup>167</sup> Hoping to establish such a community “within the realm of the imaginary,” Avidan publishes his plays under the title “David Avidan Presents Abstract Theater.” Abstract, first, as these plays are not necessarily designed for the stage; more importantly they are abstract since Avidan hopes to offer through them a different form of movement in time and space than the one available in movies and television shows. It is, he explains, “a parallel illusion of movement in space and time for which the the viewer's association mechanism will be means of transportation.”<sup>168</sup> This would be, Avidan further claims, an initial experiment in the field of social “if not organizational” activity. The fact that currently there is no such intelligent “forum” that is “regulating and developing human communication,” Avidan concludes, weighs on him more than any other social failure, “perhaps even more than my financial difficulties.”<sup>169</sup> And how can such a “forum” be established? Avidan suggests changing the theater, but not only its stage, and not only the kind of illusion that the stage creates. What is needed is an exposure to the theatrical experience that is not limited to people's front side, since, he stresses “it is a criminal offense

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167 “A Prolog to the Prolog,” in *David Avidan magish teatron mufshat*, Jerusalem: *Achsahv*, 1965 (1962), 15.

168 *Ibid*, 9.

169 *Ibid*.

to neglect the temples during the transformation of any kind of artistic experience.”<sup>170</sup> No, just not neglect the head's temples, or any other part of the human body. Indeed Avidan further recommends nudism to allow for a fuller reception of the artistic experience. However, as much as an audience of nudists could be an interesting novelty in the theater hall, it is obvious that the genuine frustration Avidan so desperately wants to overcome relates to the lack of an audience of the very same kind that Brecht hoped to have, that is an audience made up of individuals able and willing to experience the work of art mentally, emotionally, and even physically, using their “association mechanism” as the “means of transportation” through which “an illusion of movement” takes place. And this is, Avidan insists, a social, even organizational, matter, and not a private one. Thus it is even more important than Avidan’s own financial difficulties that would, many years later, hasten his death. It is also worth mentioning that such an understanding of the power of art strongly echoes Marx’s famous chapter on commodity in *Capital*. As Robert Kaufman explains, Marx shows there that a process of ongoing judgment which is not controlled by the pre-conceived abstraction of labor time requires what Marx calls “freely associated men” judging the value of economic activities and products “in accordance with a settled plan,” but a plan that they themselves are “freely” making, choosing, altering, re-making.<sup>171</sup> Marx shows that initially this ability to transcend the conceptual abstraction of labor time—or, for that matter, any other set-in-stone already existing fixed, let alone dominant, concept—as the ultimate determinant of value would break open that very question of value via aesthetic judgment, “since aesthetic judgment by definition (since Kant at least) offers the *form* or *semblance* but not the *substance* of an already extant, determined, determining *concept*.”<sup>172</sup> Avidan, I would like to argue, aims to create an aesthetic experience that would enable every individual viewer or reader to use his or her imagination to generate an illusion of movement or narrative, i.e. change, and this newly found capacity would then enable the formation of a forum of people engaging in dialogue. This is the reason he demands to include the head temples, possibly symbolizing the mental faculty, as well as the back and the entire body, that is, all our faculties, in theatrical and literary *abstract* experiences. This could also be a metaphor to the audience in its entirety, including those sitting to the sides. The result, he maintains, would be not so much “a dialogue,” as this term may suggest only two people conversing with each other, but rather a much wider and freer discourse between a large number of people, able to “grasp,” i.e. understand for themselves without their understanding being preconditioned by other people and previous concepts.

What such a process would eventually enable is suggested in another, later newspaper article that Avidan published a decade later. It is an article from December 1973, that is soon after The 1973 War and before the battles' final demise. Avidan writes bitterly about intellectuals' collaboration with dominant ideology and practice.<sup>173</sup> In this article, titled “*Ma nishtana*” (“how is this [night] different.”) The repeated question from the Passover

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170 Ibid, 8.

171 Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 84.

172 Kaufman, “Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire Baudelaire,” 209.

173 There are, obviously, major time gaps between *Ha-ketem*, the 1958 article, and 1973, but Avidan has been more consistent than Zach in his poetry and thought, and this 1973 article sheds light on both Avidan’s past and future as a writer, especially on the reading of *Ha-ketem*'s speaker as one of the intellectual collaborators.



Haggadah), Avidan maintains that nothing has changed, despite prevalent claims to the contrary. First, he says, “this country knows only one rule—the rule of dominant opinion among the Jewish community. There is no multi-climates, no variety, there is a tyranny, exposed or covered, of the non-creative collective.”<sup>174</sup> Everybody, says Avidan, speaks of change in a way that has become no less than “a mass psychosis;” this is only “a weak substitute” for real public criticism, and it stems from a desire “to escape reality rather than get to know it.” Nothing has changed in the leadership of the country, and the worst of all is:

נכונותם של אינטלקטואלים ואמנים להשלים עם העובדה, שאירועים כמו מלחמות הם שיקבעו את סדרי-  
 חייהם והם שיכתיבו להם שינויים [. . .] אירועים מדיניים וצבאיים צריכים להיות **תוצאתם** של שינויים  
 רוחניים (חשיבתיים, ניסוחיים, עיצוביים), ולא להיפך. לא זו בלבד, שאסור לאינטלקטואל-היוצר לחכות  
 למאורעות היסטוריים, כדי להשתנות אישית, אלא להיפך: הוא עצמו, בהשתנותו האיטית, צריך להכתיב את  
 השינויים ההיסטוריים.

[Intellectuals’ and artists’ willingness to accept the fact that events such as wars would dictate their lives and prescribe change [. . .] political and military events should be the outcome of spiritual changes (in thought, articulation, form), and not the other way around. It is not only that the creative intellectual must not wait for historical events in order to change personally, but the other way around: he himself, in his gradual changing process should dictate historical changes.] [Emphasis in the original.]

All transformation should start with a slow inner change of thought, articulation and form, and not necessarily with direct action. Again, if “grasping” is to be left solely to army officers, politicians, and “public opinion,” actually, to any “other,” nothing will change, nothing at all.<sup>175</sup>

### e. But There’s No One To Talk to, Not Someone Close and Not Someone Else

By 1973, the year in which Avidan publishes *Shirim shimushi’yim* (*Useful Poems*) and writes his aforementioned newspaper article about creative people’s collaboration with a false concept of change, his poems had gained a more intense sense of urgency. This is the reason why the poet A’haron Shabtai, who’s first volume of poetry appeared in 1966, and who had not held much appreciation for Avidan’s earlier poetry, became highly impressed with at least some of the poems in *Shirim shimushi’yim*. Shabtai senses that Avidan represents here the difficulties of “our generation,”—first and foremost a certain emotional detachment that bears, according to Shabtai, on every aspect of “our lives,” whether it is the inability to love, or what he defines as the “loss of values.”<sup>176</sup> This, he continues, “produces dissociated

174 David Avidan, “Ma nishtana,” *Yedi’ot A’charonot, Tarbut ve-sifrut*, 21 Dec., 1973, 3. Following citations are from the same page.

175 In German, that is for Heine, Marx, and Brecht, among other, the word for “to grasp” is the same word as that for “to conceive”: *begreifen*. Avidan did not read German, but interestingly his idea of grasping corresponds to what the German suggests.

176 Aharon Shabtai, “Shirim shimushi’yim,” *Ha’aretz* (Tarbut ve-sifrut supplement), August 17, 1973, 18. All

people, with defenses, that escape contact. Such is the Avidanian protagonist, a cosmic superman of the ‘age of communication.’” Shabtai encourages us to note Avidan’s “strong, absolute choice of a certain kind language,” a language that is so violent and inconsiderate that it makes one shiver. The “ideal” of this language, Shabtai observes, is modeled on the style of advertisements, research, legal contracts, newspaper articles, or financial bonds, and it yields another ideal, as it were, “an existence on the same level—some kind of mythical functioning.” Avidan’s is a “useful language” of control that expresses distance, supremacy, and independence. However, Shabtai further maintains, this very language produces an “I” that “is simultaneously passive and active, myself and an other. . . the primary victim of the arrogance of Avidan the superman, who neutralizes, penetrates, expels, and alienates through language, is, of course, Avidan himself.” This is Shabtai’s understanding of the very trait that Yitzhak Laor worries might prevent readers from a genuine engagement with Avidan’s poetry.<sup>177</sup> Shabtai here does not focus on Avidan’s playfulness or on the mystical idea of speech speaking from within oneself and thus overcoming any division between self and an Other. Poetic language itself, its style and tone, the choice of words and syntactic structures, are what he singles out. Shabtai’s contentions can be easily understood when reading, for instance, Avidan’s long poem “Election Speech for the Presidency of the United States of ChinAmerica,” where an incredibly aggressive speaker talks, barks and screams at his potential voter. I would like, however, to examine another poem from the same volume that may have been too mystifying for Shabtai to mention and praise.<sup>178</sup> It is a thirty line poem consisting of fifteen rhyming couplets, which unfortunately are very hard to maintain in translation.

#### 179 עכשיו הוא הזמן

עכשיו הוא הזמן להתחיל משהו שלא יגמר  
 בשורות קצרות וארוכות בחרוז לא-לבן לא בוער  
 לא בוער יש לי זמן ונניח שכן בוער  
 ונניח שלא אצלי אלא אצל מישהו אחר  
 הינו הך לא קובע ענין של מקום וזמן  
 קלפים ואקדח ודרכון קלפים על השולחן  
 קלפים על הראש קלפים ביד קלפים חזקים  
 משהו שמרים ולא מוריד ענינים עמקים  
 עמקים מני ים עמקים מני דם משהו שמגיע

following citations are from the same page. “*Shirim shimushi’yim*,” was published before 1973 war which commenced on October 6, 1973.

177 Yitzhak Laor, “Nazri’a nashim ba-kikar mul ha-shemesh,” *Ha’aretz*, 12.6.2009. Laor focuses on Avidan’s so-called “masculinity.”

178 It seems that Shabtai has almost always had a proclivity for direct and communicative poetry. This tendency grew stronger as Shabtai became associated with the Left. See his “He’arot al shira u-politika,” in *Chadarim* 15 (Winter 2003-4): 24-31, where he advocates a straightforward, clear and oppositional attitude towards the empirical, implicitly relying on Brecht (this can be surmised from his translation to Brecht’s *Geschichten von Herrn Keuner* for the same volume of *Chadarim* journal.)

179 Avidan, *Kol ha-shirim* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute and Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me’uchad, 2009-2012), 2: 258.

משהו שחותך למעלה רקיע אחר רקיע  
 לא רגוע ולא מרגיע ולא נרגע  
 רוצח בכוונה תחילה ונרצח בלי שגגה  
 עובר מקיר אל קיר ומדם לדם  
 בזמזום של חרק במלמול של חולה של בנאדם  
 משהו שהולך לישון אבל לעולם לא נרדם  
 לא במטה ולא על אבן ולא על מים  
 ושמעו עליו על הארץ וחקרו עליו בשמים  
 והזכירו אותו בתפילות בבתי-חולים  
 בבתי-ספר בבתי-סהר בבתי-גללים  
 שהכניסו לו עד העצם יכולים או לא יכולים  
 עד עצם הענין על עצם העצם ובין הגלגלים  
 ובין הרגלים ובין הידים ובין העינים  
 ובין האזנים ובין הכנפים ובין השנים  
 נכנסו ויצאו הפוכים ומי שחזר חזר  
 נגזר ברוח נגזר בגשם בחרב נגזר  
 ובא על ענשו ברגע מר מתוק  
 ולמד לצעוק לפני שלמד לשתק  
 עכשיו הוא הרגע הנכון להכניס לו מהר ועמוק  
 אבל הענין לא פשוט ואין כבר עם מי לדבר  
 לא עם אדם קרוב ולא עם אדם אחר

### [Now is the Time

Now is the time to start something that will not end  
 in short and long lines in non-free verse no burning rush  
 no burning rush I've got time and suppose it is burning  
 and suppose that not at my place but at someone else's  
 no difference does not determine a matter of time and place  
 cards and gun and passport cards on the table  
 cards on the head cards in hand strong cards  
 something that takes deep matters up and doesn't let them down  
 deeper than sea deeper than blood something that reaches  
 something that cuts up above sky after sky  
 not calm not calming not calming down  
 kills with premeditation and gets killed without lack of intention  
 moves from wall to wall and from blood to blood  
 with an insect's hum with a sick person's murmur a person's  
 something that goes to bed but never falls asleep  
 not in bed not on stone and not on water  
 and they've heard about him on the earth and inquired about him in the skies  
 and mentioned him in prayers at hospitals  
 at schools in prisons in shit houses  
 that they let him have hard to the bone they can or cannot  
 to the bone of the matter the bone of the bone and between the wheels  
 and between the legs and between the hands and between the eyes  
 and between the ears and between the wings and between the teeth  
 came in and went out upside-down and whoever came back came back  
 cut down by wind cut down by rain cut down by sword  
 and received his punished in a bitter-sweet moment

and he learned to scream before he learned to keep quiet  
Now is the right moment to let him have it quick and deep  
But the matter isn't simple and there's no one to talk to  
Not someone close and not someone else]

Starting with a call for an action that will never stop, or better yet, with the gesture of such a call, Avidan mimics an aggressive militaristic language, with bitter irony, since it isn't at all clear what kind of action is actually called for. "Something," a recurring word in Avidan's early poetry, is what needs to be started. Not something specific that has a name, that has already been conceptualized, but "something" made "in short and long lines in non-free verse." It is also time to write this very poem, urgently, because although "it doesn't burn" as the Hebrew idiom for "no rush" goes (translated from the Yiddish "*es brent nisht*"), it is burning, if not at my place, than at someone else's. Who this someone may be isn't said. It's enough to know that something burns by someone, and that something needs to be done, in verse. Why in verse? Because verse, for one, allows for *bo'er* (burning) and *a'cher* (other) to rhyme, and thus make an arbitrary combination of words seem necessary. The card-play in the next couplet is a gesture showing that it's all an art's-game, indicating the playful nature of the "something."<sup>180</sup> But as playful as it is, it is a poem about violence. The something that "lifts" possibly reveals instead of hiding, deep matters, deeper than blood—the language becomes more and more aggressive with the cutting through the skies, the killing with a specific intention and premeditation. And since the Hebrew does not so much differentiate between "it" and "him" (*mashehu*, something, is a masculine gender noun), the aggression and violence become ever more threatening and personified. Interestingly, the wall and the blood from the "Stain Remained on the Wall" reappear here, as the "something" moves from wall to wall and from blood to blood. Things may have got worse since *it* last appeared, and now violence is literally all over the place. Everything is touched by "it" or him. Things really get messy. They beat him up hard to the bone, the Hebrew can even suggest "they fucked him"—*hikhnisu lo*, that is they forced it into it or him, whether they could or couldn't. They even forced it in between its wings—another ironic hint that this "it" is not entirely of this world—it has been mentioned in prayers, though it never fell asleep (or walked) on water. And now "they" are also harmed—some did not return, an expression used euphemistically to speak about those killed in battle, and whoever did return, came back not in his right mind or form, that is upside down. Or it could be that everything has been overturned, reverted, as a result of the clash with this something-become-someone. The movement between anapestic and iambic meter, as well as the rhyming couplets, and especially the fact that the poem is made out of just one sentence, make the poem into a speech that cannot cease, as it rolls from line to line, image to image, rhyme to rhyme. It is a madman's speech—the military general revealing his crazy blood thirst. As the speaker says, now is the moment to nail him, to let him have it fast and deep.

The "organizational activity" that Avidan had hoped to create through art a decade before the publication of *Useful Poems*, an activity he imagined would enable the gathering of a "forum" of people capable of taking part in a discourse concerning art, has probably

180 On Avidan's poetic engagement with the cinema see Yitzhak Laor, "Ha-si'ach shel ha-adon."

failed by now. “Now Is the Time” can be read as a linguistic image of violent acts such as war, rape, and murder. It both emulates and shatters the discourse around war and death that existed at the time (and in various ways has lasted to this very day)—suffice is to read the way Moshe Dayan refers to matters of death, life and war while maintaining war's and deaths' alleged necessity and hiding the true pain they so much involve. Death is welcomed by Dayan, war is the right and only way to fulfill Zionist aspirations, occupation becomes “liberation” in his mouth.<sup>181</sup> This is why it is time to “let him have it quick and deep”—Avidan’s language of poetry strives to reveal the violence within that language, i.e. Dayan's language, to show it for what it really is, while also sing it. And by singing I mean the musicality of the poem that makes it pleasurable and at the same time painful. Avidan may have learned a lot from Brecht’s insistence on speaking about this world, being very directly communicative, and uniting the “useful” with the pleasurable.<sup>182</sup> The form combining the fluent, rhythmic prose with spoken Hebrew stretched here into clear poetic form, each word finding its right place and time, certainly to pleasurable effect. It makes us all the more wonder how was this something made into someone, realize that the stain from *Ha-ketem nish'ar al ha-kir* has turned into a human being, shudder at the thought that we are caught in a circle of never ending violence, and there is, literally, no one to speak to.

Being a language of poetry that uncovers the violence lurking within the language from which it takes its materials, the poem maintains an otherness from within that is “its own most enemy,” to cite Adorno once again. Singing this language equally reveals the potential of Israeli Hebrew to become the language of the truly emancipated individual, an individual who can associate freely to create all kinds of forums, make decisions according to set plans, and create change without wars and in non-violent ways. When sung the way Avidan sings it, it becomes a language that exposes the oppression of the other alongside that of thee self as it moves from wall to wall and from blood to blood. Indeed, it could very well be that Avidan was somewhat naïve in his unabated belief in poetry. This naiveté had also led him to write an alternative national anthem published posthumously. “The New Israeli Anthem” (*Himnon-Yisra’el He-chadash*) was written for Israel’s Jubilee (1998). Avidan uses a very simple vocabulary, decidedly non-poetic, even resembling child-like language, to express under what conditions Israel could still thrive. From a current Left perspective it may be hard to accept Avidan's support of Zionism, but I believe that it still holds a certain power. Indeed, Avidan believes in “our” potential to be the chosen ones, but only under conditions of peace, not at the expense of others, and as long as “we” realize that one nation isn't yet a world. That is, “we,” whoever we are (he does not mention the term “Jews,” or any kind of past) will be wise, respectful, and inclusive; only then will we be the chosen ones. In this way the divine promise or demand becomes an earthly matter. Avidan puts it simply, although not without a certain amount of irony that invokes an ironic-sad cabaret song

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181 See, for example, Moshe Dayan, “Mapa chadasha yachasim acherim,” *Ma’ariv*, 1969. See also Amos Oz on Dayan in *Be-or hatkhelet ha-aza* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat po’alim, 1979), 28-29, 69-73. Oz wishes to distance himself from Dayan, but actually also fails to see reality from the view-points of the Palestinians. His excited and euphemistic language is the language of the one who believes himself to be ever righteous.

182 See Tom Kuhn, introduction to *Empedocles’ Shoe*, eds. Tom Kuhn and Karen Leeder (London: Methuen, 2002), 16.

(Brecht once more). He says it simply, contrary to pathos of *Ha-tikva*, the current national anthem, it is a song meant to be sung by many people together, expressing a hope for an intelligent forum to make wise decisions. It is thus also a way of summarizing my reading of Avidan:

### המנון-ישראל החדש<sup>183</sup>

כל עוד במח בפנים  
עובדים התאים הקטנים,  
וכל עוד הגוף מתמודד  
עם מה שישן וכבר מת,  
וכל עוד הנפש פתוחה  
לרוח-חירות לרוחה –

לא נדע מות,  
לא נדע סוף,  
נדע רק חיים  
ונדע רק טוב. // X 2

כל עוד תשלוט התבונה  
בכל עניני המדינה,  
וכל עוד דברים כמו שלום  
יהיו מציאות, לא חלום,  
וכל עוד נלמד להביט  
קדימה אל-תוך העתיד –

לא נדע מות,  
לא נדע סוף,  
נדע רק חיים  
ונדע רק טוב. // X 2

כל עוד נהיה נבחרים,  
אך לא על חשבון אחרים,  
וכל עוד נבין שכלם –  
ולא עם אחד – זה עולם,  
נהיה עם אחד מיחד,  
בוטח, אמיץ, לא נפחד.

לא נדע מות,  
לא נדע סוף,  
נדע רק חיים  
ונדע רק טוב. // X 2

183 Avidan, *Kol ha-shirim*, 4: 290.

**[The New Israeli Anthem**

So long as inside the brain  
The little cells are working,  
And so long as the body copes  
With all that is old and dead,  
And so long as the soul is wide open  
To the spirit of freedom

We shall not know death,  
We shall not know end,  
We'll know only life  
And we'll know only the good // x 2

As long as wisdom controls  
All matters of state,  
And as long as things such as peace  
Will be reality, not a dream,  
And as long as we'll learn to look  
Forward into the future —

We shall not know death,  
We shall not know end,  
We'll know only life  
And we'll know only the best // x 2

As long as we shall be the chosen ones,  
But not at the expense of others,  
And as long as we understand that all —  
And not one nation—is a world,  
We'll be one special nation,  
Trusting, brave, unafraid.

We shall not know death,  
We shall not know end,  
We'll know only life  
And we'll know only the best // x 2]

### Chapter 3: Harold Schimmel and A Poetry That Is Born Out of Poetry

בראיון עם ידידי ט. כרמי, ששמעתי ברדיו, הוא אמר: "מי זה משורר? ברגע שאתה יושב וכותב שיר, אתה משורר, וכשאתה מסתובב בעיר ולא כותב שירים אתה לא משורר, כי זה מקצוע, כמו נגרות." ואני שמעתי בזה מין חוסר נאמנות לשירה, מפני [. . .] שיש משוררים, שהייתה להם שתיקה של שנים והם היו משוררים עד קצות אצבעותיהם. לי היה די קשה עם זה כשלימדתי באוניברסיטה את "וולדן" של תורו, שכתב על משהו כמו "poetic existence"—איך לחיות בצורה פיוטית—ותלמידים לא תפסו את זה, ראו בזה רק סנטימנטליות, דבר מיושן. ואני אז הרגשתי בדיוק להיפך—שמשורר זה מי שחי חיים של משורר, ושכל מה שהוא קורא ולומד הוא בסופו של דבר רק לצורך שירתו. . . .

דבר שני, ששמעתי מפי חבר מאוד קרוב שלי, יהודה עמיחי: אותו תמיד הרגיזה המלה "שירה" בתוך שירים. הוא היה אומר, ששיר חייב להיות על החיים, שאין שירים על שירה. הוא ראה בזה סנוביות ושאיפה להרמטיות, סגירות. אבל בשבילי שירה תמיד נולדת משירה, כמו שפרחים נולדים מזרעים של פרחים [. . .] ואין-ספור גדולי המשוררים, השירה היתה הנושא שלהם: כל הרומנטיקה האנגלית—קולריג', וורדסוורת', קיטס, שלי—הם לא שכחו את זה אף לרגע. וכאן זה מתקשר לדברים של כרמי, כי אם הם ישנו, הם הלכו לישון כמשוררים וקמו בבוקר כמשוררים וחלמו, בטח, לא חלומות סתם, וכל זה רק כדי להזין את השירה [. . .] ומנדלשטם, במסה שלו על דנטה, מגיע לשיא השירה—בניגוד מוחלט דווקא לדעה הזאת של יהודה, שאסור לכתוב שירה על שירה. ודנטה עצמו ב-*Vita Nuova* בונה הכול על ציטוט עצמי ועל פירוש השירים בתוך מסכת השיר.<sup>184</sup>

[In an interview with my friend T. Carmi, that I heard over the radio, he said: "Who is a poet? Once you sit down to write a poem, you're a poet, and when you walk around town and don't write poems, you're not a poet, because it's a profession, like carpentry." And I heard in what he said a kind of disloyalty to poetry. Because [. . .] there are poets who kept quiet for years and were poets to the core. I had difficulties with this approach when I taught Walden by Thoreau at the university, who wrote about something like "poetic existence"—how to live in a poetic way—and the students didn't get it, they saw it as sheer sentimentality, an obsolete idea. And then I felt exactly the opposite—that a poet is someone who lives the life of a poet, and all he reads and learns is ultimately only for the sake of his poetry [. . .]

Another thing, that I've heard from a very close friend of mine, Yehuda Amichai: he was always upset by the use of the word "poetry" in poems. He used to say that a poem must be about life, that there are no poems about poetry. He regarded it as snobbery and a desire for hermeticism, being closed off. But for me poetry is always born out of poetry, just like flowers are born out of flower seeds [. . .] And so many of the greatest poets had poetry as their theme: all of English romanticism—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly—they didn't forget it for a moment. And here it relates to what Carmi said, because if they were sleeping, they had gone to bed as poets and woke up in the morning as poets, and dreamt, certainly, not mere dreams, and all this only so as to nurture their poetry[. . .] And Mandelstam in his essay on Dante arrives at the peak of poetry in complete contrast to Yehuda's view, that one mustn't write poems on poetry. And Dante himself in *Vita Nuova* builds everything on self-quotation and on interpretation of the poems within the framework of the poem.]

184 Harold Schimmel, "Letsorekh shirato, A Conversation with The Poet Harold Schimmel," interview with Gali-Dana Singer and Nekoda Singer, *Nekudata'yim*, 3-4 (2002): 31.



This unabated commitment to poetry that Harold Schimmel (b. 1935) expresses in the above quoted excerpt from a 2002 interview, explicitly inspired by English Romanticism, is rather atypical in the context of Hebrew-Israeli poetry of the last decades. Schimmel problematizes the demand made on poetry in the early 60s by Me'ir Wieseltier and Dalia Herz, among others, as well as Amichai's model, that poetry engage with the materials of actual reality. While Schimmel engages the materials of sociopolitical reality, but he is no less involved with poetry itself, its language, forms, and styles. What Schimmel seems to stress in the above-quoted interview excerpt is, first, that any poetry is inspired by other, previous works that the poet remembers. Second, that poetry is always committed to its own autonomy as a construct of the imagination, and since poetry necessarily and always converses with its own past, it is not "about" life, though it by no means excludes life. For all that a poet does is done for the sake of her poetry and will find its way into her work. The kind of commitment that Schimmel advocates, a commitment to "a poetic way of life," can be understood as a devotion to a continuous reciprocity between writing and actually living in this world. A poet, according to Schimmel here, is not someone who just lives life and whenever the urge seizes her, sits down and writes; nor is she necessarily a person who never stops writing. A poet is nothing like a carpenter who knows beforehand what she is to make—a chair or a table, or any other practical item which needs to have a pre-established purpose. If this were the case, "life" and "poetry" would only occasionally meet, and then yield an already conceptualized or purposeful object. "Poetic existence," Schimmel stresses, is a way of living and experiencing, and a poet who lives a "poetic" life supports a certain sustained intention towards both his art and his life, an intention that may yield poetry through a continuously experimental process, a process whose outcome and function are not yet known or fully conceptualized. Poetry comes out of a commitment to engage with life's materials in ways that remember, while not necessarily completely adhere to, the forms, styles and ways in which poetry has been written in the past.

Indeed, Schimmel's poetry is based to a large extent on a process of remembering, which may involve love. Love is actually Schimmel's explanation for the effect that the Yiddish language may have had on his poetry—love for his late father, and a related awareness of the similarities between them, both physical and other, that increases as he himself grows older.<sup>185</sup> A memory that involves love, or at least intimacy, permeates two of Schimmel's latest volumes of poems *Nochach* [Facing], 1995 and *Kash* [Chaff], 2008.<sup>186</sup> *Nokhach*, on which this chapter focuses, is a sequence of poems, or sections of a long poem, where a male speaker observes pictures or photographic recollections of a closely related woman, and mirror (or photographic) reflections of himself, while addressing both her and himself. *Kash* is a sequence of 366 ten-line-poems divided according to the seasons of the year, telling of the speaker's everyday experiences during what could be the aftermath of the demise of a dearly beloved woman. This chapter's discussion of Schimmel's work will

185 See Harold Schimmel, "All the 'Sort Of' That You Can Make," interview with Helit Yeshurun, *Chadarim* 5 (Winter 1985-6): 118-131.

186 The English name for *Nokhach*, as it appears on the book's front matter, is simply "Poem." *Qasida*, a collection of previous works, is the last book Schimmel published so far. See *Qasida* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009).

consequently concentrate on the following: memory, or the process of remembering and forgetting, as constellated in Schimmel's language of poetry, reveals a profound involvement with the materials of the actual world, albeit not in any expected way. Schimmel's notion of memory/poetry is also closely related to Walter Benjamin's and Theodor Adorno's notion of the constellation/configuration and to Adorno's understanding of experience as that which art makes available to us through the dialectics of semblance, and which necessarily involves an encounter with otherness. It is a double otherness: first, the otherness that art formally conveys in the form of semblance or *Schein*, i.e. recognized illusion; then it is the materials of sociohistorical or political otherness that art uses.<sup>187</sup> In what follows I show that Schimmel offers a provocative and stimulating understanding, through his poetry and his writing about poetry, of where such an encounter with otherness might begin. I further argue that in constellating his work with other poetries, predominantly that of the Arabic Qasida and on the other hand of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Schimmel suggests that it poetry itself can enable, or is indeed historically one of humanity's most developed modes for enabling, the extending of natural human sympathies beyond the realm of one's immediate and concrete familial or social circles. This chapter, then, focusing as it does on the work of a contemporary Israeli poet and its surprising affinities with other poetries, threads together the major questions raised throughout the dissertation, and offers a tentative account of what is to be gained from reading poems during these hard times.

#### a. "Like Building Backwards. A Return to Boards and Nails"

Born in New Jersey in 1935, Schimmel started to write Hebrew poetry some years after his 1962 immigration to Israel. "In English," he would later tell Helit Yeshurun, "everything is limp, and everything is familiar, and everything lies on its back."<sup>188</sup> But however "limp" and "familiar" "everything" in English may be, the reverberations and poetic traditions of the English language are audible through Schimmel's Hebrew poetry. An avid reader, Schimmel alludes in his poems to Yiddish, Italian, Hebrew (both modern and ancient), and French literary traditions, but also to Arabic poetry in translation. The poetic forms and styles that he uses—and Schimmel's poetry has almost always rigorously experimented with forms—may be inspired by all these literary traditions. However, the languages that Schimmel most often gestures towards in his poems are Yiddish, English and the specialized language of medieval Hebrew poetry. Speaking of Yiddish and English, Schimmel tells Yeshurun in the above-mentioned interview that if his poetry evokes Yiddish (or English), then "I think it is more the movements of Yiddish, the gestures, or the music."<sup>189</sup> I believe the movements, gestures, and music of Yiddish, English and Hebrew (and via medieval Hebrew, but also through translations into English, the movement of Arabic poetic forms and styles) are being remembered or re-remembered in Schimmel's poetry, in a way that does not exclude forgetting. For forgetting, Schimmel explains in his poetic essay "Tract on Memory," is part

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187 See Martin Jay, "Is Experience Still in Crisis," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Thomas Huhn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 129-147.

188 "All the 'Sort Of' That You Can Make," 126.

189 Ibid, 118.

of the process of remembering and forgetting, or emptying out and recalling, that life itself is or at least significantly involves. “Without the perpetual potential for emptiness,” Schimmel writes, “nothing new can be absorbed or happen inside, and without the organized content in it (the library of scrolls at Alexandria) you will not be able to cope with anything new.”<sup>190</sup> Schimmel then introduces the idea of “a return in memory” as taking permission to go back to an image of a certain event or feeling that one has already come across once before. Memory has the validity of a dream, he further asserts, and there is no complete and round memory or dream, as we ourselves and our way of grasping the world are sundered, partial, and gradual—if you cast darkness on your eyes, allow yourself to be cheated, and cooperate with the illusion, you may return to what was already forgotten without retrieving anything whole, complete and absolute. For that which returns in the form of memory cannot bring anything back to life, but the illusion of its reconstruction enables unexpected new ramifications. The same object can be part of different situations and contexts, and facilitate the formation of arbitrary constellations, or what only seems at first sight to be arbitrary. “You can act upon knowledge only if you remember,” Schimmel continues, “otherwise your feet will carry you in the usual direction.” This is the reason that the combat pilot, explains Schimmel, does not want to know more than he needs to in order to accomplish his mission, and, I would add, even less so remember. “Is death, then, the burning of the library of scrolls at Alexandria,” Schimmel asks and immediately answers, “No. Death is simply an end to remembering and an end to forgetting. Remembering by lifting images, and forgetting by putting them down.” Thus my death is not the final erasure of all my memories and all that I have learned and become, but is the end of the darkened, dream-like dialectics of remembering and forgetting that allows for a trace of the past to re-enter the present in a new form. Put differently, *my* death is the end of *my* (potentially poetic) creativity.

In his *Qasida*, a long poem also dedicated to poetry and memory in which Schimmel considers all poetry to be a form of Qasida, the classical Arabic lyric poem, Schimmel gives the most vivid example for his idea of return in memory:

חשוב על פרוק וחלוקת אברים (לפי התור) כתנועה הפוכה מליזר. כמו בניה לאחור. כלומר, פרוק בקתת הקיץ שבכרם. חזרה אל קרשים ומסמרים. [קיי"ה: קני"ט]

[Think about the dismemberment and distribution of limbs (by turn) as a movement that constitutes the opposite of remembering. Like building backwards. Which is to say, dismantling the summer shack in the vineyard. A return to boards and nails. 51:159]<sup>191</sup>

Building backwards entails re-imagining the materials of the no-longer-needed-hut in a new form. Disassembling and reassembling necessarily follows a certain order, but not an intention directed at a specific aim. “This is remembrance as an act of will,” Schimmel

190 Schimmel's “Tract on Memory” was written in English but published only in Irit Sela's Hebrew translation, from which I quote. Accessed Dec. 19, 2013, <http://www.helicon.org.il/46930/> מסכת-על-הרוח-שימל-מתוך-מסכת-על-הזיכרון-מאנגלית-אירית-סלע

191 Harold Schimmel, *Qasida*, trans. Peter Cole (Jerusalem: Ibis, 1997). The sections from *Qasida* will be cited according to the following order: page number followed by section numbers.

maintains: “The poet-hero-subject dismounts from his beast in order to devote himself to the ritual of remembrance [...]”<sup>192</sup> Having regained the materials of remembrance, its boards and nails, it is now the poet's task to begin. “What the protagonist will do with that first letter is another matter,” Schimmel continues. “This is what the poem is about.” [51:161]

In Schimmel's essay the image, which appears as a memory, is a semblance of what is outside the mind, and while entering or re-entering the mind, it is changed and renewed, maintaining a trace of what was but gaining a new order or form; not erasing the summer hut that it was while reconstructing its materials into something new. “*Atlal*.” writes Schimmel, referring to what is left of the deserted camp of the beloved, is:

נסיגה פשוטה מזרם החוויה. סרוב עקשני לערגה בתנועה. אם לא תהיה מוכן להפסיק מעט לזרום, לא תמצא גישה לרב-קוליות הרומזת, שהנה זכותך הבלעדית לעולם המשמעות שלך. [צ"ט:ע]

[A simple retreat from the flow of experience. A stubborn refusal to longing-in-motion. If you are not somewhat prepared to cease flowing, you will not gain access to the insinuating polyphony which is the exclusive right of your world of meaning.” 31:70]

The image of the *atlal* corresponds to a private pause in the usual lapse of time to generate a genuine, subjective and multi-varied experience. “Not a taking stock with regard to what was,” Schimmel stresses, but rather “a refashioning of a private past's structure as desire.” [100: 76]<sup>193</sup> Taking stock as an engagement with the past cannot yield better access to one's private world of meaning; you need to stop flowing, to halt, to conjure up a memory. “*The poet-speaker-hero*,” Schimmel continues his discussion of the *qasida*, that is the human subject “is empty, mobile, centerless. At the site of the *atlal* he is 'empty.' In the passage to *rahil*<sup>194</sup> he is “mobile.’ And he is 'centerless' in the conglomeration of the scattered tribes and dispersal of wild beasts.” [33:80]<sup>195</sup> Yearning involves a subjectivity that is never pre-given, stable and static, for it concentrates in a departure, facing the empty desert, for it retrieves only “boards and nails” of that which is gone. “Absence and presence as the wink of an eye, but intertwined. He's capable of stopping and seeing what's there before him only with the assistance of *what was there*.” [34:82]<sup>196</sup> Meaning that although the human subject is empty, mobile, and centerless, it is a human subject nevertheless. It is *he* that can or cannot see, and it is his yearning that allows him to see, as much as it is always a yearning directed towards an other. Not self-examination, even not the kind that involves thinking of somebody else, but the form, and only the form, of yearning (i.e. not an actual desire) towards somebody else. This explains at least partly why Schimmel models his treatise on poetry on the Arabic *qasida*, on other culture's poetry. Interestingly, Schimmel's is not an educated examination of

192 See *Qasida*, 118:161: הזכירה פעולה מרצון היא. המשורר-גבור-נושא יורד מבהמתו כדי להתמסר לפולחן הזכירה.

193 Ibid., 100:76: לא חשבון-נפש על מה שהיה, אלא עצוב מחדש של תבנית עבר פרטי כערגה.

194 *Rahil* is the journey, the second major movement of the *qasida* (Schimmel's explanation.)

195 Ibid., 33:80: “המשורר-דובר-גבור. הנושא האנושי ריק, ניד וללא-מרכז. בנקודת **אטלאל** “ריק”. במעבר אל רחיל “נייד”. רי”ללא-מרכז” בין צברי השבטים הנרחבים ובקרב חיות הבר הפזורות.

196 Ibid., 34:82: העדרות והמצאות כקריצת עין, אך שזורות הן. הוא מסוגל לעצור ולראות את ששם לפניו רק בסיוע **מה שהיה** שם.

the ways Hebrew poetry and Arabic poetry have been interacting throughout the ages. Nor is it an attempt to find an origin to (his) Hebrew poetry in the ancient culture of the Arabs, or even to “rewrite” the qasida, or to parody it, into something new, at least not exactly. Schimmel employs Arabic poetic form “consciously in an improper manner,” as he himself explains, that is without a claim to represent the qasida, nor to emulate it, certainly not to appropriate it, but to superimpose over it, to constellate with it with his own (ideas about) poetry. He only writes his yearning, his “improper” remembrance of the Arabic qasida [111:124].<sup>197</sup> In an improper way he also constellates Hebrew and Arabic, modern and ancient:

לא רק מזהים את המקום שם היינו, אך בשרשרת באים הדברים שם עשינו, ונוכרים בדמיות שפגשו  
 ואפלו בשברי מחשבות לא-מצאו-קול שעברו בתוך הראש עת שם היינו.  
 לכל המנגנון הזה נעניק את השם **נסיב** ואת עצם המקום נציין כך, **אטלאל**.  
 נסבתי את לבי (נסיב) כי היא היתה ראשית הנסבה לשנות את כל הדברים. [פ"ג-ד:ג]

We identify not only the place in our having been there, but a chain-like series of associations follows with what we did, people we met, and even unvoiced thought-fragments of things that crossed our minds while we were there.

To this entire mechanism we'll grant the name *nasib* (the turning) and the place itself we'll refer to as the *atlal*. I turned my heart to give it direction (*nasabti et libi*), because this was the primary factor in the alteration of everything. 13-4:3]

The *Nasib*, the memory of the lost beloved as it is depicted in the first central part of the qasida, is all that comes into the mind in the presence of the *atlal*, the remains of the beloved's camp. “There is no picture before the eyes. There is nothing pre-established in writing to contend with.” [15-6:10] It all begins with departure [15:9], a departure from the beloved, a departure from all that is solid, known, extant, in favor of remembrance. Therefore, it is now the task of the poet-hero to turn his heart, to move, to form a structure, in his felt-thoughts—“I turned my heart to give it direction (*nasabti et libi*).” Schimmel clearly alludes here to Ecclesiastes 2:20: “Therefore I turned my heart (*ve-saboti et libi*) to despair of all the labor which I took under the sun.”<sup>198</sup> Interestingly, a major concern of the poet of the book of Ecclesiastes is memory. See, for example, Ecclesiastes 2:16: “For there is no remembrance of the wise than of the fool for ever; seeing which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.”<sup>199</sup> All shall be forgotten, nothing and no one shall be remembered, *consequently* all is in vain, apart from God's commands. Not for Schimmel. *Ki hi hayta reshit ha-nesiba*, “because this was the primary factor,” he writes, “in the alteration of everything,” using what would be an irregular construction in modern Hebrew, while familiar to the biblical poet (the pronoun *hi* [she] refers here to the following feminine noun *reshit* [beginning], whereas modern Hebrew would have

197 Ibid., 111:124:

כותב כל זה לא על קצידה ממשיית אלא מיצר משג עם כוונת משלי, להשתמש בו ביודעין באפן בלתי הגן, במונח “קצידה”.

198 Ecclesiastes 2:20: וְסָבוֹתַי אֲנִי לְיָאֵשׁ אֶת-לְבָבִי עַל כָּל-הָעֵמֶל שְׁעֵמֶלְתִּי תַחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ.

199 Ecclesiastes 2:15: כִּי אֵין זְכָרוֹן לְחָכָם עִם-הַפְּסִיל לְעוֹלָם בְּשֶׁכֶּבֶד הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכֹּל נִשְׁכַּח וְאִידָּ, יְמוֹת הַחָכָם עִם-הַפְּסִיל.

it relate to the previous noun/s.)<sup>200</sup> *She* then relates to the *nasib*, despite the fact that it is a masculine noun in Arabic, thus the *nasib* as a poetic form constructed out of the memory-chain instigated by a departure, is the reason for any alteration, is that which allows for change to happen. Schimmel uses the word *nesiba* which means reason or cause, as well as circumstances or conditions when used in modern Hebrew in the plural form (*nesibot*). He then also suggests that the root of *nasabti* (I turned) and *nesiba* comes from the Arabic *nasib* (unfortunately, Peter Cole's English translation does not include this thought); although *nasabti*, a neologism made out of the biblical *saboti*, shares the same route with *nesiba* (*s-b-b*), but not with *nasib* (*n-s-b*). Schimmel's "turning back" imaginatively "reveals" an origin in the Arabic for the Hebrew word, or a familial similarity between the two languages, an unexpected ramification which would then become itself "a primary factor in the alteration of everything." But Schimmel's constellation is actually even richer, as "for it was the primary factor in the alteration of everything" alludes not only to Ecclesiastes and to the *nasib*, but quotes directly, though in a slightly truncated form, a story by the Hebrew *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment) writer Yehuda leib Gordon (1830-1892), *Ha-evke?* (Shall I Weep?). Schimmel leaves out one word from the quotation (in Hebrew), as Gordon writes: "for it was the main reason (*nesiba*) to change all things for the better (*le-tov*)."<sup>201</sup> Schimmel is not willing to commit to a change for the better (*le-tova*), as change, it seems, need not be defined. This omission also makes Schimmel's line less concrete than Gordon's, which refers to a specific event that was the reason for the beneficial change. It also does not necessarily suggest any specific affinity between the two works, and Schimmel does not construct here a purported continuity in Hebrew letters—starting with Ecclesiastes, moving on to Gordon, and ending with himself. Rather, in quoting Gordon, Schimmel remembers, or better, forgets ("putting it down") Hebrew as it used to be written when it was not yet the spoken language of a modern nation, when it was still only or mainly a literary language. It is a memory, or a quotation, isolated from its temporal context; it is the "boards and nails" of something else, a certain other, of that which no longer is, of that which is not identical with the self, the poet's language and his time, and it is constellated with contemporary Hebrew and the *qasida*. Thus, Schimmel makes poetry into a remembrance that necessarily involves an other (notice that Schimmel uses the plural form in the above quotation—what *we* did, whom *we* met, where *we* were); a memory of being in the presence of somebody or something else, and a yearning towards being with—as this yearning takes form in the language of poetry (*nasib*)—a yearning that can never and must not be realized, or else it will become useless for poetry. Remembrance does not need to be of an actual fact, it can begin with the false-Hebrew *nasabti* as an extension of the Arabic *nasib* (via the biblical *saboti*), and while being grammatically and historically incorrect, this invented tradition of the Hebrew language constellates biblical Hebrew, Arabic, and modern usage to suggest a plethora of meanings. First, it is an indication of how closely related Arabic and Hebrew are, but even more so it shows the power of poetry in forming a sibling relationship. And the allusion to Gordon, more than anything else perhaps, reflects a commitment to the potential of Hebrew as a

200 Ecclesiastes 4:4: וְרָאִיתִי אֶגְוִי אֶת-כָּל-עֵמֶל וְאֶת כָּל-פְּשֻׁרֹן הַמַּעֲשֶׂה כִּי הִיא קִנְאֵת-אִישׁ מִרְעֵהוּ גַם-זֶה הִבֵּל וְרֵעוּת רֵיחַ.

201 See Yehuda Leyb Gordon, *Kol Kitve: proza* (Dvir: Tel Aviv, 1960), 68:

"כי היא היתה ראשית הנסיבה לשנות את כל הדברים לטוב."

language of poetry in that it can extend beyond the realm of everyday communication. An immediate result of the constellative linguistic creativity Schimmel allows himself, his language sounds strange and is harder to make sense of, as he himself explained to Yeshurun:

בשירה שלנו לפעמים שפת הדיבור היא שפת דיבור פשוטה כמשמעה, ואובד אותו משהו זר וקשה, שמאפשר לקרוא ולשוב ולקרוא. השפה צריכה לדעתי לחיות בתוך השורה כמשהו שמחיייה את עצמו לצורך הרגע—כוכב מכוכבי הלכת, שנדלק לרגע מסוים של מבט וכבה. לא דיבור, אלא **החייאת דיבור**.<sup>202</sup>

[In our poetry the spoken language is sometimes literally a spoken language, and that strange and hard something is lost, that which makes it possible to read and reread. I believe the language needs to live within the line as something that brings itself to life for the sake of the moment—a planet among planets that lights up for a specific moment and then darkens. Not speech but **bringing speech back to life**. [Emphasis in the original]

That lost strange and hard something is vital, Schimmel insists, for poetry to resuscitate speech. That is, among other things, for the language of poetry to allow new meanings to appear and disappear. This is the meaning of reading and rereading; remembering and forgetting, and then reliving, experiencing anew. The something which is foreign and hard also makes it difficult to remember without alteration, to make it yours without repeated reading. Unlike everyday speech, the poetic work prolongs our experience of the lapse of time, allowing affinities to be formed between separate moments of reading, varied stages in life, as well as making inner constellations between words and concepts that seem to be or actually are unrelated. The fact that the language of poetry flashes in and out, on and off, with the gaze, means that it always exists in the moment of reading or writing. True continuity is not formed through repetition, but through the flickering of light, that is of the human gaze, between light and darkens, life and death, sense and silence. Death is then not the burning of the library of scrolls at Alexandria, nor the end of remembrance, but an end to that volatile flickering and ever changing experience of the present moment. Everyday speech for Schimmel equals reified everyday communication that simply follows the lapse of time. For speech to be made alive something difficult and foreign is needed, something that is not identical with speech.

There are striking similarities between Schimmel's notions of poetry, language, and “a return in memory” and Walter Benjamin's ideas of the dialectical image and movement at a standstill (and their related force field and constellation/configuration/superimposition), although Benjamin or Adorno are not among the names Schimmel brings up. Let us take a short detour into Benjamin's account of the dialectical image in his *Arcades Project* (especially throughout Convolute N) to make this affinity clearer.<sup>203</sup> First, it is important to note that Benjamin is forming his idea of the dialectical image in the *Arcades Project* also in face of the vulgar Marxist understanding of truth as “timeless”—“Truth is not,” he writes, “as

202 “All the ‘Sort Of’ That You Can Make,” 123.

203 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2002), 456-88.

Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike.” [N3,2] What Benjamin seems to be saying here is that truth about historical process cannot be simply attained by the unveiling of objective facts, by the acquisition of objective knowledge, as “history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance <Eingedenken>.” [N8,1] Truth then depends on there being a subject who remembers, a subject who is able to give meaning to an image of the past that suddenly emerges in the now as if in a dream, an image that flashes through one’s mind when he or she encounters that which conjures up this image (for Schimmel: *atlatl*). “The dialectical image,” writes Benjamin, “is a caesura in the movement of thought” [N10a,3], (“a stubborn refusal to longing-in-motion,” writes Schimmel). For history, stresses Benjamin, decays into images, not into stories,” [N11,4] and does not progress or move forward in a necessarily linear (not to mention, not in an automatic) fashion. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin strives to construct ways of writing history that do not turn it into a homogeneous and continuous chain of events—or, in the language of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, a “continuum of concepts”—when things are made to seem inevitable and ever progressing towards the present moment. The way to break through this delusion, according to Benjamin, to save the past, and more importantly the present, is through the dialectical image, as it takes shape in language:

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.—Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic [not Jungian-R.O.]); and the place where one encounters them is language. [N2a,3]

While Benjamin had in mind Baudelaire’s flâneur who sees images of the past as he walks through the modern city, his notion of the dialectical image corresponds with that of Schimmel protagonist/speaker/writer of the Qasida, who imagines past encounters. Most importantly, Benjamin finds the dialectical image in language, not least in a language that allows for images to “flash with the now,” to go beyond language’s immediate, communicative function; that is the dialectical image exists in language as an art-form, in a language that is not limited to the rules which delimit its use in everyday speech. The dialectical image, writes Howard Eiland, is “isolated from the pragmatic continuum of events considered as causes and effects [...] to become a singular experience of the past.”<sup>204</sup> Truth for Benjamin thus involves singularity, that is a subjective experience of a specific past event/circumstances. Benjamin then cites an interesting letter from Adorno:

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204 Howard Eiland, “Superimposition in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*,” accessed Dec. 19, 2013, [journal.telospress.com/content/2007/138/121.abstract](http://journal.telospress.com/content/2007/138/121.abstract), 136.



The attempt to reconcile your “dream” momentum—as the subjective element in the dialectical image—with the conception of the latter as model has led me to some formulations. . . . With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings. Subjectivity takes possession of them insofar as it invests them with intentions of desire and fear. And insofar as defunct things stand in as images of subjective intentions, these latter present themselves as immemorial and eternal. Dialectical images are constellated between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meaning, are instantiated in the moment of indifference between death and meaning. While things in appearance are awakened to what is newest, death transforms the meanings to what is most ancient. [N5,2]

Adorno speaks here of modern economy's commodification of objects, when use value, which had under pre-capitalist economic systems to some degrees involved *particularity* and thus *subjectivity* as part of economic value, is replaced by congealed calculations of labor time. Under these conditions the only subjectivity available is the kind that invests emotions of fear and desire into alienated, hollowed out things, i.e. commodities. Having no meaning and value that depends on their particular uses, commodities gain meaning by our desiring them, fearing them or the consequences of having/not having them. This kind of meaning seems to be real and never-changing, making subjectivity void again. Adorno then understands Benjamin's dialectical images as constellating subjectivity with hollowed-out things in a way that allows meanings to change, and then change again. When meaning is not pre-invested in defunct objects, and because the objects are themselves void of any meaning, that is when the objects are seen for what they really are, mere empty forms of things, meanings can come and go. The alienated things thus provisionally gain an emancipatory potential by allowing movement between something and nothing. They cannot hold to a meaning and thus pretend to be immemorial, and meaning is then always fleeting “in the moment of indifference between death and meaning.” This is how human subjectivity can encounter alienated things: by introducing a fuller, truer, more “awake” form of subjectivity, to use Benjamin's term. And this can happen in the language, Benjamin insists; the dialectical image appears in the language as an art form.

In the letter that Benjamin cites, Adorno is actually challenges Benjamin's faith that a constellative act with either “dream images” or “dead objects” of the past (or present) can just be constellated and do the work Benjamin wants them to do. Adorno fears that instead of “constellating,” Benjamin offers a mere “montage,” the kind that tends to treat its materials as already poised. Adorno maintains that “dreams” about the past, like “dead” objects (commodity or otherwise) do not simply form critically signifying relations by being “brought” into constellation; but rather that more imaginative work has to be done with and to them.<sup>205</sup> I would like to suggest that not by merely introducing what is hard and foreign into the language, but rather by making it into a poetic form, Schimmel is filling hollowed-out structures with true meanings. Words and allusions are taken from their actual historical

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205 On constellation as critical writing and not as an artwork see Adorno's “The Essay as Form,” *Notes to Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:3-23.

contexts and superimposed on or constellated with each other and with everyday speech to arrest the alleged continuity of meaning. In this way Schimmel's language of poetry allows for different meanings to flicker through and in the language, resuscitating speech as an open-ended medium, not one that is bound by the conceptual and communicative function of language. This is the “calling backwards” [17:17] (*kri'a le-achor*, also, *reading backwards*) that poetry is. Let us now examine how Schimmel's poetry itself constellates the dialectics between what is hollow, or has become hollow, and meanings that come and go.

### **b. Facing the Other, Facing Myself**

For the cover art of his book *Nokhach* (literally, being in the presence of, or facing) Schimmel chose a drawing of three naked women by the eastern European Jewish artist Bernard Reder (1897 Czernowitz-1963 New York). Three women are also mentioned in the dedication—אם ורדה, ומי ושל ברט, של מולי, (of Moly, my mother and of Bert, Varda's mother.) These words are vocalized, as is the custom with Hebrew poetry (unlike prose and book-dedications), and are placed on the bottom of the inner cover page stating the book's name. Thus the dedication is made a part of the poetry in the book, and not an addendum to it. Using the word *shel*, meaning belongs or belonging, is unusual in this context and may even sound ungrammatical. Because the word *shel* here is so strange, it is possibly reminiscent of the talmudic tale of Rabbi Akiva, who left his wife Rachel at her request for 12 years to study at the Rabbi's house. When he came back to her, his entourage pushed Rachel away from him. To this he said: *sheli ve-shelakhem shela hu* (mine and yours is hers), meaning that all that he had learned and taught them was hers. Without supposing that Schimmel imagines himself as a modern Rabbi Akiva, he may be indicating by this dedication that what is inside the covers of his book is more than merely dedicated to the two mothers, but is owed to them or even belongs to them in a deeper sense. The poem is not given to the mothers as a present, and also not dedicated to them as books often are, but is theirs to begin with as it could literally not have been written without them. But in what way? Is it that they have given him the opportunity to learn, to write; is it theirs because they have inspired him so profoundly? Could Schimmel be forming dialectical images using his remembrance of the two mothers, and what could this possibly mean? Clearly, Schimmel wishes to stress an affinity between the poem(s) and the two mothers, possibly also an affinity with his wife *Varda*, the third woman mentioned in the dedication. Is the poem of *Nokhach* a result of facing these two women, of facing them, that is, in the *form* of a poem? And if so, what could be the possible importance and meaning of such poetry of facing the other? Let us follow the book of *Nokhach* through some of its sections or poems to construct a possible understanding of its insistent effort at facing, being in the presence of an other, beginning with the second and third poems in the sequence<sup>206</sup>:

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206 Schimmel, *Nokhach*, 8.

אין כבר יותר להגייד לגבי מה שלפנינו. הבחירה שוב להעמיד מראה מִכָּר גם לא מובן.

גם כלום לא אמר כי עסוק הוא פשוט, כאסוף מגן מה שנתן להציג על צלחת, בתוך סל, ולאחר זמן לאכל. תדמית ההעברה מ"שם בחוץ" ל"כאן על-יד-שלחן" כאויר לא מסגל להחליט, לאן. סוגרים חלון פותחים חלון.

עדשות שהן יותר הסתרת מבט. מחתך סדקים קובעים כמות האור. הלבוש הוא כל האדם. כך בורדו של שנים על חלוק בית אדם מזריק לפנים.

אני אפרסמון, אני שמש שוקעת. אני, בתוך אמבטה, גוף אשה, ללא שמץ שנוי. אספקרלריה כלל לא משיחה. מצח עליון נדלק זהב. כשביבי נר אלה פנים יפלו בגסיסתן.

[**There is nothing more to say about** what is in front of us. The decision to place again a familiar sight that is also not understood.

Also I will say nothing because the task is simple, as collecting from a garden what can be shown on a plate, in a basket, and after a while eaten. The image of transferring from "out there" to "here by-the-table" as air unable to decide, where. Closing a window opening a window.

Lenses that are more the hiding of a gaze. From their slit cracks set the amount of light. Clothing is the entire person. Thus years-old maroon on a house robe ruby injects into the face.

I am a persimmon, I am a setting sun. I, in a bath, a woman's body, without the slightest change.

A mirror not conversing at all. Upper forehead lit gold. Likes candle flakes this face with fall when dying.<sup>207</sup>

In translating this poem, as with any poem by Schimmel, I had to clarify the condensed, even elliptical language, and give up the unusual formation of certain nouns and verbs to allow it to make sense to readers of English. But this is only a partial explanation for the relative smoothness of the English version. Another seems to be that Schimmel's language here follows the style, rhythm and tone of the English, and more specifically that of modernist English-language poetry. Translated back into Hebrew it may seem as emulating the language of the one who is not a native speaker of modern, Israeli Hebrew, i.e. an immigrant, or an educated non-Israeli. This is also due to gaps that need to be filled with more words, as with the phrase opening the poem, *en kvar yoter le-hagid*, which is a literal and ungrammatical translation of the English "there is nothing more to say," since the

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207 All translations of the poems from *Nokhach* are mine. I wish to thank Chana Kronfeld for her valuable comments.

Hebrew requires the word *ma*, what (to). Hebrew grammar would have also required replacing the word *yoter* with the word *od* to express more in this context. *Yoter* means more than that which already is, and although in spoken colloquial Hebrew it is used in the same way as it appears in the poem, Schimmel may be using *yoter* according to its normative and not daily usage, as this whole sequence indeed confessedly strives not to say more than that which already is, but also no less. And while the elliptical language of the poem appears to contrast this effort at being thrift and accurate, it actually supports it. For what does it mean “to place again a familiar sight that is also not clear?” It could mean that the speaker pronounces a desire to observe anew a certain familiar image possibly without making it any more explicit. What is not entirely clear needs to stay somewhat obtuse to be true to itself.

Gazing at the gaze, the poem continues, is as simple and supposedly plain as picking a vegetable or a fruit from a garden and putting them on a plate; bringing inside what is outside, but in a way that follows the indecisive air as it passes through a window—when it is impossible to tell whether the air blows into the room through the window, or leaves the room through it. The lenses (of glasses or the eyes) allow the gaze to move towards what is outside as they allow what is outside to enter the mind. The cracks and slits of the lenses (“Lenses that are more the hiding of a gaze”), those that hide the gaze, determine the amount of light that meets the eyes of the one who is watching, possibly determining what and how he actually sees. And if it is only through cracks that the light comes in, then all may be slightly dark. Schimmel's speaker doesn't drape the windows as does Heine's speaker in “*Philister in Sonntagsröcklien*” [Burghers in Sunday Clothes Strolling], the poem discussed in the first chapter, but he does narrow his own vision until “clothing is the entire person,” and “years-old maroon on a house robe ruby injects to the face,” that is until he sees nothing but himself, perhaps not unlike Heine's speaker who drapes the windows to meet the spirits of the dead. Schimmel's speaker lets some light come into the room, and death, or better still, dying, is thus not as sharply separated from the light of the outside as in Heine's poem. However, there is a certain similarity in the gesture of separating the outside from the inside. If in Heine's poem it is especially the dead beloved that the speaker meets in his secluded abode, the male speaker of *Nokhach* becomes himself the Song of Songs' Shulamite: “I am a persimmon, I am a setting sun,” paraphrasing the famous “I am the rose of sharon, the lily of the valleys.”<sup>208</sup> He thus becomes, or is superimposed on, a woman's body lying in a bath, round and full as a persimmon or a setting sun, “without the slightest change.” The image of a setting sun that resembles a reddish persimmon holds immense beauty, as well as a sense of approaching doom. The Persimmon denotes in the bible and Talmud a plant unknown to us today from which an expensive oil was made.<sup>209</sup> The mysterious and regal associations of the persimmon (its oil was supposedly used for the libation of kings) are combined here with its modern denotation as a round sweet orange-colored fruit. The image of a middle-aged man resembling a huge persimmon and a woman's body submerged in a bath is both sublime and ironic (the speaker's age, 57, is revealed in the first poem in the sequence and corresponds to Schimmel's age at the time of publication), adding to the biblical allusion a resonance of the

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208 *Song of Songs*, 2:1.

209 See *Judges* 13:10.

elaborated artifice of medieval imagery. Obviously, it is not a mere ornamental image as medieval imagery is purported to be, yet unlike the biblical image on which it is formed, and in a way that is reminiscent of medieval imagery, it does not explain or tell something about the speaker. The image isn't meant to indicate that the speaker is either round and beautiful as a persimmon or as a setting sun, nor that he oozes a lovely smell reminiscent of persimmon oil. It is a beautiful, both mysterious and ironic image, that yields a sense of approaching doom, as well as being an aesthetic object in itself. Put differently, the images of the persimmon and that of the setting sun (or both as the same) gesture towards themselves as an illusion, following medieval imagery that, as Dan Pagis explains, usually does not generate a genuine sense of wonder but is rather an illusion which points at itself as such.<sup>210</sup> The setting sun is an extremely conventional image of death, but here the color and the round shape of the persimmon, or more specifically the way Schimmel plays with medieval imagery to make it into an artifact, defamiliarize the poetic cliché in a way that makes it impossible to separate death from beauty and pleasure.<sup>211</sup> Schimmel then continues to form an irregular internal rhythmic pattern using the following false end monorhymes: *ambata*, a word he constructs out of *ambatya* (bath tub), that resonates the root *m-b-t*, a gaze, *isha* (woman), *aspaklarya* (an archaic term for mirror, from the Aramaic) and *mesicha* (converses or talks), a verb of a high register, not unlike *aspaklaria*. It is a rhyming pattern reminiscent, again, of medieval Hebrew poetry (following Arabic poetry), where a repeating monorhyme is often used. The employment of a biblical allusion, although not exclusive to it, can also be felt to express an engagement with medieval Hebrew poetry. Gesturing in this way towards medieval tropes and models of imagery and prosody, Schimmel makes the final stanza more poetic and rhythmic than the previous prose-like three, stressing his idea that poems come from other poems (and other languages).

“Clothing is the entire person,” the speaker insists, suggesting a resistance to psychological depth, and as Schimmel writes in another poem in this sequence: “We seal the vision of 'who we are' with 'where.' The quality of depth is always partial.”<sup>212</sup> Only what you see can enter the poem. The mirror reveals nothing. The gaze is that which places her over him, him over her, then over now, through the cracks that set the amount of light coming in, as if in a dream. “Upper forehead lit gold,” that is suddenly, unexpectedly, “As candle flakes this face will fall when dying”—this face (*ele panim*), Schimmel superimposes English syntax on the Hebrew (which would have required a definite article)—is doomed to disappear.<sup>213</sup> Is it his face that will be consumed like a candle, or hers? It isn't clear. What is it, then, that the poem actually tells of? A 57 year old speaker dressed in his old maroon-colored robe, looking at himself while possibly watching a picture of, or conjuring up a recollection of, an actual woman taking a bath. A woman, that is, he must be, or must have been, caring about. Her dying must anticipate his own demise as he reconfigures himself in her body. “There is no more to say about what is in front of us,” the poem begins, and indeed

210 On medieval imagery see Dan Pagis, *Shirat Ha-chol ve-torat ha-shir Le-Moshe Ibn Ezra u-vne doro* (Jerusalem, Bialik Institute: 1970).

211 I thank Chana Kronfeld for her useful comments on the poem.

212 In Hebrew: אנחנו סותמים את הראות של מי אנו ביהיכני. תכונת העמק היא תמיד חלקית. *Nochakh*, 14.

213 The face remains in the plural form, as it is in Hebrew. Schimmel does not follow any rule in making his Hebrew strange and ungrammatical, certainly not those of English grammar.

it does not so much “say” as *places* “a familiar sight that is also not clear,” the sight of himself as the sight of her then and later, the sight of himself overlapping that of hers, a sight or an image that cannot be clear for it needs to hold both of them.

The next poem in the sequence continues the constellation of the two of them:

איני רוצה ממך דבר. אין גם טיפת כונה בהעמיד את עצמי מולך פעם נוספת.  
בעולם הבריות פשוט אין אפשרות להסתכל ככה, בזה הענין, בזה חוסר הענין, באותו  
הרכוז. איני נרגש כמו-כן לא נרתע, וזה הראש, נקי ממחשבות. אני את עצמי מעמיד,  
נושא התבוננות.

כתמונה אין הרבה מה לראות. ברור חדוש אין בכך. זה כח הדבר. כאן מעל הצהוב  
האהוב דיוקן אדם. המביט בהבט ההבטה, עבד לתפקידו, המראָה הבלתי פוסק  
שבמסגרת מראָה. אך כעת איני מתגלח.

אני אומר את מה שאני אומר. קראי את כחפצך אך בלי לעמוד על אותם דברים שלא  
היו מעולם. כלום לא הסרתי. וזה כדאי לראות.

**[I don't want anything from you. There is also not** even a slight intention in placing myself in front of you once more. In the world of people there is simply no possibility to observe in in this manner, that's what it concerned about, that's what it's not concerned about, with that same concentration. I am not excited and also not repelled, and this is the head, clear of thoughts. It is myself that I place, a subject of observation.

As a picture there is not much to see. Clearly there is no innovation in this. This is the power of the matter. Here above the beloved yellow is a person's portrait. Who gazes with the gaze of gazing, a slave to his job, the incessant look in the looking glass. But now I do not shave.

I say what I say. You read as you desire, but without focusing on those things which never happened. I have removed nothing. And this is worth seeing.]

Not unlike a scientist who combines two substances in a vial, or an artist examining an object assisted by its other—an apple with light, an apple, light, and the artist—the speaker places himself once more in front of her. Experimenting, ideally, without any given intention. “In the world of people there is simply no opportunity to watch in this manner,” he explains, when the head is clear of any thought, when one is neither excited nor repelled, but indifferent. He does not want anything from her, but places himself in front of her, although, the speaker soon stresses, “It is myself that I place, a subject of observation.” The Hebrew word *nose* used here means both a subject, or a subject of, and literally the one who carries or takes something upon himself. The coma separating the two parts of the sentence, which is redundant from a syntactic perspective, stresses the understanding that the speaker is not only the subject of his own observation, but the one who takes upon himself the task of observing. In placing himself facing her and himself, constantly watching, adding or omitting nothing, there is something that is worth seeing, he tells her, while omitting the Hebrew direct object

marker *et (ve [et] ze keday lir'ot)* following English (as well as Yiddish) sentence formation. He may thus be leaving nothing out, except what he detracts from the language itself, possibly to allow it to become fuller, that is suggestive of other languages, but more so of language itself and how it can exceed its normative formation to make it sound stranger but also more concise and accurate. Schimmel is observing one language through another, superimposing them on each other as his speaker is being superimposed on a (female) other. Most importantly, since the poem's observation or gaze it is not concerned with depth, the different languages and images maintain their unique qualities. The abstractness of the figures of the speaker and the woman allows them to remain like two human souls, forms, or images, that do not impose themselves, that always remain somewhat transparent. *Nokhach* is not concerned with *saying* anything new in the sense of moving towards the acquisition of more knowledge, or a fuller story ("there is no innovation in it"). It is concerned with seeing anew, resuscitating the gaze. But what does it mean to resuscitate the gaze in the presence of both the self and an other? Doesn't the poem also empty "her," making her, as well as the speaker, into hollowed-out things instead of actual people with concrete histories and stories? Isn't the speaker's and the poem's suggested use of "her" overly instrumental? Do the poems exemplify modern economy's emptying-out of things, the reality of social alienation, by this stance of not wanting anything "of you," that is, of any other? Or is it that the only way of engaging with the other in "a nondominating, nonsubsumptive, nonhomogenizing manner," to quote Adorno, necessitates the hollowing-out of us both?<sup>214</sup> And if so, what does this involve? What does it allow for, and how? Let us read another poem in the sequence with these questions in mind:

בפחות ערמוניות מתמיד, עינים בקשי נפקחות מאחורי זכוכיות  
נחוצות. הקו שבלחי צלקת כמעט, שוב אנחנו כאן. מי שבמשך שנים הפך "אמן",  
בחלוק בית משפשי אדם.

הבט בחרסינות אלו המרבעות ובתוכן, שקיפויית ים גדול (קו דק כחול) ומעט הצהב  
הבהיר שמעל-לכל אהוב (קרא חופי חול). אך אנו מהבד בורדו-שחור נעשים פני  
מדורות של תוך אפרסמון. עורקי דם מתחת עור עדין מול אש פרגי-אחו.

הו עוד לפני מסך יורד נכנסת לאחורית כתף אור ממול מצניח מצח בלונד-צהב עלומי  
השערות כאלו. פה כלו זכר סכום דק זכרון דברים שעיינים במעוף בלעו קמטי סדינים  
בבשר הרפה נשארים כשעתים. אוהב, בעירתי אמרו יצור הוא בעל שלשים-ושתיים  
שנים. כחפצך נגס שלד משורר, בפנים רך האגס. [כ"ג]

**[With less cunning than usual, eyes barely open behind necessary glasses.** The line on the cheek almost a scar, we are here again. He who for years was becoming "an artist," in a house robe rubbed out red .

Look at these square tiles and in them, a big sea's transparencies (a thin blue line) and the little bit of light yellow that above it all is beloved (read sandy shores). But we from the black-maroon cloth become the bonfire face of a persimmon's

214 See Martin Jay's treatment of Adorno's notion of experience in his "Is Experience Still in Crisis?"

core. Blood veins beneath delicate skin facing meadow poppies' fire.

Oh just before the curtain falls light enters through back of shoulder parachutes ahead yellow-blond forehead the youth of hair supposedly. A whole mouth the memory of a thin sum a record that eyes flying swallowed sheet-creases remain in the lax flesh for about two hours. Loving, in my small town they said a creature had thirty-two teeth. At your leisure bite a poet's skeleton, inside the softness of a pear.]

Again we are here; is it myself and I? Although Schimmel obviously does not use the royal “we” its traces are nevertheless ironic. It is the age-line in the cheek that divides the speaker in two: “I,” and the lapse of time, which in itself has made the “I” an “artist” in a red domestic robe. Someone who is no longer young, who is also not that active, it seems, outside the realm of his home or even his bathroom. A sense of old age is also hinted at in the eyes that need glasses and are barely opening; perhaps also in their diminished canniness. Now look at the tiles, the speaker calls to himself, re-imagining his bathroom as a seashore, as he does in other poems in the sequence of *Nokhach*. “But we,”—we again, namely what the lapse of time has made of me, and the “I” that is watching it all (the poet?)—are experiencing this moment in the bathroom as being extremely intense—notice the blood vessels, delicate skin, bonfire and fire, as well as the maroon-black color of the robe that ignites this ominous, volatile imagery—the kind of intensity that perhaps only the recognition of one's temporality can bring with it. The rhymes *gadol* (big), *kakhol* (blue) *la-kol* (of it all), *chol* (sand) are interrupted by the adjective of *ahuv* (beloved) that breaks the rhythm awkwardly. For it is a somewhat strange adjective in the context of the line—“the little bit of light yellow that's above it all (is) beloved (read sandy shores)”—what is it exactly that is beloved, and why should it be read or understood as sandy shores? It may be that life that joins in with the immensity of the sea is the right place for love to be felt, an emotion that allows the speaker to open himself freely and fearlessly to that which is endless, or to a felt-recollection of love. It may also be that the yellow is evoked as marking that which differs from the color of the setting sun, that is life in its full bloom. “But we,” the speaker continues, “from the black-maroon cloth become the bonfire face of a persimmon's core.” The speaker's robe, now almost black, is, possibly again, a reminder of the setting sun. Schimmel's inclination to use chains of construct state nouns (to express a genitive link), similarly to, but not as smoothly as, medieval Hebrew poets, elevates the language only to make it sound awkward again—*Shkifuyot yam gadol (kav dak kachol) (a big sea's transparencies [a thin blue line]); pne-medurot-shel-tokh-afarsemon* (the bonfire face of a persimmon's core)—it is just too much, too many words, too many peculiar images made to lean on each other. The language becomes both somewhat numinous and earthy in a way that corresponds with the poem's memento mori quality.

A little before all this comes: “Look at these square tiles,” which in Hebrew is “*habet be-charsinot elu ha-meruba'ot*.” The literary tone of “*habet be-charsinot elu*,” that Schimmel prefers over the more familiar “*habet ba-charsinot ha-elu*” is joined by the slang



*charsinot* (literally, “porcelainss”) for tiles.<sup>215</sup> Schimmel is obviously not interested in that which sounds smooth and familiar. Interestingly, *charsinot*, a word of a lower register, is related to *charasim* (shards), a word reminiscent of both archeological excavations as well as death, since according to past Jewish custom, shards are to be placed on the eyes of the dead before burial (called *sherblakh* in Yiddish). Furthermore, the root of *ch-r-s* is also related to a major *piyut* that is part of *Rosh Ha-shana* and *Yom Kippur* liturgy, *unetane tokef*, where man's life is compared to a broken shard. Thus, the shores of sand, mentioned here and throughout the sequence, relate to the *afar* (earth) to which all return, and form part of the exhumation-and-death imagery.

“Oh,” Schimmel writes in the next stanza, “just before the curtain falls,” and probably especially before it does or while being acutely aware that it would and has already started to fall in certain ways, remembrance creeps in even more explicitly. It is a recollection of youth, and the mouth is also a reminder, as are the creases that the bed has left on the face, of the lapse of a life that has been lived, and of all that stays with us at least for a while, like the creases that bed linen leave in the flesh of the one who has just awakened. But then the word *ohev* (loving, or the one who loves) that begins the last sentence in the poem seems to make little sense. The shtetl memory that the speaker then conjures up is actually an allusion to an alleged physical difference between Jews and non-Jews in *Midrash Talpiyot*, a book by Eliyahu Ha-Cohen of Izmir (1659?-1729). It is a collection of *midrashim* (homiletic stories) from the talmud, the Zohar and other books of *kabbalah* arranged according to subjects. Under “bodily organs” *Midrash Talpiyot* states that the divine difference between Jews and non-Jews lies in the teeth, unlike the man-made difference of *mila* (circumcision). According to the midrash, Jews have 32 teeth, while all other nations have 33.<sup>216</sup> Schimmel then turns the Jew in the original story into a creature, making the allusion seem more mythical than xenophobic and nationalistic. Interestingly, the discussion of teeth in *Midrash Talpiyot* is adjacent to another *midrash*, attributed to the Zohar, where different parts of the human body are depicted as Jewish and others as non-Jewish: the head is attributed to the first man (*adam harishon*), the right arm is Abraham, the left is Isaac, the body is Jacob and the internal organs of the liver and the spleen are Esau and Ishmael accordingly. Surprisingly or not, the heart is Jacob again. As much as this alleged spiritual biology is strange and xenophobic, Jews and non-Jews form together the human body in its entirety. Schimmel's use of Jewish sources (bizarre and marginal as they sometimes are), is fascinating. It is never a learned commentary on the source, nor a profound discussion of its possible meaning for Jews and non-Jews today. Unlike many other contemporary scholars of Jewish sources intended to excavate an alternative reading of Judaism, from Levinas to Butler (through many Israeli artistic and scholarly works), Schimmel prefers to superimpose images one on the other allowing for as many bifurcations as possible. He doesn't therefore suggest that the xenophobic tales he alludes to actually reveal inner tensions and are not that xenophobic to begin with. Deriving meaning is the responsibility of the reader. The irony which Schimmel implies is both acute and endearing—in his town people used to tell this story, he writes, as if

215 *Charsina* in the singular simply means porcelain or china pottery or tile. Its plural form is slang.

216 Eliyahu Ha-Cohen, *Midrash talpiyot*. Available online (accessed Dec. 19, 2013), <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20804&st=&pgnum=14&hilite=>

it were a sweet and wondrous childhood memory. This kind of writing does not take the xenophobic sting out of the story, but opens it to different meanings without claiming that these newly arrived ideas are true to the original tale. The word “loving,” (*ohav*) could then be read as another apostrophe, as if the speaker were calling to someone, “you, the one who loves (*ohav*), listen to this.” Or to say that it he who feels love as he recalls the story about the creature that had thirty-two teeth. “Now,” he calls out to his reader, “you are invited, at your own leisure, to bite into the skeleton of the poem, its form, its riddle-like word combinations, using either your 32 or 33 teeth, and find inside the softness of a pear, that is taste, that is pleasure. And while you enjoy yourself so much please notice how Jews and non-Jews can become necessary parts of the whole human body, how they can and have been divided, and then think again of this poem and feel how it constellates Arabic poetic forms through the Hebrew, tinged by the English, for as much as the human body is made of Jews and non-Jews, so is the Hebrew language not just one language.” Indeed, for Schimmel Hebrew is far from being just one language, as he explains in the introduction to the first publication of *Qasida*:

אלא השירה לא רק עברית היא, היא כוללנית. כפי ש"עברית" אומרים, יש גם אחרת הקיימת לצידה, לפנייה, אחרייה. כל הכתובות דוברות. המשורר בעל-מזג, בזה שהוא חי את שלו, חי את כולן. כמו כן כל הצורות, האחיות למקצוע, מכתיבות את רישומן בגדול. חלק יש להן בשירה, והן הן נציגות השירה. מותר גם להגיד השירה עצמה. כך הגעתי אל רעיון **הו קצידה**.

[Yet poetry is not only Hebrew poetry, it is general [also: inclusive]. As much as one says “Hebrew,” there is another one, existing near it, before it, after it. All inscriptions [all that is written] are speaking. The poet gains a temperament by living his own, by living all of them. Similarly, all forms, the trade sisters, dictate their impression largely. They take part in poetry, and they are the ones who are the representatives of poetry. We may also say—poetry itself. This is how I arrived at the idea of *Qasida*.<sup>217</sup>]

This is the meaning of constellation or superimposition, that is poetry, for Schimmel—going backward in time, but also sideways and forward, not so as to take stock, but to allow what is not here and not now, first past and then future, all possible forms, to take part in this moment. Schimmel insists on opening avenues for the imagination, swirling allusions around, always keeping an ironic distance from the (often Hebrew and Jewish) allusions that consequently always form critical moments in the poem. Whether with extreme lighthandedness, or with more evident artistic intervention, he makes more of those allusions by finding, and allowing us to sense, the signifying relations opened up by their constellated interrelation as aesthetic and poetic *form*. Here is another (truly beautiful) poem that speaks of how one is born out of the other in poetry:

217 From: Harold Schimmel, “O Qasida,” *Chadarim*, 10 (1993): 65-80. Peter Cole translated Schimmel’s poetic defence of poetry, but did not include this section taken from the opening. See Harold Schimmel, *Qasida*, trans. Peter Cole (Jerusalem: Ibis, 1997). I was trying, with very limited success, to follow Schimmel’s Hebrew, which is convulsive and enigmatic, rich in associations, of high and low registers, and yet condensed and precise.

מכוצת על ברך, הגוף מצמצם עד גוש אברים. הראש המשך הושטת זרוע  
בהרנת קדה מביית, און על שכם. כך את שומעת את עצמך, השקת שבך. מקום שם  
שוב לרדת אפשר, ושוב להשקיט צמא.

היא במדות דומות הצטמצמה בפנימיות צדף כדי לגבש הולדה, ויופי, נכנסת להמרצת  
צרך היציאה.

רכונים על עקבות רגליה בברכת שפל השטף עכוזיה, פניה כבתוך ראי בפני ים  
נשקפות, עת נוגעת היא בחי. בחמלת אצבעות מסקרנות מרימה היא אל קו קרני  
שמש עולה את מה שלא היא. מתמזגת תודעת ברדודי רשרוש המים. שעות על שעות,  
רכוז מחלט בפזור רקע עולם. כי הלב, אחות פועמת לפרי קונכיה שביד.

כאן, מימיד הם המתמלאים באמבט. ופרי הנך, והכל אפשרי, אפלו אשר. [ני"ה]

[**Scrunched down on a knee, the body reduced** to a lump of organs. The head is the continuation of a stretched out of an arm domesticated by bowing low, ear to the shoulder. This is how you (fem.) hear yourself, the water trough that is in you. A place where you can go down to again, and again quench the thirst.

She shrank in similar proportions with the interiority of a seashell to consolidate a birth, and beauty, entering the speeding-of-the-need to come out.

Bent on her footsteps in the pool of the ebb-flow her buttocks, her face as if in a mirror reflected in the surface of the sea, as she touches the living. With the compassion of curious fingers she lifts to a ray rising of sunshine that which is not her. Consciousness merging with flattenings of the water rustling. Hours on hours, complete concentration in scattering the background of the world. For the heart, a pulsating sister to a seashell-fruit in the hand.

Here, your waters are being filled in the bath. And thou are fruit, and all is possible, even bliss. (55)]

The abundance of construct states condenses and twists the language of the poem as if it were following the picture described: a woman folded into herself so as she might be able to listen to her own sound, find her own “water trough” (*shoket* in Hebrew, reminiscent of *sheket*, quietness, although not sharing the same root), as well as eventually give birth to that which is not herself. Folded onto herself, but not like a fetus, or a bathing person, as something doesn't quite fit a natural position of the body. She might even resemble an animal drinking from a trough. “The head,” Schimmel writes, “is the continuation of a stretching of an arm.” This could be made possible only while the body is being observed from an external point of view: the arm stretched away from the body, towards, or as if towards the speaker. This is also the way she sees herself, as if removed from herself, as if having the perspective of an other. It is in this way that she can hear herself, quench her thirst, or “gain access to the insinuating polyphony” which is the exclusive right of *her* world of meaning, to cite *Qasida*

70 once more. One's polyphonic world of meaning is also that which enables the fabrication of that which is not identical with it. "With the compassion of curious fingers she lifts to a rising sunshine line that which is not her." Scattering the world's background, her consciousness is one with the sounds of (must be her), waters. "[B]ecause the heart, a pulsating sister to a shell-fruit in the hand." Put differently, and not as beautifully (but like medieval poems Schimmel's yield to paraphrase), one's heart, one's beat in a moment of arrest, when it is listened to as if from a distance, is the key that opens the door to life's magic, as well as to the potential for recreating that magic. Notice that Schimmel makes the masculine noun *lev* (heart) into a pulsating sister and then combines it with a seashell fruit (that is feminine in Hebrew.) For indeed "all is possible, even bliss." All of this is closely related to another section from *Qasida*, Schimmel's tract on poetry:

כשהוא מאבד עצמו בתנוחת מאזין, נסחף אל אפריון פרדת הזולת, רק אז  
ובתנאים אלו מסגל הוא לגלות מטמון-בעל-משמעות בנוף-מדבר. כי עוד לפני רגע  
נדמה היה הכל אבדה ושממון. [צ"ט:ע"ד]

[When he loses himself in listening's pose, drawn to the other's canopied departure, only then and under those conditions is he capable of discovering not-negligible treasure in the desert scape. Just a minute ago it all seemed loss and desolation. 32:74]

The poet-speaker is able to find a treasure in the desert ("a seashell-fruit in the hand") when he listens to the other's departure. But what does it mean? How can we truly understand the affinity between the self and the other as a necessary condition for our creative imagination to find treasures, that is, as Schimmel suggests, gain access to one's subjectivity? And how is it related to poetry? Let us turn to another poem, one of the last of the sequence of *Nokhach*, and the last one of this book to be discussed in this chapter:

קצת יותר השתנות מאשר פני נוף. מרכות עלומים, ערבה הנגיעה לשם  
עצמה, לסימני שפם ראשון, פלומת פרי רכה. ואז הרשומים קובעים, קבועים, למסר  
לך פנים.

צריכים להסתכל בקפיצות רציניות של כעשרים שנה כדי להבחין. שבע עשרה,  
שלושים ושבע, שבע וחמשים. בדלוגים כאלה אפשר כבר הר להזיז, לסדר מחדש  
עמדות עצים.

קדם שומעים כהד מרחוק בפרוזודורי אזנים קצב דמך, עור מתוח על פי כלי חרס.  
אחר כך דמות מזהים.

חמש וחצי, בקר, בחור בתוך כביש צועד, תוף בין הידים. כלל לא מאמן, אך מתון הולך  
תופף, מתון הולך, שקט תופף אל חוצות עיר. ס"ח

[A little more changing than the face of [the surface of] landscape. Out of softness of youth, the touch is pleasant for its own sake, the marks of a first mustache, soft fruit's fuzz. And then the sketches determine, determined, to deliver you a face.

One needs to watch in serious leaps of about twenty years in order to notice. Seventeen, thirty seven, seven and fifty. Hopping in this way you can already move a mountain, rearrange the layout of trees.

First one hears as a faraway echo in the corridors of the ears the rhythm of your blood, a stretched out skin over a clay vessel. Later you recognize a figure.

Five thirty, morning, a young man in the street is walking, a drum between his hands. Not at all trained, but slowly walking and drumming, slowly walking, quietly drumming to the streets of a city.] 68

The fifty-seven year old speaker conjures-up again an image of himself in his youth, here at his early adolescence. “Serious leaps,” he says, are called for if one is to truly observe one's life from an adequate perspective. He then leaps again, as it were, to the third stanza, but not for the sake of rethinking his life, as might have been expected. Rather, the speaker listens to the rhythm of *her* blood heard as a faraway echo in *his* ears. His eardrum, “a stretched skin over a clay vessel,” resembles an Arabic goblet drum known as *darbuka*, which is traditionally made of clay, *cheres*, covered with animal's skin. We may recall that in a poem discussed earlier, the speaker observed transparencies of a big sea in his bathroom's *charsinot* (a plural form of the same root), and that the entire poem had a strongly felt memento mori imagery. Here, too, an awareness of death is evinced through the time-leaps and the memory of the “softness-of-youth.” Actually, the hints dispersed throughout *Nokhach* now clearly suggest that the whole text is a memento mori poem, which strongly alludes to Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's “Memento Mori,” as much as Halpern's work at large seems to be a major inspiration for this sequence.<sup>218</sup> We have already noted the speaker's red robe, which is, as I argue below, is reminiscent of Halpern's *shlofkhalat* (bathrobe), and here the street drummer forms a salient allusion to Halpern. Schimmel clearly uses Benjamin Harshav's translation into Hebrew of Halpern's famous poem “*der gasen poyker*,” *Ha-metofef ba-chutsot* in Harshav's translation, which is also the name given to a volume of collected poems of Halpern's which Harshav had translated with Arye Sivan.<sup>219</sup> Halpern's street drummer beats his drum vigorously to make it burst (*poyk ikh az di poyk zol platsn*)<sup>220</sup> and strikes his cymbals no less forcefully, while Schimmel's young man is walking slowly and is drumming quietly. The figure of Halpern's reckless man, who has nothing, no property and no family, to lose, and is thus a bold and daring revolutionary, is made here to drum the sounds of the (woman) other's heart-beat in the speaker's ears. It is as if Schimmel arrests or at least slows down Halpern's drummer in a way that enables his speaker to lose “himself in listening's pose, drawn to the other's canopied departure.” The sound of her blood-beat is

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218 Schimmel refused to be interviewed for this dissertation, but in a phone conversation conducted on September 2013 he confessed to being still very much interested in Halpern's poetry, which he enthusiastically declared to be “wonderful!” (*nifla!*) as well as with the work of other Yiddish poets of the same generation.

219 Moyshe Leyb Halpern, *Ha-metofef be-khutsot*, translated by Benjamin Harshav and Arye Sivan (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1993).

220 Moyshe Leyb-Halpern, *In nyu york* (New York: Matones, 1954): 35-6.

heard from afar, she is not here, and the figure that eventually shows up in not hers, but possibly the speaker's (re-imagining himself as Halpern's speaker, as well as keeping his distance from him). Drawn to her departure, to her not being here, that is to his own remembrance of her, the speaker is able to hear her sounds as music, as quiet music, an embodied sense of rhythm, as an expression of an affinity with the music of another poet and other times, of another language and a different culture, and possibly also as the music he himself creates at the very moment of writing these lines. This seems to be his way to gain access to his own world of meaning, his own temperament (*mezeg* in Schimmel's term), a term that brings to mind Halpern's *perzenlekhkayt*. Having a poetic *perzenlekhkayt* would then mean being able to follow one's memory, to constellate all that could then become one's languages dialects, and vocabularies, be they within Yiddish, English or Hebrew. If Halpern's "Memeto Mori" introduces a rendezvous with death as the source of poetry, or of the gestic, as I have tried to show in the chapter dedicated to Halpern, Schimmel's rendezvous with Death happens as he sees himself "*vi men zet zikh aleyn in a shpigl*" (Just as you see yourself in a mirror), in the morning; and his rendezvous with Death is also no less "dazzling and colorful," and, indeed, similarly inspired by an other's canopied departure. "And if Moyshe-Leyb, tears in his eyes," Halpern writes, "[s]wears that he was drawn to Death / As a man is drawn at dusk in desire / To the window of a woman he adores — / Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?" We can now understand Moyshe-leyb the poet's desire as much more than an ironic gesture towards Romantic imagery of love (as well as, possibly, reread that imagery itself), in light of what Schimmel terms as desire or yearning (*erga*). What is at stake is thus not a desire towards a woman one adores, but, as Schimmel writes in *Qasida*, "a refashioning of a private past's structure as desire," that is poetry made of desire or yearning, or in the form of desire, that is distilling for us the *form* of desire.

Schimmel's understanding of desire is indeed extremely formal and abstract, while Halpern's is always ensconced in the dire particularities of the socio-historical reality of his life, and necessarily involves pain caused by injustice. But a closer look into both Halpern's work and Schimmel's engagement with it may reveal an intriguing affinity between the two poets. I believe that such an examination can shed light on the questions discussed in this chapter, namely where poetry comes from, and how poetry's origin is related to the relations of self and other. Let us then take a detour, beginning with yet another "tract on poetry," one that Halpern had written probably for a talk about his poetry he delivered during a 1925 speaking tour.

### **c. Evening Red, and Not Because Someone Died at Your Neighbor's**

In her *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*, Ruth Wisse cites an illuminating meta-poetic story from Halpern's 1925 talk. It is a story interesting enough to merit lengthy quotation and discussion. This is what Halpern writes:

On the street outside, wearing a white dress and with large red paper flowers in her hair, sat a gentile bride weeping, with a circle of people around her.

One of the onlookers, the hunchbacked tailor who did minor alterations for everyone

in town, tried to comfort her,

“Don't cry,” he said to her, “your fiancé will come back. He won't abandon you with that large belly.”

My mother said nothing, but slowly helped the girl to her feet and holding her by the arm brought her into our woodshed where she gave birth. When she was asked whether someone should go for help to the flax-merchant in whose house she had served since childhood, the girl crossed herself and made a cross over her infant and cursed the merchant.

The town's fool, Tsemakh, a witness to all this, ran outside and began stopping strangers in the street, pleading with tears in his eyes that they wait for the child to grow a little older to see it acquire a beard and sidelocks, like the flax-merchant. Once the evidence was visible, they could summon him to a *beys-din* for trial.

And every time Tsemakh ended his story, he gave himself such a resounding thump on his naked breast that I began to fear him as much as I did the evil-spirit who, my mother told me, would come to choke me if I forgot a section of my prayers before going to sleep.

And from then on—

Like a beggar with fists full of coins, who begins to lose them when his memory fails, I have lost all the psalms I used to know by heart and all the prayers and blessings, and whenever I find a scrap of paper I write on it those accursed thirteen words: on the ground weeping gentile bride infant flax-merchant beard and sidelocks evil-spirit trial evening-red.<sup>221</sup>

Following Jungian dream analysis, Wisse believes there is something of Halpern in each of the characters in his tale and analyzes it accordingly. However interesting her analysis may be, my focus lies on the poetics that Halpern brings forth in his tale. The end of the story is especially intriguing. On the one hand it seems that the speaker finds substitutive sources of inspiration to replace the religious ones, as if those “accursed thirteen words” were a different kind of prayer, a new song to be performed so as to keep evil spirits away. However, it is only a list of words, not a prayer nor yet a poem, but mere “boards and nails” reassembled from an actual or imaginary childhood memory. These words will turn again and again, Halpern explains, into poems.<sup>222</sup> The last two words, evening-red, are almost entirely new to the story, suggested only by the red flowers in the bride's hair (*purpurene*, that is purple, in the version I've read, where the bride herself is red).<sup>223</sup> “Evening-red” is a poetic

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221 Unpublished manuscript in the Halpern Archive, YIVO, 181-86. Cited in Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 119-120. Wisse translates the thirteen words as beginning with the words “on the ground was gentile bride,” but at least in two other versions of the story found in Halpern's Archive the text says “*oyf der erd. Geveyn. Goyisher kale* [...]” This reads: on the ground. (A) Weeping. Gentile bride.” I believe it makes more sense for Halpern's thirteen words not to have a verb, and certainly not the ungrammatical construction Wisse uses in her translation.

222 And see also Chana Kronfeld's discussion of Halpern's image of the poet as beggar that I that is left with very little.

223 Wisse does not cite the Yiddish original. In the version of the story I've found in YIVO, evening-red is *oventroytkayt*. It seems that at first the gentile bride had a purple and not red flowers in her hair, and she herself was red. See Halpern's Archive, YIVO, no. 58, 56, 57, 59 60, 88, and 1050 for different drafts of the same talk.

cliché, and its very status as cliché highlights the words' artificiality, indicating the kind of imaginative, or gestic intervention, that is needed for poetry to be written. Deeply related to it all is the simile Halpern uses to describe his becoming a poet—"Like a beggar with fists full of coins, who begins to lose them when his memory fails, I have lost all the psalms I used to know by heart and all the prayers and blessings [...]." Forgetfulness and even impoverishment are necessary for poetry; writing requires relinquishing what one already possesses or knows by heart. Yet something must be remembered for it to be forgotten: the thirteen words that remain may be a radical rewriting or replacement of the Thirteen *Midot* (attributes) of God, one of the central prayers in the Jewish ritual. In Halpern's Archive in YIVO there are quite a few draft pages of the same talk that Wisse cites, containing a lot more material, though it is sometimes hard to make clear sense of it. One of those paper-drafts includes a kind of introduction to the thirteen-word tale, a very illuminating introduction. This is what Halpern writes:

*Zog ikh tsu zikh ikh zol di oygn vider efenen. Efn ikh zey un ze az oykh der kop bay mayn shokhn iz royt. Naket un royt vi men zet a mol a signal-shild a kaylekhdiqs oyf a banweg. Dakht zikh mir az ikh darf zikh oyshitn far epes mayd ikh oysshpringen aroys dray klezmerkarliklakh azoy vi take fun a ban un ven tsvey fun zey shpiln hoybt on der driter oyszuzingen ot vos:*

*Nit in emets geshtorbn bay dayn shokhn  
un nit zenen zayne oygn royt vayl er kukt zikh arum tsu fil  
un nit fun harbkaytn vos er zol hobn gegesn  
nor vayl di zun gezt unter.*

*Un az er rut a vayl zingt er iber nokhamol dos eygene un dernokh faln ale dray vi toyte anider. Trakht ikh iber vegn dem vert mir gringer vayz ikh on mir aleyn azoy vi mit a finger az oykh mayn bukh in zeyere hent iz royt vayl di zun gezt unter.  
Nor di draytsn verter vos khazern zikh iber in mayn bukh un vos ikh aleyn hob zey ibergetseylt shoyt zer lang tsurik zenen royt eybik. Afile in regenteg herbstike un in finstere nekht—azoy dakht zikh mir.  
Batog farges ikh zikh amol  
Farnakht ober vi nor ikh derze an ovnt-volkn shveb ikh mit.  
Di roytkayt fun der zun vos gezt unter dermont mikh on mayn kindhayt un on der goyisher kale vos tsulib ir bin ikh aza a farfalener [...]<sup>224</sup>*

[I tell myself I should open my eyes again. I open them and see that my neighbor's head is also red. Naked and red as a round signal light that you see sometimes on the railways. I have the feeling I should shield myself from something, I dodge, three klezmer-dwarfs jump out just as if from a train and while two of them play, the third one begins to sing this song:

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224 Halpern's Archive, YIVO, no. 58.



Not because someone died at your neighbor's  
And not his eyes are red from looks around too much  
And not from hardships that he must have been through  
But because the sun is settings.

And after he rest for a while he sings the same song over again and then the three of  
them fall like the dead on the ground.

I think about it and things feel easier for me I point at myself as if with a finger that my  
book that is in their hands is also red because the sun is setting.

Only the thirteen words that repeat themselves in my book and that I myself have  
counted them a long time ago are eternally red. Even in autumnal rainy days and in  
dark nights—so it seems to me.

During the day I forget myself

But in the evening, as soon as I see an evening cloud, I fly along.

The redness of the setting sun reminds me of my childhood and of the gentile bride  
because of whom I'm such a hopeless case.]

This excerpt makes it even clearer that we are to understand the thirteen-word-tale as tracing poetry's *Ursprung* or origin back to someone else's misfortune that is felt to be the poet-protagonist's own tragedy.<sup>225</sup> It is because of her that he has become such a *farfalener*—lost, hopeless, or better, a hopeless case—namely, for Halpern, a poet. The *oventroytkayt*, evening-red, that is added to the thirteen words (the manuscripts in Halpern's archive show that only at a certain point in the process of writing his talk did Halpern insert “*ovntroytkayt*” in) is conceived as a key term in his conception of poetry, and not only because it reveals the artistry of the poem. Red here also suggests the color of blood, and the grotesque klezmer song is to be taken seriously: it means that someone did die at your neighbor's, and that you should not attribute the redness to the setting sun. The red head of the speaker's fellow rider on the train similarly indicates an act of violence that was done to him, or at least an impending danger. Red colors Halpern's book, and his thirteen words are of the true eternal red, and as sunsets trigger his recollection of the non-Jewish bride, his childhood neighbor, he sets these words into poetry again.

Some of this redness and violence is played out in one of Halpern's greatest poems, written as if by his wife, “*Fun mayn Royzeles togbukh*” (From My Royzele's Diary). The poem was written in 1924, a year before Halpern delivered the talk discussed above. It is given in Royzele's voice and takes the form of a monologue of a woman who has no one to talk to. The poem brings to mind the literary convention of the eastern European Jewish wife who is left alone to battle with poverty, and who tries in her distress to come up with some kind of solution. Here is the beginning of the first part of the poem:

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225 Benjamin's notion of *Ursprung* is closely related to that of the dialectical image. Origin for Benjamin has nothing to do with stability, but is directed to the past in order to “restore” or “reproduce”, and because of that can never be complete or brought to a stand-still. See Samuel Weber, “Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's Origin of the German Mourning Play.” *MLA*, 106:3 [German Issue] (April 1991): 465-500.

***Fun mayn Royzeles tog-bukh*** <sup>226</sup>

I

*Mentshn shteyen oyf  
un yogn zikh mit shifn un mit banen,  
un flatern vi feygel, in der luftn iber alts,  
un shparn zikh, vi roykhn fun di koymens,  
un dreyen zikh, vi shtoyb in vint  
in ot-dem eybik-zingendikn gold-un-ayzn-virbl  
fun der shtot,  
un do baym yam afile oyf dem toytn-indzl;  
baym frukht-farkoyfer in der vogn  
leydik shoy n kimat,  
un Sam der kremer shtelt di akhte milkhkan shoy n aroys;  
un oykh McDowell, der alter irlender,  
der shokhn undzerer,  
mit hant un hamer oyf der zoyl der harter,  
fayft shoy n aroyf tsum tsentn mol dos zelbe lid  
tsum feygele in shtaygl, vos lernt zikh  
im nokhtsuzingen.  
Mayn man ober, –  
azoy vi s'vil der yam nisht oyfhern tsu royshn,  
vil er nisht oyfhern  
stu firn zayn milkhome mit di flign  
in shlofkhalat.*

**[From My Royzele's Diary]** <sup>227</sup>

I

People wake up in the morning  
And race in boats and trains,  
and flutter like birds in the air above it  
And push, like smoke out f a chimney,  
And spin like dust in the wind,  
In this ever-singing, gold-and-iron whirlpool  
Of a city.  
And even here, by the sea, on Dead Island:  
The fruit-vendor has almost  
Emptied his wagon by now,  
And Sam the grocer puts out the eighth milk can;  
And McDowell, too, the old Irishman,  
Our neighbor,

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226 *Moyshe Leyb Halpern*, vol.1: 62-65.

227 See Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 441-443.

His hands and hammer on the hard sole,  
 Whistles for the tenth time the same song  
 To a bird in a case that learns  
 To mime him.  
 Yet my husband—  
 As the sea will never stop its swell—  
 He'll never cease  
 To make war against the flies  
 In a bathrobe.]

The day has already begun, and all but Royzele's husband are participating in the race, working to earn a living. Royzele's good-for-nothing husband doesn't even pretend to have any life in him as he wages war on the flies wearing his bathrobe. For while all are busy earning a living, they actually "flutter like birds in the air," "push, like smoke out of a chimney, / and spin like dust in the wind," an imagery closely related to the *Unetane Tokef* prayer mentioned above in relation to Schimmel's *Nokach*. "A man origin's is from dust and his destiny is back to dust," says the *piyyut* liturgical poet while directly alluding to Ecclesiastes, "at risk of his life he earns his bread; he is likened to broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, flying dust, and a fleeting dream."<sup>228</sup> Halpern may not have forgotten all of his prayers, after all, although he put them to a very different use here, making us understand that the husband's waving of the hands is no less useful than the others' fluttering, pushing and spinning. Moreover, Royzele and her husband are "here, by the sea, on Dead Island." Halpern *toytn-inzl* must be an allusion to *Die Toteninsel*, a painting by the Swiss symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), that was extremely popular in central Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Royzele's speech, however, does not try to emulate the awe that Böcklin may have wished to inspire. On the contrary, she is trying to come across a down-to-earth kind of person. What does it mean, then, that she and her husband live on Dead Island? It is with death that the poem starts, although also with a gesture towards remembrance:

*Un mit mayn hut oyf zikh, dem mit di royte blumen,  
 yogt er zikh arum un varft mit hant,  
 vi in der opere a dirigent a heyser.  
 Un vi a biber shvitst er shoyrn (er ken zikh nokh,  
 khalile, tsukiln) vos tut men mit azoynem – got mayner?  
 Es kumt dokh oys, khotsh shray oyf im, vi oyf a kind,  
 tsi gor farshpil mit reyd im, vi a kind.  
 - O, zilber-groyer kop, – du man mayner, du kind  
 vi heyst der rebe dayner, zog mir, oyb du veyst?  
 - mayn rebe iz a blinder oyf an oyg  
 un heyst reb Khayem.*

228 In Hebrew: אדם יסודו מעפר וסופו לעפר בנפשו גביא לחמו משול החרס הנשבר החציר גבש וקציץ נוכל קצל עובר וקענו קלה. וברוח נושבת וקאבוק פורח וכהלום יעוף. The English Translation is from the *ArtScroll Rosh HaShanah Machzor*.

- *Vos trinkt der rebe dayner ale tog?*
- *Tsikorye fun a kvortn-tepl*

*Trinkt der rebe mayner ale tog,  
un bloyz lekoved shabes est er  
kashe mit fasolyes,  
kashe mit fasolyes,  
kashe mit fasolyes.*

[With my hat on is head, the one with the red flowers,  
He races about and throws his arms  
Like a hot conductor in an opera.  
He sweats like a beaver (he might, God forbid,  
Catch cold). What shall I do with such a man, my God?  
Shall I scold him like a child,  
Or, with words, put him to play like a child?  
- Oh, silver-gray head—you, my husband, my child  
What's the name of your teacher? Tell me, if you know.  
- My teacher is blind in one eye  
And his name is Reb Chayem.  
- What does your teacher drink every day?  
- Chickory in a mug, that's what  
My teacher drinks every day,  
And only on the Sabbath he eats  
Kasha with beans,  
Kasha with beans,  
Kasha with beans.]

Wearing his wife's hat, indeed, “the one with the red flowers,” Royzele's husband possibly calls to mind that gentile bride from Halpern's thirteen-word-tale who had red (paper) flowers in her hair. For if it is not to form an affinity with that childhood memory, why should he be wearing it? “Red flowers” (as a hair ornament) form two words out of those accursed thirteen that he uses again and again, but as we are soon to see, one's childhood also harbors hope. With that hat on his head, Royzele's husband is waving his hands as if he were conducting an opera, but perhaps even more so like a useless Don Quixote, and she is afraid he'll catch cold. More than being feminine, this fly-catching husband looks like a clown, but as Kronfeld explains, Halpern's use of the clown, or pauper-clown figure in his writing, serves simultaneously as a condemnation and an exoneration of the poet's marginality.<sup>229</sup> It is interesting to note the several references to singing in the poem's first part—first, the “ever-singing, gold-and-iron whirlpool of a city,” McDowell the shoemaker's whistled song, and the bird in a cage that learns to mimic McDowell. Music ironically metaphorizes into the husband's inability (as an enthusiastic opera conductor) to provide for his wife. But music as song also emerges from the funny and strange dialogue

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229 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 196-202.

between husband and wife playing mother and child. This is a general, all-Yiddish children's song that could have been sung about any boy and any rabbi in any *kheyder*. But exactly this Jewish-universality is what makes the husband-wife dialogue into a song or poem.

Mimicking a lullaby, husband and wife collaboratively write their own poem-song. Ending in *kashe* (buckwheat porridge), the conclusion of the poem's first half may allude to the Yiddish idiom *farkokhn a kashe*, making a mess of things. For the repeating last three lines result in no determinable meaning and eventually in a complete impasse that may actually testify to the poem's own utility. Yet, this impasse of and in song-play begins to reveal itself in the second part of the poem as a case of music or poetry's capacity to allow us a sense of time, a temporality being held open, suspended, inviting us to enter and therefore act on time or history: precisely this layered song-play enables a new beginning, as the speaker takes on a more philosophically-informed attitude towards life.

## II

*Un do in land dervaksene, vi kinder,  
benken ale tog nokh naye shpilekhlakh,  
far vos zol – freg ikh – dos farmestn zikh  
in flign-khapn oykh nisht zayn a shpil?  
Vor iz: mir iz shver tsu trakhtn vegn dem,  
dos kumt derfun, vos altsding molt zikh glaykh  
far mayne oygn oys, azoy vi lebedik.  
Ot ze ikh dokh in dem plakat,  
vu oysyes, vi slupes groyse,  
zogn on dem nomen fun mayn man.  
Der flign-khaper-tshempiyen fun land iz er, –  
s'shteyt azoy geshrign.  
Un oysgemolt mit briln, hor un shnips,  
un mit di hent un fis in luften  
kukt er mir oys – nisht oysgeredt zol zayn –  
vi a meshugener oyf glaykhe vent.  
Nor mer fun alts fardrist der froy in mir! –  
Vi m'hot mir ongeton mayn libn man.  
Dem top dem goldenem, vos hengt im  
oyf der Brust – farshtey ikh nokh –  
er darf mistam araynvarfn ahin  
di flign, vos er khapt,  
me zl zey kenen ibertseyln,  
ven di farvet-tsayt ver fariber zayn.  
Di breyte hoyzn ober, oy di royte zayne –  
vos badarf er?  
Flign zaynen dokh keyn vilde oksn nisht,  
Men zol zey darfn raytsn?  
Nor efsher vil men tsutsiyen mit dem gor undz aleyn, –*

*di froyen?*  
*Royt dermont dokh undz on epl-rozn zunfargang,*  
*on shporn-klang fun yunge ofitsirn.*  
*Far mir aleyh hot zikh shoyh oykh a mol farneygt azoyner.*  
*Ikh bin gegangen demolt*  
*mit mayn khaverte shpatsirn*  
*in vilne – oyf der hoyptgas –*  
*peshe-gitl iz geven ir nomen.*  
*A landsman vos iz ersht fun shif arunter,*  
*hot dertsyelt, az zi hot zikh aleyh geteyt,*  
*ven zelner zaynen zeyer hoyz*  
*in mitn nakht bafaln – – –*

[II  
Here, in this country, grown-ups, like children,  
Desire new games every day.  
Why shouldn't – I ask – a competition  
In fly-catching also be a game?  
It's hard for me to think about it,  
Because every though appears as an image  
Before my eyes.  
Now I see a poster  
Where letters big as pillars  
Announce the name of my husband,  
The fly-catching champion of the nation, –  
That's what it says.  
Painted with glasses, hair and a bowtie,  
With his arms and his legs in the air,  
He looks—forgive me for saying so—  
Like a madman climbing walls.  
But above all, the woman in me is annoyed!  
Now they've dressed up my dear husband!  
Never mind the golden pot hanging on his chest –  
he has to drop the flies he catches into it,  
So they can count them  
When the competition is over.  
But what are those wide trousers for?  
Are flies wild bulls  
That one must tease them?  
But maybe they want to attract us—  
The women?  
Red reminds us of an apple-rosy sunset,  
And of the sound of spurs of young officers.

One of them once bowed  
 To me.  
 It happened when I strolled  
 With my girl friend  
 In Vilna, on Main Street.  
 Peshe-Gittel was her name.  
 A *landsman* who just came off a ship  
 Told me that she killed herself  
 When soldiers in the middle of the night  
 Burst into their house – – –]

“[...] Grown-ups, like children, desire new games every day,” she says, and as will become even more evident later, this is a complaint addressed at mode of production of modern capitalism. Accustomed to frequent and intense stimulations, the public always asks for new ones. The speaker then imagines her husband as a fly-catching champion appearing on a commercial poster, in which he looks, as Royzele explains, like “a madman climbing walls.” The pot hanging on his chest might have a concrete function, but not his wide red trousers. Or maybe they do, aimed to attract women, reminding them of a cliché sunset-image or the sound of young officers’ spurs. The image of the sunset and the color of the trousers form a critical moment in the poem, women are being presented with an image (here, that of the wife’s own reified husband) that is supposedly designed for their true emotional needs while it is actually a dangerous delusion. The speaker images her husband as something of a famous sports champion selling precisely that image of himself accompanied by other easily marketable images. But Halpern doesn’t stop at making his figure, the poet’s figure, into a false image. After all, he wears *red* trousers, and red “reminds us of an apple-rosy sunset,” and sunsets reminds us “the sound of spurs,” and spurs remind us of Peshe-Gittel, who killed herself so as not to fall into the hands of soldiers. We come back full circle to where it all started, the gentile bride and the accursed thirteen words, especially, that is, *ovntroytkayt*.

The seemingly disjointed chain of associations that leads to this last death makes it all the more surprising and effective. Seemingly, because it all relies so heavily on the color of injustice and death, but also of poetry, the color red. This chain of associative constellations inscribes in the verse, and hence in us, the realization that the game of the imagination we are taking part in is more than a game; likewise, we feel that the poem’s image of the poet as a fly catching champion stretches beyond the limits that had made him, and restricted him to being such an advertisement of a fake champion. Engaging in a game of real pain and imagination we ride along only to be slapped hard in the face in the end. Peshe-Gittel knew all too well the real meaning of soldiers’ spurs. She was not intoxicated by the mechanically-produced images of apple-rosy sunsets and young men. The speaker isn’t intoxicated by it either, she knows where poverty can end. At this junction of the speaker’s distress, the poetry-making of the husband, the commercial poster, wartime violence against women, and suicide, the language of poetry takes shape. And it all started with Royzele's husband wearing jester's red trousers and a woman's red-flower hat, that is in the poet-figure wearing his professional

attire and thus being superimposed on his wife, the young bride, and eventually, Peshe-Gittl. Importantly, none of them gets blurry because of this superimposition.

How should we understand Halpern's choice to have his wife as the poem's speaker? It is very rare for a male poet to write a poem, not just from a woman's or a lover's view-point, but from his own wife's view-point, where the erotic insinuations, and usually illicit "love-affair" connotation, are much less likely to infuse the gender-bending implications. Halpern's choice is also a way of re-introducing an older partnership formation. It clearly makes the poem all the more painful, as responsibility and dependence are at stake, as are, of course, the bare necessities of life, including love. Choosing a wife as speaker also positions a woman's voice as a social position; this is rather different from presenting femininity as an immanent trait. Royzele is not "feminine," or "sexy," or simply different, she is a human being, a definition that does not exclude her woman-position. Her Jewishness is no more essentialized—Royzele and Peshe-Gittl are Yiddish names, but we can hardly regard their misfortune as exclusively and necessarily Jewish. Also because the red flowers in Royzele husband's hat remind us of those thirteen words and the gentile bride's misfortune. It is thus the wrong done to that bride (by a Jewish merchant) that starts the poem's final felt-to-be-inevitable chain of associations that ends in Peshe-Gittl's death. It is a Yiddish poem, telling about Jewish immigrants and a Jewish victim that it is formed through listening to the "other's canopied departure" as it originates in a wrong done to an other, non-Jewish woman.

This poem that has in it a sunset and an artist as the one wearing a *shlofchalat* (bathrobe) and red wide trousers, can be read to be in the background of Schimmel *Nokhach*. Schimmel's artist may not be fighting the flies, but, as Schimmel writes, he has become "an artist" in quotation marks, and he does wear a red bathrobe at least whenever he takes the artist's pose (and for Schimmel that could be always.) Thus Schimmel brings to mind Halpern's fly-fighting husband, that is the poet as both useless and capable, and capable because he does nothing, because he loses himself in a listening's pose. Schimmel's persimmon sunsets may not have the same meaning as Halpern's sunsets, that signify the moment in which a human being faces violence, disrespect, and homelessness, perhaps more than anything else. Red is the color of violence, but also of poetry (*ovntroytkayt*).<sup>230</sup> For Halpern, poetry cannot come into existence without the poet's active, constructive remembrance of an injustice done to a certain "her," whereas Schimmel's poetry is extremely abstract and spare, does not speak of any injustice, and both the speaker and its feminine other are flattened and emptied-out of any specific attributes. And yet, I believe both Schimmel and Halpern produce are poetries that come into being through an other, and the two poets share an understanding of where poetry comes from. Let us return once more to Schimmel's *Qasida* in trying to further explain this affinity. Here is what Schimmel says of *atlat*:

**אטלאַל** (אתר האש הנחרך) שם המשורר-הגבור מגשים העלמותו.  
"יתפוגת הנושא בשדה האחר." כך התייחס ארנס ג'ונס ל"אפניסיס", אותו פחד  
שחלילה לא נדע העדר ערגה. [צ"ו: נ"ח]

230 For Schimmel's *Nokhach* red is also related to the function of art, as I've tried to show in relation to the way he uses the image of the speaker-poet as a setting sun. Reminiscent of the function of imagery in medieval Hebrew poetry, the poet-persimmon-setting sun could be seen as forming an auratic gesture.



[*Atlatl* (the charred site of the fire), where the poet-hero crystallizes absence. "The expiration of the subject in the field of the other." This is how Ernest Jones spoke of "aphanisis," the apprehension that, God forbid, we'll never know the absence of desire. (28: 58)]<sup>231</sup>

Schimmel makes a gesture of a learned citation, but only a gesture. Jones's aphanisis is a fear of the disappearance of sexual desire and not the fear of *not* experiencing the disappearance of desire. Schimmel actually uses the notion of aphanisis to speak about the subject-poet-protagonist that loses himself in remembering an other. In (Schimmel's notion of) the Arabic Qasida the subject-poet-protagonist is not searching for the lost beloved so as to retrieve her or to rebuild the deserted campsite she has left behind. Since Schimmel relies on the Qasida, the subject-poet-protagonist is always a man in search of a woman, but this can be excused since it is a formal construct that is under discussion, not an actual suggestion for romantic love nor even for gender roles in the writing of poetry. It is also not that the subject-poet-protagonist's subjectivity is fixed and pre-given. In his constructed search for her, carried in a dream state, in a state of remembering, he looks "for the 'not-I,' read 'other' in order to form a renewed promise of his own skin." [72: 261] He is expiring, that is, becoming absent, taking leave from the flow of experience and from "longing-in-motion" or longing for motion. This must always involve a not-I, exactly as the poet-protagonist of the Qasida immerses himself in the memory of *her*, but does not mount his horse and chase her! He has lost his desire in remembrance for the benefit of gaining access to his poem, to that "insinuating polyphony," to his "world of meaning," which is never fixed or pre-given, but is formed through the provisional search for the other that is the making of a poem. It is a search for the other that results in finding a truer, fuller, self. It is a search for subjectivity. God forbid, then, we'll never know the absence of desire.

For Halpern, the search for the other is no less formal, and his poems are also made out of other poems, not necessarily in drawing on many poetic sources, as Schimmel does, but rather in its coming into being through the kind of constellative process that Schimmel suggests in his *Qasida*. Halpern, as can be seen in his poetry as well as his own account starts with a childhood memory that translates itself into poetic building blocks he would keep constellating anew throughout his short writing career. Furthermore, his subject-poet-protagonist never does anything in the real world to save either the gentile bride or Royzele, or any of the other women and men in need that fill his poetry. Halpern's poetry originates in an injustice done to an other, not in the trope of romantic love, but it is in and through poetry that the other's experience becomes the self's, and is made available to us. In his poetry's engagement with Halpern, Schimmel encourages his readers to reread Halpern's poetry, and inspect for themselves what Halpern reveals about that which is not the self. He does it using the tropes of sunset, red color, the poet as the one wearing the bathrobe, and the drummer in the streets. Schimmel does not take it upon himself to represent or interpret Halpern, but he turns that drumming into the rhythm and sound of her heartbeat. And here, perhaps, lies the key to his approach to Halpern. It involves an abstraction of the ties that Halpern forms between the self and the other, without lessening their interdependence.

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231 Cole's translation is slightly emended by me.

Still, some questions remain that need to be asked, question that relate to the affinity between Schimmel's work and its time and place: why does Schimmel empty both his subject and the other? If his poetry (at least in *Nokhach*) is that of love, what kind of love is it? Is it love for the one nearest me—mother, wife, daughter, mother in law, a close friend—or is it in any way able to extend beyond one's immediate others? That is, what about all others who are not closely related to me, whom I may not know personally, and have never even met? Does Schimmel suggest a way of moving from what Seyla Benhabib terms “the concrete other” to what she refers to as “the generalized other”?<sup>232</sup> I believe these questions to be extremely important as although originating in poetry they touch on what is most urgent and difficult in Israel, and elsewhere, today—how can a non-violent public sphere exist in times of great political tension; how can a society that invests much of its resources in maintaining a sustained state of hostility with its neighbors imagine a peaceful solution while avoiding mere delusions about a peace process already taking place?<sup>233</sup> How can a community of people begin to form the kind of solidarity that is needed for it to improve the social situation of its members, and negotiate its interest peacefully?

These questions were recently addressed by Seyla Benhabib in reviewing Judith Butler's latest book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*.<sup>234</sup> In her review Benhabib challenges Butler's employment of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics for her own theorizing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The debate between Benhabib and Butler touches upon questions raised in this chapter and all through this dissertation, namely relations of self and other, subjectivity, and political action. Benhabib begins her discussion of Butler's reading of Levinas with the remark made by him that “the face is what one cannot kill.” Since we know all too well that people can and are indeed so often being killed, then what this remark actually means, explains Benhabib, is that “‘the face’ is not simply the physical appearance of the other, but a certain mode of being-with-the-other.”<sup>235</sup> Benhabib then cites Butler who observes that “there is no way to separate the face from that precise encounter with the face to which we are subject, to which we cannot help but be subject, in the face of which we have, in effect, no choice, bound as we are by the interdiction imposed upon us.”<sup>236</sup> The face of the other, then, “subjects us to itself; this moment of *beholding* the other is also when the interdiction is imposed upon us.”<sup>237</sup> This calls to mind my discussion of Schimmel's *Nokhach*. But first, it is important to note that for Levinas the self is bound by

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232 Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory.” *Praxis International* 4 (1985): 402-424.

233 In his *Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine* Lev Grinberg explains that in the years following the Oslo accords many Israelis imagined the Israeli authorities to be promoting a peace process with the Palestinian representatives. Grinberg contrasts this imagined peace with a governmental policy that limited the free movement of Palestinians and hence their income sources, as well as supported the continuous building of settlements. See Lev Luis Grinberg, *Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine: Democracy versus military rule* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

234 Judith Butler, *Parting ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

235 Seyla Benhabib, “Ethics without Normativity and Politics without Historicity: On Judith Butler’s Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism,” *Constellations* 20:1 (2013), 151.

236 Cited in Benhabib, “Ethics without Normativity.” 151.

237 Ibid.

the presence of the other, and as Benhabib further explains, this phrase “contains a devastating critique of all philosophies based on the primacy of the autonomous subject [...] So, it is not my death that is the culmination of my authenticity but rather, the realization of my own vulnerability in the hands of the other and of the other’s vulnerability in my own hands that is fundamental.”<sup>238</sup> This insight, says Benhabib, is important to Butler because ethics is no longer understood, and here she cites Butler: “as disposition or action grounded in a ready-made subject, but rather as a relational practice that responds to an obligation that originates outside the subject.” Therefore, Butler stresses, ethics contests sovereign notions of the subject.<sup>239</sup> Benhabib then admits that these insights are indeed compelling, as “ethics comes to signify the act by which place is established for those who are “not-me,” comporting me beyond a sovereign claim [...].”<sup>240</sup> Indeed, Benhabib maintains that this stress on responsiveness and responsibility is part of all ethical relations in that they necessarily involve being able to respond to the suffering as well as to the joy of the other. However, Benhabib stresses, “this alone cannot be the essence of the ethical, even though it may well be its foundation, both philosophically and psychogenetically.”<sup>241</sup> And she goes on to explain that what Butler terms “ec-static relational practice” can go normatively wrong:

[T]he circle of those toward whom I feel such responsiveness and responsibility will inevitably be narrow. How or why can I extend natural human sympathies beyond those to whose claims I am subject in some special way and toward whom I feel special responsiveness? Furthermore, what does radical relationality entail? Do you and I share a common understanding of moral responsibility? Do we need to debate it among ourselves or do we simply know what it entails? And if I get caught up in “ec-static relationality” and cannot judge for myself whether this is indeed the correct way to act or the proper responsibility to assume, will I not be subject to the myriad demands and wishes of others and lose my own ethical individuality in the process? This vision of ethics dissolves into three alternatives: ethical particularism, including various forms of familism and tribalism; ethical intuitionism; and/or loss of ethical agency.<sup>242</sup>

Benhabib then goes on to explain that ethics, or moral autonomy, unavoidably comes into being “by learning of how to balance abstract moral injunctions with the concrete situations and obligations that one faces.”<sup>243</sup> Thus there are two difficulties with Levinas’ ethics in this context, the first of which is that it does not suggest a way of extending natural human sympathies beyond the face that I know, and care about. Second, if the self is conditioned by the presence of the other, how is one to make decisions, to choose between different options and actually act, not least, to make the other that which is will not to be killed? What Benhabib eventually suggests is a normativity that goes beyond familism,

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238 Ibid.

239 Ibid.

240 Ibid.

241 Ibid, 152.

242 Ibid.

243 Ibid.

tribalism, and intuitionism, while considering specific and particular historical and cultural as well as gender-related differences. Elsewhere Benhabib explains that western universalist moral theories from Hobbs to Rawls are “substitutionalist in the sense that the universalism they defend is defined surreptitiously by identifying the experience of specific group of subjects as the paradigmatic case of the human as such.”<sup>244</sup> Drawing on feminist thought she then introduces the idea of “interactive” universalism as that which “acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human.”<sup>245</sup> Interactive universalism is based on the assumption that disputes can be rationally settled, and that concepts of moral thought such as “fairness, reciprocity, and some procedure of universalizability are [...] necessary conditions of a moral standpoint.” However, interactive universalism also regards difference, that is difference between people, their bodies, ideas, social and political circumstances, as a starting point for reflection and then action. Universality is then “not the ideal consensus of fictitiously defined selves, but the concrete process in politics and morals of the struggle of concrete, embodied selves, striving for autonomy.”<sup>246</sup> Put differently, my discussion of Benhabib here wishes to emphasize that she sees acts of agency as crucial and urgent for progressive politics. It is only through such acts that we can hope to have rigorous, rational and also imaginative searches for new social forms and create new norms.

How can we now, in light of this discussion, understand Schimmel's and Halpern's possibly different takes on the relations of self and other and on subjectivity? How and in what ways may natural human sympathies extend beyond the concrete other to include the general(ized) other? I believe that Halpern's figure of the neighbor can be extremely helpful in making this transition possible. For Halpern, it all begins with a distant other—a non-Jewish woman, a woman who is not part of the social and ethnic group he is part of, but can be seen, and heard, and understood. His tale of the thirteen words offers a way of listening to her, without claiming to represent her, that is through the repeated reconstruction of her misfortune as the misfortune of many others. The wrong done to her has become, over and over again, a universal pain. In reading Halpern's “From My Royzele's Diary” we experience the gentile bride's pain as it is transformed into Royzele's misfortune, her fly-catching-husband-poet's failure, and, eventually, Peshe-Gittle's death. *Ovntroykayt*, evening-red, that most general, pseudo-universal, poetic trope, is that which brings it all together, along with the bride's and then Royzele's red-flower-hat. Red, we can now say, exactly because someone *had* died at your neighbor's, someone you may not have even heard about. Your neighbor can be entirely unknown to you; anybody can be your neighbor if he seats in front of you in the train, or if you happen to see her on the streets (in the poem discussed in a previous chapter) and that is all you two may have in common. The other's lot matters to you, an other that is not exactly Benhabib's generalized other, but also not quite concrete. He or she are your neighbors, but they make it all red for you *only* in and through the poem. The “as if” sensation that the poem yields, the way, for example, Halpern uses the conventions of a woman's Yiddish dialogue, including the associative concatenation of images and stories, is

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244 Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlner-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory,” *Praxis International*, 4 (1985): 406.

245 Ibid.

246 Ibid.

felt to be real, that is funny, painful and beautiful all at the same time. And it is exactly this sensation makes her pain painful. Now, what you'll do with this pain and beauty is another matter, but at least you were able to extend your sympathies beyond the closest to you, that is to feel, provisionally, what it means to be a *farfalener*.

Like Halpern, Schimmel also doesn't want anything of her, "[i]t is myself that I place, a subject of observation." The poet-speaker is the one who makes the poem a process into his own subjectivity. In observing her, he observes himself. And she, if only she reads as *she* pleases, *ke-cheftsekh*, "as you desire," writes Schimmel, that is if only she also loses herself "in listening's pose," and lets herself be "drawn to the other's canopied departure," now given to her in the form of the poem, then she could gain access to her own polyphony, her own world of meaning, what actually applies to *any* reader of the poem. Schimmel propounds the idea that poetry is in itself a creative response to the other, not exactly a moral response to the other, but where such a response could begin. The felt subjectivity that poetry suggests is not of a ready-made subjectivity, on the contrary; it is a subjectivity in the making, always coming-into-being and going away, never anchored in anything tangible. It is a subjectivity that begins to suggest itself when one places oneself imaginatively and also repeatedly in front of her disappearance. "Is death, then, the burning of the library of scrolls at Alexandria," asks Schimmel in his above-mentioned tract on memory, meaning, is death the culmination of my subjectivity? "No. Death is simply an end to remembering and an end to forgetting. Remembering by lifting images, and forgetting by putting them down." I would like to suggest this formulation as an alternative to the understanding that Butler, following Levinas, advocates, of the self as being conditioned by the face of the other, of subjectivity as a relational practice. If according to this ethics, "it is not my death that is the culmination of my authenticity," as Benhabib explains, "but rather, the realization of my own vulnerability in the hands of the other and of the other's vulnerability in my own hands that is fundamental," then Schimmel suggests poetry as a third way. The creative process that is poetry is offered as a way of gaining access to one's subjectivity.

Why is it then that Schimmel does not start with listening to the injustice done to the other as Halpern does? There is an actual historical difference between the two—Halpern was an impoverished Jewish immigrant in 1920s New York, and Schimmel is a contemporary writer living in Jerusalem able to be entirely committed to his work. Obviously, times have also changed, and as much as Schimmel appreciates Halpern's poetry, he uses a different language, and another poetic style. Notwithstanding these differences, I would like to suggest that in slowing down Halpern's drummer, and making his thrust milder, Schimmel actually stresses that the sounds of the other's disappearance is were the concrete other and the generalized other meet; it is in this moment that any non-violent interaction begins.

And one last thing: throughout this dissertation I have been trying to suggest the ways in which different language and poetics have been heard through each other: Heine inside the Brecht; Brecht and Heine inside Avidan; Yiddish, English, and Arabic heard through Hebrew poetry. I believe these internal voices express a desire to speak with and to one another in a manner that becomes the constellation of something more than any of those individual elements or identities, and this is a direct result of listening.

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