

Money, So Much Money: Reading Tahel Frosh's *Avarice*

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"Dad, I think your job killed you."
— Tahel Frosh, "Accountant"

ABSTRACT: In this article, I address the work of the Israeli poet Tahel Frosh, whose debut collection *Avarice* (2014) advances a critical commentary on neoliberalism and the privatization of the Israeli economy. Against official accounts of Israel's economic history and their emphasis on development and growth, Frosh's poetry offers an accounting of the toll of capitalism and the free market on individual bodies and spaces. Her work also proposes an intersectional reading of gender, economy, and the value of poetic labor set against the backdrop of the 2011 social justice protests in Israel. Acknowledging the market relations between Israel and the United States, my reading brings Frosh's work into relation with that of the U.S. poets Anne Boyer, Lorine Niedecker, and Laura Sims, highlighting points of comparison in the formal strategies that shape their critique of capital and labor.

IN HER 2014 HIGHLY ACCLAIMED debut collection *Avarice* (Betsa), the poet Tahel Frosh offers a critique and testimony of the privatization of the Israeli economy, especially the toll of neoliberalism and the free-market economy on Israeli bodies, families, and homes. These concerns converge in the poem "Accountant" (Ro'eh heshbon), quoted above, which Frosh has described as "an elegy for my father, who devoted himself to work," slowly working himself to death in jobs that offered little by way of professional mobility although, ironically, they took him far from home, "from his children's daily lives."¹ "You were always loyal to your job, wherever it

¹ Amichai Hasson, "Shoveret shurot: Tahel Frosh rotsa lemotet et ha-bankim be-emtsa'ut shira" [Breaking the lines: Tahel Frosh wants to knock down the banks through poetry], *Beit avi hai*, December 2, 2014,

was,” his daughter observes.² She works hard at school, studying “extra math” so she can take over his bookkeeping, a request that he resists. Helplessly, she watches as his health fails.

The irony here is that the companies for which the father works can trace their history back to the Histadrut (the General Organization of Workers in the Land of Israel), Israel’s national labor union that was founded in 1920 with an express commitment to “organize and unite those who toil all their lives, without exploiting the work of others.”³ In 1921 the Histadrut founded Solel boneh (Paving and building), a construction and civil engineering company that played a major role in infrastructure development in Mandatory Palestine. Today it is owned by Shikun u-binui (Housing and Construction Holding Company, Ltd.), one of the largest construction and infrastructure companies in Israel and also an affiliate of Arison Investments, which until recently held a controlling stake in Bank Hapoalim, Israel’s largest bank (previously owned by Histadrut).⁴ At various points in his life, the father has worked for these companies, reassigned and relocated from one branch and arm to another, as the increasing deregulation and privatization of the Israeli economy turned these once-public companies into private entities. His stint as a “free agent” proves brief, and he returns to this economy for the precarious security of “a paycheck.” Against capitalism’s—and, specifically, Israeli capitalism’s—official history of mergers and acquisitions, the poem “Accountant” offers a more personal counterhistory that begins when the speaker is a young girl, watching her father “leave the house every morning at an ungodly hour” until, finally, illness forces “the end of the work.” The illness proves terminal, but it is at this moment that the father’s “late-night TV profile” becomes a full face, fully present in a way that was not possible before. “And that was the end for you, the end of the work, the end of that profile, the beginning of your whole face, the beginning of your love. That’s how this final miracle came to us.”⁵

In what follows, I will examine *Avarice*’s criticism of the Israeli economy and the specific formal strategies that Frosh utilizes to claim the poem as both a symbolic and a material space where a reckoning of the language and forms of neoliberal capitalism may be calculated. I begin by reading Frosh’s collection in the context of modern Hebrew literature’s ongoing preoccupation with the relation between poetry, labor, and capital, as well as the specific economic conditions that followed the 2008 global economic crisis. In this period, poets in Israel, as elsewhere, reasserted the currency of poetry, and thereby the value of poetic labor, through social activism and political engagement.⁶

Additionally, the figure of Shari Arison, the American-born owner of Arison Investments, the investment company she inherited from her Israeli father, Ted Arison, has provoked here a

<http://www.bac.org.il/specials/project/bvaatym/article/shvbrt-shrvrt-thal-prvsh-rvtzha-lmvtv-at-habnkym-bamtzaavt-shyrha>. These quotations come from the partial English translation by Lisa Katz, which was published online in *Poetry International Web*, http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/28026/An-interview-with-Tahel-Frosh.

² Tahel Frosh, *Betsa* [*Avarice*] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2014), 54. All translations from the Hebrew are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ I have translated this line from the 1920 text of the Histadrut’s constitution.

⁴ Yaacov Benmeleh, “Billionaire Arison Sells \$930 Million Stake in Bank Hapoalim,” *Bloomberg Markets*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-24/israeli-billionaire-arison-sells-major-stake-in-investment-arm>.

⁵ Frosh, *Betsa*, 55.

⁶ See Eleni Philippou’s article, “Perennial Penelope and Lingering Lotus-Eaters: Revaluing Mythological Figures in the Poetry of the Greek Financial Crisis,” in this issue.

comparative reading of Frosh's *Avarice* in relation to American poetry. The writing of U.S. women poets in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has addressed how women's bodies, texts, and labor are accounted, valued, and politicized in the long age of capitalism in ways that overlap, indeed *intersect*, with Frosh's oeuvre in particular and with modern Hebrew women's poetry more generally (in what follows, I also discuss briefly the work of Rachel Bluwstein and Dahlia Ravikovitch).⁷ Placing Frosh's work alongside that of U.S. poets acknowledges the complicated and vexed diplomatic and economic relations that these countries share, but I am also interested here in the formal strategies—notably, restraint and excess—that shape the works of these poets, both in Hebrew and in English. While by no means an exhaustive selection, I have included in my discussion poems by Lorine Niedecker, Anne Boyer, and Laura Sims, all of whom, I show, apply these formal strategies as an explicit component of their critique of capital and labor. A short discussion on the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva prefaces my remarks on the American poets, signaling the direction further comparative work on this poetry could take.

In Israel, a public reckoning of capitalism coalesced around the 2011 social justice protests (*ha-meha'ah ha-hevratit*), which took to task rising housing costs, the increased cost of living, and a widening gap between rich and poor in Israel. Indeed, the makeshift tents that covered Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard became one of the iconic images of this protest, lending it the sobriquet "the tent protests" (*meha'at ha-ohalim*). Israeli poets were notably active during this period, organizing public readings and publishing a range of work, much of it distributed electronically and for free, as part of an appraisal of the Israeli book-publishing industry and its own problematic practices of growth and profit.⁸ But their activism also included a commitment, which continues today, to upend a capitalist order that mediates the relationship between authors, readers, and texts.

Roy "Chicky" Arad's poem "Summer of 2011" (Kaits 2011) captures the mood and energy of this period but also demonstrates how Israeli poets claimed the poem itself as an act of protest:

ננצח בכפרים
נמשיך אל מרכזי הערים
ננצח ברחוב דב הוז, נחלחל מהסדקים בקיר
נחדור מצינורית המזגן
ננצח בעמקים
ננצח על המדשאות מול העיריה בחצור הגלילית
ובדירות השותפים בתרס"ט
ננצח במגדלי אקירוב

⁷ For a brief survey of this literature, from Tillie Olsen's 1934 poem "I Want You Women Up North to Know" to Adrienne Rich's poetry, see Mark Nowak, "Notes toward an Anti-capitalist Poetics," *VQR*, Spring 2006, <http://www.vqronline.org/essay/notes-toward-anti-capitalist-poetics>.

⁸ As a further point of contact between Israel and the United States, poet activists involved with Occupy Wall Street (September–November 2011) and Occupy Oakland (October 2011), both tent protests, organized readings and compiled anthologies of protest poetry. See David Lau, "Occupy Oakland: Poesis and Political Practice," *Poetry Foundation*, April 2014, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/04/occupy-oakland-poesis-and-political-practice>. The *Occupy Wall Street Poetry Anthology* (edited by Stephen Boyer and Filip Marinovich) is available online for free download: <https://peopleslibrary.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/occupypoems1.pdf>.

We'll win in the villages
 And move toward the city centers
 We'll win on Dov Hoz Street, seeping from cracks in the wall
 We'll infiltrate through air conditioners
 We'll win in the valleys
 We'll win on the lawns in front of the Hatsor Ha-Glilit municipality
 And in apartment shares on Tarsat Boulevard
 We will win over Akirov Towers⁹

Like Frosh's "Accountant," Arad's poem contains numerous references to Israel's fraught economic history. In the section that I have quoted from the much longer poem, Arad initiates a movement from Israel's geographic and social peripheries to the center, in the process parodying and co-opting the language and style of militaryspeak.¹⁰ Dov Hoz immigrated to Ottoman Palestine from the Russian Empire in 1906 and later became a founding member of *Ahdut ha-avoda* (Labor Unity), a political party that became one of the cofounders of the *Histadrut*. In August 2011 police forcibly removed protestors who had taken over a vacant building on Dov Hoz Street.¹¹ The protestors had reclaimed this space—allegedly slated for demolition to make way for luxury apartment buildings—as a public, common space, highlighting the irony that many such buildings remained vacant throughout the city in the midst of a housing crisis. Indeed, the Akirov Towers (also known as Tsameret Towers) mentioned in this poem refer to three high-rise luxury apartment buildings that went up in the early 2000s and contain some of the most expensive apartments to hit the Israeli retail market (counting among its high-profile residents the former prime minister and minister of defense Ehud Barak). By contrast, Hatsor Ha-Glilit, a town in northern Israel, was initially established in the early 1950s as a *ma'abarah*, or transition camp, for North African Jewish immigrants and later acquired the status of "development town" (*ayeret pitu'ah*). Mostly located in what is today still referred to as Israel's *periferiyah*, development towns were meant, in part, to alleviate the overcrowded housing market of Israel's largest cities. Today, the average salary in Hatsor Ha-Glilit falls well below the national average,¹² and in 2009 the town's mayor declared a state of emergency, citing a financial crisis that was making it impossible to pay municipal workers.¹³

Although the repetition of "we" in Arad's poem underscores the collective nature of the social protest, the poem's parody of the national "we" also acknowledges that not everyone was, or chose to be, included in this movement. In their study on *ha-meha'ah ha-hevratit*, Uri Ram and Dani Filc examine the language of one of the protest's main slogans—"The people demand social justice" (*Ha-'am doresh tsedek hevratit*)—and its claims of inclusivity.¹⁴ The leaders of the protest,

⁹ Roy "Chicky" Arad, *Noset ha-metosim* [The aircraft carrier] (Tel Aviv: Ma'ayan Press, 2015), 59.

Arad intentionally publishes his poems without diacritical marks (*nikkud*).

¹⁰ I would like to thank Yosefa Raz for bringing this relation to my attention.

¹¹ Ilan Lior, "Protestors Plan More Building Invasions after Police Eviction," *Haaretz*, August 24, 2011, <https://www.haaretz.com/protesters-plan-more-building-invasions-after-police-eviction-1.380330>.

¹² See http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications17/local_authorities15_1683/pdf/496_2034.pdf.

¹³ Yanir Yagna and Eli Ashkenazi, "Hatzor Mayor Says Town on Brink of Collapse as City Workers Protest," *Haaretz*, November 9, 2009, <https://www.haaretz.com/hatzor-mayor-says-town-on-brink-of-collapse-as-city-workers-protest-1.4533>.

¹⁴ Uri Ram and Dani Filc, "Ha-14 shel Dafni Leef: 'Aliyata u-nefilata shel ha-meha'a ha-hevratit' [Daphni Leef's July 14th: The rise and fall of the social protest movement], *Teoriya u-bikoret* 41 (2013): 17–43. Daphni Leef

most of them young, middle-class Israelis, were invested in a discourse of inclusivity. “We’re all in the same boat,” said Stav Shaffir, who was later to become the youngest woman elected to the Knesset, the Israeli parliament.¹⁵ According to Ram and Filc, “The diversity inherent in the concept of ‘the people’ was therefore an important characteristic of the events of the protest. That being said, the support for the protest was not divided uniformly among different social and political circles, and not only that, but some social circles avoided and even objected to it.”¹⁶ In the aftermath of the social protest, some of its critics laid part of the blame for its failure (today, income inequality persists, and housing prices have continued to rise) on the fact that most of its leadership hailed from Israel’s Ashkenazi (European Jewish) “elite.”¹⁷ On the other hand, Tovi Fenster and Chen Misgav have observed how, in their resistance to Israel’s “Ashkenazi-dominated politics,” Mizrahi (North African / Middle Eastern Jewish) feminist activists mobilized “a protest within the protest” that was generally more inclusive and intersectional in its agenda, bringing into its fold, for instance, the concerns of Palestinians, political refugees, and migrant workers.¹⁸

Poet activists also wrestled with these ethnic and socioeconomic rifts and tensions, both during the protest and in the months that followed. Groups like Guerilla tarbut (Cultural guerilla) and Ma’avaq ha-meshorerim (Poets’ struggle) invoked a politics of inclusion around a shared commitment to improving the economic status of poetry in Israel’s literary economy and the real-life economic conditions of the poets themselves. Ma’avaq ha-meshorerim, for example, advanced a vision of an Israeli literary economy that supported all of Israel’s cultural and linguistic groups.¹⁹ Guerilla tarbut, founded in 2007, was committed to collaborations between Israelis and Palestinians and also published the early works of the Mizrahi poetry collective Ars Poetiqua.²⁰

While many of these references, and their political implications, need to be unpacked for a reader unfamiliar with Israeli culture and history, doing so emphasizes how events and developments in the previous decades shaped the social and economic conditions that precipitated the housing crisis of 2011. But Arad also deploys these references to underscore historical ironies. For example, Tarsat Boulevard, Sderot Tarsat in Hebrew, is a short street next to the Habima Theater in central Tel Aviv, an area that has seen considerable development in recent years. But

is an Israeli social activist and filmmaker who is credited with initiating the tent protests. Leef, who had been notified that she had to vacate her apartment, created a Facebook event to protest rising housing costs in Tel Aviv when she learned that rental fees had doubled in recent years.

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

¹⁷ On the fifth anniversary of the social protest, journalist Sara Leibovitz-Dar followed up with leaders and activists to assess its legacy and failures of leadership. Sara Leibovitz-Dar, “Ha-mahapekhah ha-levana: Lamah nikhshelah ha-meha’ah ha-hevratit shel kaits 2011?” [The white revolution: Why did the social protest of summer 2011 fail?], *Ma’ariv*, July 16, 2017, <http://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/Article-549492>. I thank Chen Bar-Itzhak for bringing this article to my attention.

¹⁸ See Tovi Fenster and Chen Misgav, “The Protest within Protest: Feminism and Ethnicities in the 2011 Israeli Protest Movement,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 52 (2015): 20–29.

¹⁹ “Odot” [About], *Ma’avaq ha-meshorerim*, December 2011, <https://poetry4rights.wordpress.com/about>. A conference organized by the group in December 2011 even adapted one of the central slogans of the social protest: “Poets Demand Social Justice.” In Hebrew, the word “poets” was rendered as *meshorerot*, “female poets,” rather than in the more standard form of the collective plural, *meshorerim*, “male poets.” For more information on this event and its objectives, see Amir Segel, “Al ma’avaq ha-meshorerim” [On the poets’ struggle], *Yekum tarbut*, June 27, 2017, <http://www.yekum.org/2017/06/ח-לקש-מירשעו-האמ-הכירצ-ינא-רישה-לזאועל/>.

²⁰ The group disbanded in early 2017, though its website remains online as an archive of its activity and publications: <https://gerilat.wordpress.com>.

“Tarsat” (תַּרְסַט) also refers to the date of Tel Aviv’s founding, 1909, when sixty-six Jewish families gathered on a sand dune outside Jaffa to parcel out plots of land, an initiative prompted in part by Jaffa’s congested housing situation, the very condition that would spark the social protest almost one hundred years later.

This irony is also at work in Frosh’s poem “Emergency Announcement” (Azharah dehufah; literally, “urgent warning”), first published in the digital anthology *The Revolution Songbook / Tent Poetry* (Shiron ha-mahapekhah / Shirat ha-ohalim), a collaboration that included the journals *Daqa* (no longer active) and *Ma’ayan*, founded and edited by Arad.²¹ Like Arad’s “Summer of 2011,” Frosh’s poem opens with a proclamation that mimics military language, specifically alerts issued by the Israel Defense Forces: “This is an emergency announcement. / If you meet the following conditions, stop working immediately and take to the street.”²² The conditions that follow range from “if there are pay gaps between junior workers and more senior managers” to “if you have to drive to work every single day,” which are, according to Frosh, the true daily “emergencies” of Israeli society. Here, the health hazards of capitalism replace the security concerns to which “emergency announcements” typically apply. “Stop working if you are endangering your health: for instance, if you are not authorized to go to the bathroom, if you mostly sit [*yoshvim*] in a closed office [*be-misrad sagur*] illuminated by fluorescent lights.” These work conditions have reached a “state of emergency,” and in this context, “to stop working” is an act of protest. The speaker calls for the workers to “go out and sit [*lashevet*] in the open air [*ba-avir ha-patu’ah*] next to the houses of the minister of security, the minister of the treasury, the prime minister, all the ministers of the government.” The parallelism between these two conditions—sitting all day inside an office and sitting outside in the open air—hinges on the act of sitting (*lashevet*), which in Hebrew shares lexical similarities with the verb “to strike” (*lishbot*). But Frosh also calls attention to how capitalism creates private spaces (i.e., closed offices) that undermine individual privacy and freedom.²³ Reclaiming the right to stop working, to take a break (also related here to the observance of the Sabbath), allows for critical thinking and reflection, and it is in this space—outside of work—that acts of protest are possible.

The 2012 pamphlet *Unveiling Work* (‘Avodat gilui), published by Guerilla tarbut and edited by Frosh and the poet Mati Shemoelof, continued to draw attention to the physical and material conditions of Israel’s economic and labor policies. The expression ‘*avodat gilui*’ also invokes an understanding of ‘*avoda*’ as “worship,” alongside the Kabbalistic concept of *gilui*, “revelation,” ideas that resonate in the editors’ commitment “to bring to light what happens under the fluorescent lights of the place we call ‘work,’ to expose what work does to human relationships and to the course of human lives.”²⁴ To the extent that the texts in this pamphlet constitute a “poetic testimonial,” as the editors put it, of this labor, they also call attention to the place of poetic labor

²¹ Tahel Frosh, “Azharah dehufah” [Emergency announcement], in *Shiron ha-mahapekha / Shirat ha-ohalim* [The revolution songbook / Tent poetry] (Tel Aviv / Beer Sheva: Daqa, Ma’ayan, et al., 2011), 10. A pdf of the anthology is available online via Scribd: <https://tinyurl.com/protestpoetry>.

²² Frosh, *Betsa*, 47.

²³ In a series of posts for *Growlery*, the blog of *Parlour: A Journal of Literary Criticism and Analysis*, Ben Fulman offers a critical reading of Frosh’s *Avarice* that explores the relation between work and free time. The aesthetic theories of Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse are central to his analysis. Ben Fulman, “Critical Aesthetics in Tahel Frosh’s *Avarice*,” *Growlery*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.ohio.edu/parlour/growlery/news-story.cfm?newsItem=B42CA59F-5056-A874-1D328C055C9AA155>.

²⁴ Tahel Frosh and Mati Shemoelof, eds., *Avodat gilui: Asufah shel shirah, ‘edyot, siporet ve-omanut* [Unveiling work: An anthology of poetry, testimony, narrative, and art] (Tel Aviv: Guerilla Tarbut, 2012), 5.

within the workplace, hence the quotation marks around “work.” In so doing, they address the basic question of how poets make a living, how this determines “the course of their lives” as artists, and how writing a poem disrupts, resists, and even rewrites the workplace. On the one hand, the stifling job that Frosh describes in “Emergency Announcement” represents an opportunity to rise above the poverty line, hinting at the “ideological rifts,” to use Yossi Yonah’s term, between the 2011 activists and their supporters (and among the activists themselves) over “the question of what social justice means.”²⁵ On the other hand, declaring the refusal to work as a state of emergency explicitly calls attention to the relation between class and “free time” in a capitalist order, a relation that Frosh scrutinizes throughout *Avarice*.²⁶ Like the protagonist of Herman Melville’s story “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Frosh’s speaker, in this and many other poems, faces the workplace and declares, “I would prefer not to.”²⁷

It is also worth mentioning here that modern Hebrew poetry has long addressed the ways in which poetry has been devalued vis-à-vis other forms of labor, such as the work of nation building, calling attention to the politics of exclusion and inclusion that has determined whose labor—poetic or otherwise—counts. In his poem “Toil” (‘Amal), Avraham Shlonsky (1900–1973) celebrated the work of the male *paytan solel* (poet paver), whose lines of verse and stanzas are compared to the roads and homes that exemplify Jewish settlement activity in Palestine, thereby including poetry in the (masculine) work of nation building.²⁸ By contrast, Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931) contested the greater value assigned to work, usually by men, that contributed directly to the development of Jewish settlement in Mandatory Palestine. In her 1926 poem “To My Country” (El artsi), she compares her “modest” gifts (a tree, a pathway, an outburst of joy) “with heroic tales, / and the spoils of battle.”²⁹ For Rachel, as for Shlonsky, the work of poetry was vital to the development of Jewish national life in Palestine, but in her poems, and in this poem in particular, she also acknowledges a hierarchy of labor that devalues the work of women.

Published years later, Dahlia Ravikovitch’s poem “Livelihood” (Parnasah), from the 1987 collection *True Love* (Ahavah amitit), also wrestles with the value of poetry and the necessity for things like poems when other needs are pressing. It opens with, and later repeats, the line “to hell with the poem, I need 120 shekels.” But “Livelihood” is not really concerned with the impracticality or uselessness of poetry; rather, it addresses the question of how poetry remains current. Engaging a rhetoric of deflation, Ravikovitch’s speaker articulates a desire for a different kind of poetry, one that acknowledges “the crooked tiles” and “impatient groan,” a “shuffling” poetry.³⁰ In the process, Ravikovitch recalibrates the currency of the poem in terms that constitute an authentic response to the realities of the poet’s time and place.³¹

²⁵ Yossi Yonah, “Social Justice in Israel: Shifting Paradigm,” in *Handbook of Israel: Major Debates*, vol. 1, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Julius H. Schoeps, Yitzhak Sternberg, and Olaf Glöckner (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2016), 349.

²⁶ See Tafat Hacohen-Bick and Yoav Ronel’s article, “Zelda’s Poetics of Poverty,” in this issue.

²⁷ Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), available at *Project Gutenberg*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11231>.

²⁸ Avraham Shlonsky, *Le-aba-ima: Tseror shirim* [To Papa-Mama: Collected poems] (Tel Aviv: Ketuvim, 1927), 42–43.

²⁹ Rachel Bluwstein, “El artsi” [To my country], in *Rachel: Shirim, mikhtavim, reshivot, korot hayeha* [Poems, letters, essays, biography], ed. Uri Milstein (Tel Aviv: Zmora, Bitan, 1985), 156. This poem was first published in the 1927 collection *Safiah* [Aftergrowth].

³⁰ I have taken “shuffling” from Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld’s excellent English translation of the poem. “Making a Living,” in *Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Collected Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 165.

³¹ One section of the book is even titled “Issues in Contemporary Judaism.”

About Ravikovitch's poem, Frosh has said, "When you need money to survive, poetry gets pushed aside, but then your breath and soul go to hell as well. Today, almost all of us live in a state of conflict between what we want to do and this need for money."³² In "The Mountains of Spain" (Harei Sefarad), Frosh insists that a refusal to participate in a capitalist order does not mean that one forgoes the desire for nice things, like high-end sunglasses and poems:

אין זה אפְּשָׁרִי שְׁאֵנִי מְנַלֶּה
בְּעֵצְמִי סְרוּב עֵמֶק, בְּסִיסִי
לְחֵשֵׁב עַל כֶּסֶף, לְתַמְחָה, לְרִצּוֹת
לְעֵבֵד בְּשִׁבְלֹו. זֶו קָלָה

וְאִמִּי הוֹרִישָׁה לִי אוֹתָהּ
עִם נְטִיטָתִי הַפּוֹתָהּ אַחַר תַּעֲנִיגוֹת אֶסְתֵּטִיִּים
וְהַצְמִיד הָאֲרוּר שֶׁבִּין יָקָר וְיָפָה,
וּבְכֹל נְטִיטָתִי אַחֲרֵי קָפֶה שְׂמֹנִישִׁים לִי
בְּבֵתִי קָפֶה, וְאַחֲרֵי מַאֲפִים, וְאַחֲרֵי שְׂמֵלוֹת תַּחְרָה.

It can't be true that I've only just discovered
this innate, chronic refusal
to think about money, to charge, to want
to work for it. It's a curse

I inherited from my mother
along with a taste for aesthetic pleasures
and that unholy union of wealth and beauty
not to mention a fancy for coffee I'm served
in a café, and pastries and lace dresses.³³

Nevertheless, it is impossible to think about these nice things without thinking about money and the need for it. Taking money out of that equation—removing it from our desires, our relationships, our work, and our art—is an option available only to a privileged class that can afford not to work, that can refuse "to think about money" without consequence. When Frosh's speaker invokes that refusal, she inverts the logic and language of capitalism.

In a recent essay succinctly titled "No," the U.S. poet Anne Boyer argues that "poetry enacts its refusal in its formal strategies. . . . Of these formal strategies of refusal, among the simplest is the technique of poetry called 'turning the world upside down.'³⁴ The most classic example, as Boyer notes (citing Walt Whitman's poem "Transpositions"), is to imagine a world where the roles have reversed: the rich have become poor, and the poor rich. In "The Mountains of Spain," Frosh's speaker compares herself to a "Russian princess / who has lost everything," and who now, like her, sits in her room reading "in her old / ragged bathrobe." Nevertheless, the speaker's status remains unchanged:

³² Hasson, "Shoveret shurot."

³³ Frosh, *Betsa*, 24. My English translation appeared in "New Hebrew Writing," *World Literature Today* (May–August 2015): 88.

³⁴ Anne Boyer, "No," *Poetry Foundation*, April 13, 2017, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/04/no.

ובבית חושבת, משקפים יפים עולים אֵלַי שְׁקֵל
 וחושבת גם, ביום רביעי בלשכת התעסוקה
 אניח אצבע במסגרת האצבע ועין
 אלקטרונית אדמה תתפס את קוי
 והמכונה תוציא תדפיס
 ותאמר לי: לכי לך
 אין עבודה. ואני אשׂמח.

Back at home, I'm thinking that nice frames cost 1000 shekels
 and I'm thinking that on Wednesday at the employment office
 I'll place my finger on a square and a red
 beam will scan its ridges
 and a machine will print out
 the words: move along
 there's no work. And I'll be happy.³⁵

The difference between the speaker and a Russian princess is a difference of money. But once money is removed from the social order, the differences between the rich and the poor become, in Boyer's word, "unworkable."³⁶ For one, the speaker may not be able to afford nice frames that cost "1000 shekels," but unemployment affords her time to read books and drink her tea, the way poor Russian princesses do. The speaker even describes her refusal as an "inheritance" passed down from her mother, thereby describing unemployment in terms typically associated with privilege and status, a mode by which Frosh herself "turns the world upside down."³⁷ In so doing, Frosh reclaims this refusal—to work, to make money—from the space of wealth and privilege. In this context, the words "and I'll be happy" constitute an act of protest, rejecting, if only temporarily, the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of unemployment. Eventually, money will work its way back in to the social order, even in the novels through which the speaker attempts to "lose" herself. Here, Frosh's reference to J. G. Ballard's 1996 novel *Cocaine Nights*, about a community of wealthy British expats in the Spanish resort Estrella de Mar, both contextualizes the poem's title and underscores the paradox of this escapism: the mobility of the unemployment line ("move along") against the reality that the speaker is going nowhere—"I won't go looking for puddles / and make fun of tourists on lousy vacations."³⁸ In the Hebrew, "move along"—*lekhi lakh* (directed to a female addressee)—also alludes to Genesis 12:1, where God calls Abram to leave his home (*lekh lekha*) with the promise of making his descendants a great nation. Against the irony of this biblical blessing, Frosh describes social and economic immobility as a pervasive, deteriorating condition: "All of this is so impossible / that it holds back thoughts of love and / lust and my will

³⁵ Frosh, *Betsa*, 23; "New Hebrew Writing," 88.

³⁶ Boyer, "No."

³⁷ See Shira Stav's article, "A Legacy of Defeat: Ya'acov Bitton against Poetic Currency," in this issue for a discussion of how the poet Ya'acov Bitton, one of Frosh's contemporaries, revises the terms and value of inheritance (literary, cultural, national, among others) as part of a critical evaluation of (Israeli) collective norms and values.

³⁸ Frosh, *Betsa*, 25.

to breathe the air / after rain.”³⁹ The speaker’s imagined death “on the cover of my English novel” further acknowledges how this condition encroaches on the time and space to create, to write.

Though not born a “Russian princess,” Frosh’s figure recalls the poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1877–1932), who chronicled the serious deterioration of her material circumstances in adulthood, in sharp contrast to the comforts of her childhood. In the 1925 essay “My Jobs,” she recounts how at one point she managed to secure employment in a government office compiling an archive of press clippings, and only when there were no more clippings to process could she write in her notebook.⁴⁰ She lasted almost six months at this job. The story goes that a second attempt at office employment didn’t last even a day. Instead, giving up on office work, she returned home, where she continued to write under the pressure of exile, extreme poverty, and domestic responsibilities. “Often there is not even a half an hour per day for myself (for my writing),” she wrote to a friend.⁴¹ Over the years, scholars of her work have addressed tensions between the poetic and domestic in Tsvetaeva’s writing, even going so far as to suggest a relation between the difficult conditions of her material life and her poetic forms and language. In Lily Feiler’s psychobiography *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell*, a description of the cramped quarters in which the poet spent a summer with her ten-year-old son foregrounds an epistolary exchange between Tsvetaeva and her friend Vera Bunina in which the poet expresses her frustration with writing poetry, her inability to compose a whole poem: “And what if until the end of my days I am doomed to fragments?” she writes.⁴² Of course, the suggestion that working under constraints directly correlates to the kind of poetry that women under pressure write, and may even be necessary for it, risks romanticizing the difficult conditions of such lives. Instead, I want to rethink these practices of composition—such as Frosh’s use of excess in “Emergency Announcement” and Tsvetaeva’s fragments—as explicit strategies that rewrite the workplace as a space for poetic labor. Take, for instance, the following poem, “Poet’s Work,” by the U.S. poet Lorine Niedecker (1903–70):

Grandfather
advised me:
Learn a trade

I learned
to sit at desk
and condense

No layoffs
from this
condensery⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰ Marina Tsvetaeva, “My Jobs,” in *Earthly Signs: Moscow Diaries, 1917–1922*, ed. and trans. Jamey Gambrell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 44–74.

⁴¹ Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World, and Her Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 175.

⁴² Lily Feiler, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 225.

⁴³ Lorine Niedecker, “Poet’s Work,” in *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 194. Reproduced here with the permission of Niedecker’s literary estate.

Niedecker grew up in southeastern Wisconsin, part of the once-booming “industrial belt,” and where until the mid-twentieth century a significant percentage of Wisconsin’s dairy industry relied on the condensed-milk market. The condensery in this poem refers to a plant where condensed milk is manufactured, a process that requires that water be removed via evaporation. In Niedecker’s poem, the condensery is also the writer’s desk, a workplace where strategies of linguistic condensation are practiced and refined. The formal properties of the poem—tercets consisting of two- to four-syllable lines—acknowledge poetry as a “trade,” a job requiring certain skills and training (while also nodding to connotations of commerce). The line “No layoffs” implies that unlike other forms of employment, the work of poetry is stable, constant, and permanent. Unlike the abandoned factories that are all that remain of Wisconsin’s active industrial past, this is a plant that won’t close down.

Whereas Niedecker exercises restraint, the contemporary poet Anne Boyer, who lives in Kansas, relies on strategies of excess that are less invested in situating poetry as “real” work (Niedecker, Bluwstein) than in asserting the right to not work, to not write, to be “stationary” in the words of *Bartleby* (Frosh).⁴⁴ Her long poem “The Romance of Happy Workers,” from her eponymous 2008 collection, draws its material from the American Midwest, the “heartland” of twentieth-century labor and union activism. Here, Boyer’s formal strategy—the couplet—forces a reckoning between competing models of socialism (Marxism, Bolshevism, Trotskyism) but also carries ideological terms and figures, by linguistic force, into fields of reference that comically deflate their ideological currency (a strategy that Arad and Frosh also engage in with respect to Labor Zionism). The folk singer Woody Guthrie (1912–67), a U.S. labor activist and one of the poem’s main protagonists, enters into an ideological union with the speaker of the poem. Through her wry use of the couplet, Boyer unsettles their romance, which begins with an “ideological kiss” that promises to bring the various strands of (their) socialism together:

His lips were a proletarian meditation
on May, all a battle between pathogens,

just those ordinary fears of newlyweds,
reformist or revolutionary . . .⁴⁵

May Day (also International Workers’ Day), which falls on May 1, is a global celebration of the working classes that also commemorates the Haymarket Affair of May 4, 1886, a labor protest that took place in Chicago and led to the imprisonment and execution of several activists. In Boyer’s poem, it is described as “a battle between pathogens,” referring playfully to the (health) risks of “ideological kissing,” as well invoking the language of contagion and disease that has long pervaded assessments of socialism and capitalism.⁴⁶ The expression “ordinary fears” is unexpected here—references to pathogens and “proletarian meditation” may not be the usual material for a romance, but this language highlights what was at stake, politically and personally, in different socialist ideologies. These differences—“reformist or revolutionary” (a reference to the

⁴⁴ Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” See also Anne Boyer, “Not Writing,” in *Garments against Women* (Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2015), 41–43.

⁴⁵ Anne Boyer, *The Romance of Happy Workers* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008), 9.

⁴⁶ For a fuller discussion on how theories of disease shaped political language and discourse in the nineteenth century, see Laura Otis, *Membranes: Metaphors of Invasion in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Science, and Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

1899 pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution* by the Marxist theorist Rosa Luxemburg)—can pull lovers apart, as indeed they do: “Not able to unite in a common struggle, / the marriage ended, a Trotsky and a mouse.”⁴⁷ But while these differences signal the end of this ideological union, the poem itself does not end. On the contrary, these differences fuel the radical, excessive “coupling” that continues for several pages more—in Mary Kasimor’s words, “giving the reader . . . the revolution that the artists were supposed to create.”⁴⁸ Forgoing the self-containment of the traditional couplet, Boyer’s open and unrhymed couplet functions here as a formal strategy that resists capitalism’s “obstruction of desire” and allows the romance to continue. Nevertheless, the presence of Tsvetaeva herself in this poem shows how different formal strategies—namely, restraint and excess—can work together toward a new revolutionary “romance.” Says “Madame” Tsvetaeva: “*This line here means your heart still beats.*”⁴⁹

The U.S. poet Laura Sims, Boyer’s contemporary, on the other hand, applies “restraint” as both a poetic strategy and a force that exerts pressure against the “form” of the workplace. The acknowledgments page of her 2005 debut collection *Practice, Restraint* includes a thank-you to her “co-workers at Home Savings Bank,” suggesting a context for the section titled “Bank Book.”⁵⁰ In fact, Sims confirmed that many of these poems were written during work hours at the bank where she was employed, in the time between clients and transactions.⁵¹ The poem “Bank Thirty” opens by simultaneously addressing and questioning the bank economy:

What is
 Money

 Is colorful
 Under her hand

 Is a basket
 Of fruit she carries
 Shoreward

 She longs for

 Far from
 Her country⁵²

⁴⁷ Boyer, *Romance of Happy Workers*, 9.

⁴⁸ Mary Kasimor, review of *The Romance of Happy Workers*, by Anne Boyer, *Jacket* 40 (2010), <http://jacketmagazine.com/40/r-boyer-rb-kasimor.shtml>.

⁴⁹ Boyer, *Romance of Happy Workers*, 16.

⁵⁰ Laura Sims, *Practice, Restraint* (New York: Fence Books, 2005), n.p. *Bank Book*, the chapbook edition of these poems, was published in 2004 by Answer Tag Press.

⁵¹ Laura Sims, reading at Kitchen, October 2005.

⁵² Sims, *Practice, Restraint*, 55. Reproduced here with permission of the author.

One can imagine here a variety of scenarios: someone saving for a trip far from home or wiring money overseas. Money here is likened to “a basket / Offruit” carried “shoreward” like an offering to a god; it is “colorful,” which could suggest that it is charged with possibilities. But it would be too easy to attribute Sims’s incisive, shard-like lines to the sharp interruptions or breaks of the workday; indeed, this language and syntax characterize most of the poems of *Practice, Restraint*. Instead, what “Bank Thirty” advances is a poetry that actually bears little overt relation to the workplace—indeed, acknowledges it only obliquely. In contrast to the “closed” space of the office in Frosh’s “Emergency Announcement,” Sims’s bank worker refuses to be restrained by the workplace and instead takes advantage of the space and time it affords—and, yes, even the money it affords—to write. It withdraws the jargon of the bank—the experiences, dreams, and desires that circulate there—and rewrites these into a new form of currency, which is to say, into a poem.

In Hebrew, “avarice,” *betsa*, comes from a biblical root—*ב-צ-ק*—meaning “to break off, cut and tear apart.” Its relation to plunder, greed, and violently ill-gotten gains recurs in a number of biblical texts, but in rabbinic sources it is also used with reference to the breaking of bread before a blessing, as well as with respect to a compromise (“splitting the difference”).⁵³ Today, its relation to greed and avarice is most explicit, but it is interesting to have these other meanings in mind when considering the formal strategies of restraint and excess that I discern in the works of these poets. The poems of *Avarice* alternate, but also combine, these strategies. It includes a number of long, prose poems, texts that visibly activate a form of excess, stretching in some cases for several pages, with lines pushing into the margins and gutters. The impression these poems give, of filling a page and almost exceeding it, creates a powerful and meaningful contrast to the breakdown of relationships, families, homes, and even language that takes place within these texts. Other poems are composed of fragmented, disrupted, and broken words and lines that call attention to vulnerabilities and weak spots in the social and familial order that capitalism enforces. The time between bank transactions and press clippings, for example, becomes the time for a different kind of investment, an opportunity to radically convert the work space into a poet’s “condensery.”

“Poetry is not a consumer product,” Frosh has said; “it is not needed, it is the foreign worker of Israeli culture and therefore it can afford to do what it wants.”⁵⁴ The father of “Accountant” certainly could not “afford” this freedom, but Frosh’s poem recovers him from the space and time of a capitalist order through formal strategies that literally turn a profile broken down by overwork into a “whole face.” His refusal to accept his daughter’s labor can be indicative of the powerful intersectionality between capitalism and sexism—despite the fact that, according to *Forbes*, Arison is the richest woman in the Middle East and helms the investment company that determined the course of the father’s professional life. That Arison inherited this company from her father is also one of the poem’s additional ironies. Capitalism, Frosh shows, has the capacity to reinforce family ties, even as it dismantles others. But the father’s refusal, which the poem reclaims, could be understood as a desire to keep the daughter out of this order, to keep her out of the workplace that broke him down. This refusal allows a different form of accounting to materialize—in the poem before us. A

⁵³ Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1903), 184.

⁵⁴ Yoni Livneh, “Re’ayon ‘im Tahel Frosh” [Interview with Tahel Frosh], *Mitat Sdom*, July 18, 2014, <https://bedofsodom.wordpress.com/2014/07/18/ראיון-עם-תהל-פרוש-בצע/>. This is a tongue-in-cheek statement, because the reality, as Frosh is well aware, is that foreign workers in Israel are subject to strict employment rules and restrictions that can extend into their personal lives.