

Poetic Currency: Introduction

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ON A VISIT TO ISRAEL IN MARCH 2017, I stopped by Ha-nasikh ha-katan (The Little Prince), a popular secondhand bookstore and café in central Tel Aviv. I was there to meet with Anat Weisman to discuss the details of “Poetic Currency,” an upcoming symposium at Oxford University that we were organizing with Vered Shemtov of Stanford. Above the bar, a line from Dahlia Ravikovitch’s poem “Livelihood” stood out, written in white chalk: “To hell with the poem, I need 120 shekels.” It struck us as an apt, serendipitous statement for an event focused on questions of value and currency as they relate to poetry. I also bought a book while I was there, this one by a different Dalia, Dalia Hertz, titled *‘Ir = Shirim* (City = Poems; Sifriyat Po‘alim, 1990), and reflected on the irony that here I was spending shekels (36, to be exact) that would never reach the poet.

The term “currency” encompasses a rich range of meanings, including the historical and temporal, and touches as well on considerations of cultural and economic value and their relation. Poems can be said to claim the status of currency in the way that they circulate and are exchanged, but do poems put food on the table, can they help pay the rent? These questions troubled the late Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño, who identified first as a poet but is best known today for novels like *2066* and *The Savage Detectives*. In various interviews, Bolaño described his shift to prose, in part, as a practical move to secure the financial future of his family. When Samuel Coleridge wrote the poem “To Fortune, On Buying a Ticket in the Irish Lottery” (1793), he may not have won the lottery but he earned a guinea and greater visibility for his poem, his first published work. A few years later, convinced of his great talent, the Wedgwood brothers arranged for a no-strings-attached annuity that would allow him to focus entirely on his writing. They

included a provision, however, that it “be independent of everything but the wreck of our fortune” and invoked that exit clause several years later. These are but two, out of many, examples—drawn from the lives of poets—that attest to poetry’s precarious economy.

The decision to focus on poetry in particular grew out of the observation that in the decade following the 2008 global economic crisis, poets have engaged in a sustained critique of the language and forms of capital, advancing new modes of circulation against the hegemony of the global book market, activating currency through translation, and aligning their work with protest activity. At the same time, poets have long recognized the vexed and complicated relation between poetry, capital, and labor. Contemporary poetry draws from this rich history and rewrites and retranslates it. The global scope of this crisis also presented an opportunity to address this literature in a comparative and multilingual context, a commitment that shaped both the symposium and this present issue of *Dibur*.

“Poetic Currency” took place on May 18–19, 2017, at St. Anne’s College, Oxford University, under the aegis of the research program Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation. It represented a collaboration between Stanford University, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and Oxford University, bringing together scholars from Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States who work in a wide range of literary traditions and languages, including German, Yiddish, Hebrew, Greek, and Polish. Most of the presentations appear in revised and expanded form in the present issue.

An electrifying public poetry reading featuring the Anglo-Breton poet Claire Trévien and the Israeli poets Roy “Chicky” Arad and Tahel Frosh followed the keynote presentations by Kristin Grogan and myself. Trévien read from her second collection, *Astéronymes* (Pinned in the Margins, 2016), a collection that utilizes redaction as both a prompt and restraint, testing the currency of language as it is broken up and recombined between lines and across poems. Behind Claire, a short film charting the movements of the moon as it crosses the sky was projected onto a screen. This recording ran on a loop for almost five minutes, constituting a kind of commentary on clichés and the strategies poets utilize to reactivate their currency.

Arad followed with readings drawn primarily from his most recent collection *Noset ha-metosim* (The aircraft carrier; Ma’ayan Press, 2016). Before coming to Oxford, he had attended a poetry festival in Metz, France, and along the way acquired a kind of portable plastic sound machine. He tested it out for the first time at Oxford, where the beats it produced accompanied his reading of the poem “Some Recommendations,” which includes the lines “if you are musicians or poets / I recommend that your next work be / emotional or danceable” (trans. Yosefa Raz). Frosh read from her collection *Betsa* (Avarice; Mossad Bialik, 2014), including the poems “The Mountains of Spain” and “Accountant,” which feature in my article on her work. Both Arad and Frosh were active during Israel’s 2011 social protest (*ha-meha’ah ha-hevratit*), organizing events and editing literary anthologies that encouraged the participation of poets. And though poetry readings and academic symposia tend to differ in format and audience, the poems that we heard that first night—and the ways in which they had been performed and translated—proved integral to the academic discussions that continued the following day.

This issue opens with Kristin Grogan’s “Money on My Mind: Stein’s Meditations,” which examines Gertrude Stein’s complicated relationship with money from her early prose writings to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), which was a financial success for the author. Grogan considers Stein’s “ambiguous” relationship with money through a close reading of her 1932

publication *Stanzas in Meditation*, a long poem of 250 pages, most of it published posthumously. That it was written around the same time as *Autobiography* prompts Grogan to examine the relation between marketability and profit, and form and language. *Autobiography* may have marked a turning point in Stein's career, but *Stanzas* nonetheless remains her most thorough meditation on and articulation of poetic labor. In this text, she notes the ways in which "capital structures our lives," all the while unsettling its very discipline, order, and logic.

Like Stein, the Israeli poet David Avidan was aware of the role of the market in making and undoing literary fortunes. He excelled at public relations, pursuing an aggressive schedule of travel and readings that were vital, in his assessment, to creating and sustaining his readership but that also accorded with his vision of the poet as a kind of businessman. In her article "The Poet as Entrepreneur: The Case of David Avidan," Anat Weisman not only traces this entrepreneurial spirit across several poems but also shows how he aspired to "get off the page." Drawing from the rich resources available in Avidan's archive at Ben-Gurion University, Weisman highlights a number of proposals that Avidan drafted throughout his life—for example, projects in the areas of film, urban development, and artificial intelligence. Those that came to fruition show that Avidan was ahead of his time in extending the currency of the poem beyond the literary and the textual.

In "A Legacy of Defeat: Ya'acov Bitton against Poetic Currency," Shira Stav turns our attention to poetry that explicitly rejects "currency," as is the case, she argues, for the contemporary Israeli poet Ya'acov Bitton, whose work, across two (soon to be three) collections, resists participating in a national cultural economy that privileges ownership, mastery, and authority. Rather than position himself within a patrilineal model of Hebrew literature—for decades synonymous with canonical authority in Israeli culture—Bitton claims for himself an inheritance of marginality and abjection. In his first collection, *Ina Dada* (The great mother; Keter, 2007), this legacy is embodied by his immobile grandmother, whose gradual deterioration Bitton records with excessive detail against the excesses of capital. In his following collection, *Mahberot ha-tvusah* (Notebooks of defeat; Helikon, 2013), Bitton revisits biblical narratives of displacement and rejection, like the classic tale of Esau, who sells his birthright to his brother Jacob for a dubious price. Here, Bitton aligns himself with Esau to declare, in Stav's words, "a deep refusal to serve as the 'poetic currency' of his own collective."

A relation between economy and theology traces back to the Hebrew Bible, as Roy Greenwald highlights in his article, "Made in the Pauper's Image: Theology and Economy in Modern Jewish Literature." Greenwald offers a comparative reading of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, bookended by Hayyim Nachman Bialik's poem "In the City of Killing" and selected poems by Avraham Shlonsky, texts that examine the relation between capitalism and Jewish theological discourse. Greenwald argues that a capitalist discourse afforded these writers a language that could mediate between the theological and the political. In Bialik's case, it also created a space for the poet to articulate his ambivalent relation to the divine in the face of crisis (namely, the Kishinev pogrom of April 1903). Throughout, Greenwald also contextualizes these works in the economic conditions of the times and places in which these texts were written.

In June 2017, Tafat Hacoheh-Bick and Yoav Ronel presented an earlier version of "Zelda's Poetics of Poverty" at the annual meeting of the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, where it caused something of a stir. I was not at the conference but heard more about their presentation than any other in the many years that I have been a member. Reactions ranged from high

praise to scathing critique, so when they contacted us about submitting a revised and expanded version of this talk for this issue, we were intrigued but also cautious. The fact that it appears here now speaks for itself. Their article focuses on *Penai* (Free time; 1967), the debut collection of poetry published by the Hebrew poet Zelda (the mononym of Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky) in her early fifties. These poems established her reputation as a spiritual, religious poet, a reading that tends to occlude other aspects of her work—namely, the political, the crux of Hacoheh-Bick and Ronel’s persuasive inquiry. They identify in her poems a critique of capitalism’s “society of the spectacle” which shapes her distinct “poetics of poverty.” In her poetic economy, an object is inseparable from what it symbolizes; thereby, a poem’s value rests *in* the poem itself and not in the meaning that one extracts from it or in the ways in which it can be exchanged, circulated, and translated.

Eleni Philippou’s “Perennial Penelope and Lingering Lotus-Eaters: Revaluing Mythological Figures in the Poetry of the Greek Financial Crisis” traces the circulation of figures from Greek classical literature in contemporary Greek poetry published post-2008, focusing on three anthologies that gather these works in English translation. In her close readings of poems by Phoebe Giannisi, Chloe Koutsoumbeli, Jazra Khaleed, and Kyoko Kishida, Philippou, like Greenwald, also draws relations between these texts and contemporary economic conditions—in this case, the social and political discourse of austerity. Citing newspaper articles, political statements, and academic scholarship, she shows how a preoccupation with ancient figures is not exclusive to literature. She closes with Kyriakos Charalambidis’s poem “Aphrodite on the New Economic Measures,” in which the ancient goddess addresses the possibility of her own “unemployment” in a time of anxiety and uncertainty. What Philippou’s reading shows us, on the contrary, is how poetry continually renews the currency of these figures even as it revises and transforms them in order to speak to present conditions.

My own contribution, “Money, So Much Money: Reading Tahel Frosh’s *Avarice*,” takes its title from Frosh’s poem “The Mountains of Spain,” one of many poems in Frosh’s collection *Betsa* that address the effects of capitalism and neoliberal economic policies on individual bodies, homes, and texts. In my reading, I examine this work in the context of Israel’s 2011 social protest and the role that poets played in shaping the public discourse of the protest in this period. Acknowledging the economic relationship between Israel and the United States, one that Frosh herself invokes in the poem “Accountant,” I also read Frosh’s work alongside poems by the US poets Anne Boyer, Lorine Niedecker, and Laura Sims. I consider the formal strategies that poets, and specifically women poets, utilize to critique, as well as overcome (at least on paper), the economic conditions in which they live and write.

The poetry dossier that follows these articles is an acknowledgment of what initially sparked this conversation: the poems themselves. This dossier expands the scope of our issue to include a much wider range of languages and literary traditions. From an Anglo-Saxon riddle to an Armenian poem about a man mistaken for a beggar, poets, across centuries and languages, have articulated the power of capital in their lives—how it exerts control over bodies and homes, and how it determines the visibility, circulation, and exchange of texts. Translation into English, for example, could be understood as a change of currency with the power to expand the audience and market for a poem, while also introducing its own complications. We also gave space here to retranslations of poems, another mode by which texts remain current over time. Although we were not able to offer payment for the poems that appear in the dossier, it is important to

acknowledge here the time and labor that their translators invested in order to bring these texts to English-language readers, not to mention the work of the poets who made these poems possible in the first place.

In 2014, the Bank of Israel announced that the new series of New Israeli Shekel (NIS) banknotes would feature four major Hebrew poets of the twentieth century: Rachel Bluwstein (20 NIS), Shaul Tchernichovsky (50 NIS), Leah Goldberg (100 NIS), and Natan Alterman (200 NIS). In addition to their portraits, microtexts of their poems feature on both the obverse and reverse sides of these notes. To appear on a banknote, in any currency, is an indicator of cultural value, but the inclusion of a poet like Rachel, for example, who lived most of her adult life in straitened economic circumstances, is also ironic. This issue of *Dibur*, including the poems that feature in the dossier, explores this tension between the cultural and the economic value of poetry; the place of poetry and poetry in translation in the literary economy; and how poets have worked with, against, and through the real economic conditions of their time and place. In preparing this issue, we also recognize our intellectual inquiries as part of a shared investment in poetry that we now, in turn, circulate in the issue before you. A