David Hofshteyn's Poetry of Listening

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This essay examines the multiple resonances of the Jewish term *hefker* (literally, "unclaimed, abandoned, or neglected property") as a modernist, aesthetic, political, and ethical category in the early work of the Yiddish poet David Hofshteyn, including his 1919 debut volume *Bay Vegn* ("On the Road"), his pogrom lament 1922 *Troyer* ("Grief"), and the virtually unknown "*Ba-yamim ha-hem*" ("In those days"), a Hebrew prose poem from 1925. I attempt to shed light on aspects of his modernist poetic practice, not merely in terms of stylistics but, more broadly, in terms of his poetic orientation in the world. This includes the sensory experience of joy and pleasure, as well as his encounter with the violence of the Kyiv pogroms of 1919. I begin with a brief discussion of *hefker* in the literary milieu, then turn to *Bay Vegn* and Hofshteyn's exploration of sensory listening. The second part of the essay turns to *Troyer*, tracing how the term '*hefker*' adds an ethical dimension to the practice of listening. I conclude with the Hebrew prose poem, which, by reflecting the poet's experience the Kyiv pogroms, shatters the possibility of listening.

Hefker

To name oneself *hefker* poetically is to proclaim emancipation from the past, from established norms, and from the community; and, thus, to make oneself open and available to the world and to a new sensory experience of it. As Naomi Brenner has shown: "The celebration of *hefker* is pervasive in Eastern European Yiddish modernist poetry" (Brenner 2015: 64). Uri Zvi Grinberg, Itzik Manger, and Peretz Markish, among others, widely used the term during the 1920s. Still in use today, this term derives from second-century Jewish law. It refers both to the legal category of abandoned belongings and to the moral category of licentious behavior. English provides parallel meanings: One may abandon a possession, leaving it up for grabs; or act with abandon, in the sense of shrugging off conventional norms and rules. Yiddish poets reclaimed *hefker*, expanding its meaning. The *hefker* aesthetic proclaimed by Yiddish authors in the first quarter of the twentieth century offered a break from the past and the possibility for a new relation to experience and, in particular, to the bodily sensorium and the corresponding emotional or affective register. *Hefker* is not solely an abstract idea, a legal category, but it is an all-encompassing psychological, physiological, and kinesthetic experience.

At the same time, however, the term *hefker* also suggests a contrasting set of ideas—not the joy of freedom and abandonment, but the pain of loss and the risk of exposure. As Efrat Gal-Ed puts it, for many Jewish intellectuals and writers, and Manger in particular, the history of anti-Jewish

violence during the first part of the twentieth century, and the subsequent "experience of being *hefker* destroyed all confidence in the possibility of belonging." The "experience of being *hefker*" meant the persistent sense of "being excluded from any system of law and abandoned to arbitrary power" (Gal-Ed 2015: 12).

Hofshteyn in the World

In one of the opening poems of his debut volume, "On the Road" (*Bay Vegn*, published in 1919), David Hofshteyn goes to meet the world in joy. He carries no scale or any other instrument with which to measure the objects he encounters; instead, streams of light reflected from the surfaces of things, like "mother of pearl," play on his eyelashes. Crystalline structures, tentative, quivering, barely discernable, but nonetheless sensory, bring him delight. As he writes in the same poem, "For every beam of light /My heart/ Has prepared a nest of joy" (Hofshteyn 1919: 11).[1] This is not to say that he avoids the disquiet (*umru*) that resounds in the literary milieu of the time. The difference is that relief is available. In the poem "Among Radiant Ruins" (*Af Likhtike Ruinen*), the wounds of Hofshteyn's disquiet heal, and the dark, deaf language of his heart tells him of the love that will accompany him on his onward journey.

Hofshteyn (1889-1952) started writing poetry in Hebrew, Ukrainian, and Russian, while his first Yiddish poems were published in 1917. As one of the leading Yiddish Kyiv poets he played a crucial role in the formation of the Kyiv Kultur-Lige ("Kiev Culture League"), an organization that promoted the arts in Yiddish. In his 1919 essay: "Belles-lettres and the Social Order," Bergelson praised Hofshteyn for his lyricism, pointing out the subtle musical structure of his poetry, in contrast to Peretz Markish, whom Bergelson accused of "shouting" (Bergelson 2007: 342). Chana Kronfeld has characterized Hofshteyn's work as "low-key, lyrical, introverted modernism" (Kronfeld 1996: 210). Like Grinberg, Manger, Leyb Kvitko, David Bergelson, and many other Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian writers, Hofshteyn lived in Berlin in the 1920s. He moved to Palestine in 1924, where he published poetry and prose, but unlike Grinberg he did not stay long, returning to Russia in 1926. The reasons had to do, in part, with the hardship of life in Palestine. In an article published in 1926 in the Polish Yiddish newspaper *Dos Naye Lebn* ("The New Life"), Hofshteyn said that agricultural labor in Palestine was "no idyll" (Hofshteyn 1926: n.p.). The circumstances of his personal life in Russia also played a role. His two sons from his first marriage had lost their mother, leaving Hofshteyn as the sole surviving parent. His support for Hebrew made him the target of the new Yiddish 'orthodoxy' of the Soviet Jewish literary establishment (Estraikh 2005: 58-60; Shneer 2004: 512). For a time, Hofshteyn was an editor at the first Soviet Yiddish poetry journal, *Shtrom* ("Current").[2]

"On the Road" begins in stillness and solitude and ends with storminess and change. It has six sections: "On the road," "Fields," "The Caucasus," "Dawns," "Streets," and "Among scattered stones" (*Tsvishn valger-shteyner*). It includes a few autobiographical notes. Hofshteyn characterizes his youth as a "sheaf of quivering years"; he writes about his father's house, the experience of eating an apple, his service in the Tsar's army in Armenia (with a nod to Pushkin), the pleasure he takes in his wife's body, and his five-month-old twins. In the final poem, "We grow from stones" (*Mir stamen fun felzn*), the poet proclaims freedom from the yoke of stagnation and celebrates brotherhood and sisterhood with the seas, winds, and distance.

The title poem describes the open road as the source of the poet's creativity, using the term *hefker* (1919: 9):[3]

> At roads distant and fleeting,
> where wheels, all unseeing,
> with wanton winds blowing,
> are grinding the dust, the dust in its roaming—
> There on untended fields I gathered my sowing.
>
> Bay vegn bay vayte,
> vu reder vu blinde
> far vintn farshayte
> alts moln un moln di heymloze shtoybn—
> dort hob ikh af felder fun hefker mayn zeyung gekloybn.

The original Yiddish for "untended" is *hefker*. The negative elements of wandering, homelessness, and dust, key motifs in the literature of political abandonment, appear in this poem as well. Yet, in this context, they are positive, representing joy and expansiveness. The poet roams everywhere as 'unclaimed' as the dust and the wind. The "unseeing wheels" may refer to the wheels of fate, indicating that this freedom is not absolute; the speaker is subject to larger forces. Hofshteyn will return to the wheels of fate in a less joyous key in his pogrom lament "Grief." The seeds that he or his poetry has sown grow everywhere in these wild, uncultivated places.

The new poetry of "wanton winds" does not, however, destroy the past, nor separate the speaker from it, as the second and third stanzas make clear. The "seeds" are moistened with "grandfather's inheritance" and by means of an "old, shrunken, dusty wineskin." Setting out on the road, the speaker carries all these things with him; *vogl* "wandering" rhymes with *logl*, "wineskin."

The third stanza introduces direct references to emotion for the first time. "Secret fear" and "loneliness" accompanied the act of sowing seeds in "completely strange, unfamiliar homes."

The repetition of the sound "*geHEYMEN*" in "*pokhed-geheymen*" ("secret fear") and "*heymen*" ("home") intensifies the sense of hidden anxiety; the unfamiliar home and secret fear are virtually synonymous. Hofshteyn synthesizes the experiences of being at home, being away, and being incapable of having a home, so that each is lined and brightened by both freedom and hidden anxiety, revealing the rich semantic field and undecidability that is the core of the term *hefker*.

The final stanza takes place in the present ("*itst*," "now") and extends into the future. Now, the poet stands in his own garden bed, "sown with suffering," and swears to the birds, wind, and hail that he will no longer gather what he has sown. The Hebrew Bible provides a gloss on this line; Leviticus 23:22 commands Israel not to "reap all the way to the edges of your field nor to gather the gleanings of your harvest" but rather to leave them as food for the poor and the stranger. There is an overlap between the concept of *hefker* and the category of leftover grain from this commandment. A controversy arose in Jewish law as to whether this unharvested remnant was legally *hefker* and, hence, free from tax and other obligations. Hofshteyn's poem transforms this commandment (to not gather) into the poetical motif of semi-silence, withholding from full articulation and, thus, leaving an open space for the reader's reflection and for other voices, not his own.

The final lines of the poem reframe the poet's self-description. Instead of stating that he "gathered" what he sowed ("*gekloybn*"), as in the first stanza, he says that he "bore" or "carried" ("*dertrogn*") it; to bear something, as in English, can also mean 'to suffer it'. A contraction of his own poetic creativity permits something to be left over, a blank space that allows some potential for other expressions, for others' expressions, even the recognition that the word he sends out to the world may come back to him with a new meaning, in an unrecognizable form. Even his own "sowing" is also not solely his. This is an aesthetic statement that signals the ethics of attention that Hofshteyn will use in *Troyer*.

The oath that the poetic speaker swears is significant, since it is the only departure from the largely narrative and descriptive statements that otherwise characterize the poem: "I swear to you today, birds, you winds, you hail" ("*Kh'bashver aykh haynt, foyglen, aykh vintn, aykh haglen*"). There is something of an incantation in its rhythm, a sense of conjuring forces beyond human control. This paradoxical oath points to the contradictions of *hefker*, the flexible, Mobius strip between law and lawlessness. Swearing to the winds is similar to writing a promise on water, since there is nothing that can guarantee its fulfillment. There's no one to say you broke your oath, and now must face the consequences; utter wildness cannot be the object of a promise or agreement.

This is a poem about new departures haunted by the past, and arrivals that stay true to the open road, winds, birds, and the vicissitudes of the weather. The rhyme scheme of the final stanza, *haglen/shlogen/dertrogn/vogl* (hail, thresh/carry/wander), returns to the rhyme scheme of the second stanza, *logl/vogl* (wineskin/wander). Amphibrachs dominate the poem, as a whole, adding to the tension between wandering, returning, and staying. The use of rhyme, repletion, and especially the importance of liquids /l/ as in *vogl* (wandering) add dynamism, and the use of sounds bleed into each other: *zeyung/vogl/vegn* (being/wander/way) suggest movement beyond limits, befitting a poem about wandering. A stanza is a stopping point, a station, and the poem is about being on the road. Thus, each part of the poem represents temporary stops on a longer journey, pauses and brief messages from the road that are part of a conversation that cannot be transcribed just now.

Hofshteyn's contemporary critics emphasized his joy, his capacity for hearing and poetically seeing what others did not. Yekhezkel Dobrushin, a poet and essayist who was also a part of the Kyiv circle, remarked on Hofshteyn's sense of sight and hearing which made it possible for him to see and hear barely discernable colors and sounds (Dobrushin 1919: 90). Dobrushin also framed his discussion of Hofshteyn's expression of emotion in terms of the sensory and affective register. Hofshteyn's versification communicates the "innermost modulations of his mood" (Dobrushin 1919: 91). In his 1921 essay on Hofshteyn's debut volume, Shmuel Niger emphasized the senses and mood, but placed more stress on the political instability and anxiety of the time. According to Niger, Hofshteyn "feels the unease of the times and hears the cry of chaos" (Niger 1958: 49).

Hofshteyn Listening

Hofshteyn's reflections on sound shed light on his poetry more broadly, and also reveal his interconnectedness with early twentieth-century Russian poetics, in which the bodily sensorium was paramount. He co-authored a handbook on poetry, published in 1927, that reiterates this perspective. Different kinds of images depend on the "centers of the brain" that they stimulate, which Hofshteyn describes as sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, and "dynamic images" that provide the impression of movement. Sight-images indicate colors, forms, and the orientation of objects in space (Hofshteyn and Shames 1927: 40-1). Lyric poets express their individual relationships with the world and expose their audiences to them by means of an indirect process that works on the senses.

Sound was the most important sense, since it distinguished poetry from ordinary speech. "Sound creates a special emotional relationship to itself" (*Literatur-Kentenish* 1927: 30) in poetry.

Hofshteyn cites his own Yiddish translation of Pushkin's poem "Autumn" to make his point. The poet's soul is besieged by lyric agitation and quivers and vibrates in its effort to express itself. The poet hears the sound-sense that was obtained in language before words took on abstract meanings and evokes the primordial *ur*-sense of language in the poetic work. (Hofshteyn and Shames 1927: 30-2). The notion that poets have a primeval ear was not unique to Hofshteyn. Alexander Blok's well-known "On the poet's calling" (1921) makes a similar point, and in much more dramatic terms. The poet discovers sounds in their "native, elemental existence," bringing them into harmony and giving them form, and then brings "this harmony into the external world." Blok suggests a correspondence between the elemental forces driving the poet and the elemental forces driving the universe. Rolling "waves of sound, like the waves of ether" are found in the very depths of the human being, inaccessible to state and society (Blok 2011). The poet's task is to throw off the coverings of civilization and reveal these depths. Even though Hofshteyn focused on the history of language, granting the poet access to its earliest history, while Blok concentrated more on the human psyche and spirit, both argued that poets are defined by their work of listening to the sounds of the world. Hofshteyn's poetry explicitly tells his readers that he is listening ("*Ikh her zikh tsu*").[4]

Hearing and sight are, of course, senses, but Hofshteyn reminds us that they belong to the body and have to do with the flesh. In the joyous poem "I have come to you, my world, fresh and new" ("*Ikh bin, mayn velt, afsnay tsu dir gekumen*"), published in *Bay Vegn*, Hofshteyn writes (1919: 13):

> Today, I rang again
> the great bell at the transparent door,
> with new joy my quivering ear
> accompanied
> its pure ringing.

The third line instructs readers in the physiology of hearing: The sound waves strike the inner structure of the ear, which vibrates, communicating with the brain and resulting in the perception of sound. Hearing sound means being touched by it physically. The synesthesia of the image transfers the activity of one sense organ to another. Normally the mouth, tongue, or lips would accompany a ringing bell, producing some sort of sound, but in this verse, it is the ear. Hofshteyn's image suggests that hearing a melody requires co-vibrating with it physically.

In the Yiddish, the second and fourth lines of the stanza, the sound of the bell and the action of the ear—are perfectly parallel:

> Afsnay hob ikh haynt ongeklungen
> in groysn glok baym durkzikhtign toyer,

mit nayer freyd hot nokhgezungen
dem loyter-klang mayn tsiteriger oyer …

It is not merely that the second and fourth lines rhyme the words for "door" and "ear" (*toyer/oyer*). The assonance of *groysn/loyter*, *baym/mayn*, and *durkhzikhtign/tsiteriger* create a vocal mirroring that underscores the relation between the poet and what he hears. He hears the sound because he can make it. He goes out to meet the sound. Receptivity or attunement and the production of poetry are linked through the fleshy receptacle of the body and its interaction with the fleshy world. The motif of "quivering," which Hofshteyn also uses in several other poems to describe himself ("the sheaf of quivering years" and the "quivering light" of his life) emphasizes the state of attentive listening or attunement. Quivering is an unsteady pulsation that both receives and produces movement; in this context it suggests a process of listening *with* a sound, as opposed to listening *to* it.

Fleshiness is a part of every sense in Hofshteyn's poetry, including sight. His images, whether imbued with sunshine or darkness, point to the intimate relation between bodies and the surrounding world. The third stanza of "In the long expanse of gloomy night," another poem in the debut volume, provides an example (1919: 35):

A barefoot bunch of children
spring forth
from house to house,
and cold puddles watch
how dark feet avoid them.

Es shpringt zikh durkh
fun hoyz tsu hoyz
a borvis bintl kinder,
un kalte kalizshes zikh kukn um
vi fislakh tunkele zey maydn oys.

Hofshteyn animates the inanimate world by attributing a sense of sight to the puddles. Instead of saying the puddles reflect the bare feet of the children as they skip over them, he sees how puddles might see what is happening around them or, in this case, over them, in an instance of what could be called visual attunement. Furthermore, he transfers the qualities of the children's feet, which are cold, to the puddles, and vice versa, rendering the bare feet as dark, a quality that makes it possible for the puddles to reflect the feet. This is an example of a tactile image, even though it is not about avoiding being touched—the feet avoid the puddles. The image makes readers feel the cold of the children's bare feet, and see them, from below, from the puddle's perspective.

In “A whole day” (“A gantsn tog”), which serves as a preface to the entire poem cycle, the speaker paradoxically describes himself as being under the dominion of the road (“*in reshus fun veg*”). This condition provides both maximum freedom and maximum exposure and vulnerability. He is betwixt and between the possibility and impossibility of passage, between the road and “roadlessness” (“*tvishn veg un onveg*”), on the narrow line between the two. The poet maps the external geography of passage and its opposite, the legibility of a domesticated space and its illegibility, and the lack of roads, onto his body, transforming the boundary to the realm of his senses. He rewrites the line demarcating the different conditions of the surrounding world as his eyelashes, mediating between his eyes and the sunshine (1919: 7):[5]

> Between the road and no road there is only a narrow line,
> Between my eyes and the sunshine, only my young eyelashes.
> What on earth
> could be more beautiful?

Hofshteyn inhabits the boundary between wildness and domesticity, self and world, with a sense of gratitude, experiencing the threshold between the two as sensory beauty.

In another poem in the same collection, the boundary space takes on a different coloration. An untitled poem, dedicated to Bergelson, marks a departure from the mood that otherwise dominates *On the Road.* I have touched on one of its images, the reflection of bare feet in puddles. Given that this poem was for David Bergelson, it is helpful to consider his 1913 novel *The End of Everything* as a reference. The mournful heroine, Mirl Hurvits, takes long meandering walks outside the *shtetl* (European Jewish village) with the lame student, Lipkis. The two wander in a frozen world of wintery expanses. It seems to Mirl that everyone and everything has disappeared, and yet, no one protests—the world remains silent.

Hofshteyn transforms the mood of Bergelson’s novel into a set of interlocking images that suggest a similarly bleak landscape. The first line sets the scene: “In the long expanse of gloomy night” (“*in langn doyern fun nakht fun triber*”). One gray day passes into another without any distinction between them. A door opens to release cows to pasture and houses release children to play. Mouths open to release coughs and joyous voices, but the wind snatches the sounds away. In a poem cycle that is full of joyous sound, the silence here, not merely the absence, but the destruction of sound—is all the more striking.

In the middle of the “dark, naked fields” there is a ditch (“*grobn*”), another concave space that resembles the opening of doors, houses, and mouths. Hofhsteyn describes this “ditch” or trench as a “*a hefker-shvel*” (1919: 36):[6]

> On the dark naked fields,

there, as before, winds ride,
there, as before, crows wander,
there a ditch lies
a threshold to nowhere in the middle of desolate distance.

Af tunklen naket fun di felder
dort, vi amol, itst vintn raytn,
dort, vi amol, itst voglen robn,
dort in a mitn ligt a grobn
a hefker-shvel in hefker-vaytn …

The term *hefker* appears twice at the end of the poem, in the line I have translated as: "a threshold to nowhere in the midst of desolate distance." The doors/houses/mouths are all emptied of their contents, but the passage to the surrounding world is fruitless. These doors, houses, and mouths resemble the empty ditch, with its strong association of a grave that awaits a corpse—the passage to nowhere in the middle of the desolate landscape. No seed has been sown in this wild place, and there is no echoing sound, only silence again.

In this poem, the empty space beyond human habitation offers no doorway to novelty and freedom. This border is a no-man's land between the human world and what lies beyond it, not only in terms of space, cultivated and wild land, but also of time, the world of the living and the world of the dead. There is a pun of sorts in the last line, as if the term *hefker-shvel* were its motto: That line is, indeed, the border between ordered, meaningful language and the blank white page. This poem takes us to the very brink of the known world and lets itself be swallowed by what remains beyond it, teetering on the brink of the impossibility of writing poetry, the loss of the ability to make a mark that is anything other than an indication of a loss.

In "In a land split by scattered stones" ("*Af erdn oyfgerirte tsvishn valger-shteyner*"), a poem from the final section of the volume, the poet finds himself in a landscape churned up by wild, overwhelming forces, hanging by a thread in the face of disaster (1919: 87):

In a land split by scattered stones,
under howling storms and raging blizzards,
who am I, what am I,
the one who carries his life's light quietly quivering?

Af erdn oyfgerirte tsvishn valger-shteyner,
in beyze onflien fun shnaydikn geviter,
vos bin ikh, vos badayt ikh, eyner,
vos trogt zayn lebns-likht mit shtilen tsiter?

The next stanza shifts to the sea, where the rudder and mast of the poet's ship provide no security. *Psalms* 114, in which God makes the "mountains skip like rams" and forces the sea to flee, is likely one of the intertexts for this poem. The final stanza turns from disastrous land- and seascapes to something resembling prayer (1919: 87):

> I am ready at any moment to entrust
> the quivering flame of my life
> to the master of destruction and creation,
> the lord of the earth and seas ...

Hofshteyn's poem entrusts his life to the "master of destruction and creation" ("*dem har fun khurbn un boyen*"). The use of the term *khurbn* is significant since, in contrast to other, more neutral terms, this word refers to Jewish national disasters, first to the destruction of both Jerusalem Temples, and subsequently to war and pogroms—politico-historical events. Hofshteyn declares his readiness to entrust his life to God who rules over both history and nature.

"Justice" ("*Gerekhtikeyt*"), one of the concluding poems in this volume, gives voice to both the joy and the sorrow of the Russian Revolution. "Giving voice" means hearing others' voices (1919: 91-2):

> I hear them with a quivering heart
> the thousand breaths exhaling joy,
> with suffering stilled I feel
> the mute quivering pain…
>
> Mit hartsn-tsiter her ikh zey
> di toyznt-otemdike freydgeshrayen,
> mit gliver-leyd dershpir ikh zey,
> di shtume tsapldike veyen ...

The restraint that quiets and condenses his own suffering allows the emotion of the poem to resonate all the more powerfully. In the same 1921 article that I quoted earlier, Niger identified the qualities of quieting and condensing (similar to the neologism above, *gliver-leyd* "stilled suffering") as the very essence of Hofshteyn's poetry (Niger 1958: 52).

Grieving

Hofshteyn returns to the motif of poetry as listening and "gathering," which he had used in his debut volume, in the poem cycle he dedicated to the pogroms of 1919. What he "gathers" in this work, as opposed to "justice," is only pain. In *Troyer* ("Grief," 1922), Hofshteyn speaks in a quiet voice, or rather, he listens; he is attuned to the pain of others. As in his previous volume, the

same restraint, the withholding of the full force of the poet's emotions, is essential to the cycle as a whole. The epigraph reads: "I don't demand/ I only ask." The pain, injury, and bloodshed found in Markish's long poem: "*Veyland*" "Pain-land" (1922, vol. 1:6), Grinberg's "Kingdom of the Cross" (1923), and Manger's interwar ballads and essays (1929), also resound throughout Hofshteyn's pogrom realm, but in a different key. Hofshteyn's language is not one of mutilated flesh, or to use Grinberg's expression, "enlipped wounds." One of several major pogrom-related poetic works, together with Markish's *Di kupe* ("The Heap," 1921), Arn Kushnirov's *Azkore* ("Memorial Prayer," 1922), and Kvitko's *1919*, Hofshteyn's poem cycle is an expression of grief in his uniquely restrained modernist idiom.

"Grief" (*Troyer*), published by the Kyiv Kultur-Lige in 1922, consists of eleven poems, with the cover page and drawings designed by Marc Chagall. To merely call the images and other graphic elements "illustrations" downplays their significance as crucial dimensions of the visual and verbal artwork as a whole (Wolitz 1995). Hofshteyn's and Chagall's project was developed while they were both working at a colony for homeless Jewish children at Malakhovka (Harshav 2004: 302-7). It is dedicated to those "cut off before their time," and the proceeds from the sale of the book were dedicated to the orphanage.

The pogrom cycle, as a whole, is a journey through the broken time and space of antisemitic violence. Time has lost its order; the week goes by without Sabbaths or Sundays, suggesting the destruction of the Christian, as well as the Jewish, calendars. God is no longer the source of the times and seasons. The Zodiac occupies this role, and the time that it produces is ruinous, causing destruction; as the wheel turns, its signs "glint like knives, like skewers."[7] The free and joyous wandering that is the leitmotif of "On the Road" is gone, because the poet cannot determine his motion through space and time. The turn of the Zodiac takes him where it will; he is compelled to wander, float, and fall. The loss of ordered time, however, also contains a potential for openness to the past and the future. Distinct epochs merge into one another, including the time of the poet's grandfathers, the future of the children at the orphanage, the biblical days of Job, Hofshteyn's time in Kyiv, and the past and future of Ukraine. Poetry itself plays a role in releasing one time period into another, as the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam had remarked in his essay, "*Slovo i kul'tura*" ("The Word and Culture"): "Poetry is the plow that turns up time" (Monas 1975: 529).

Hofshteyn does not use the term '*hefker*' to characterize the pogrom space, as Bergelson does in "The beginning of December, 1919" which describes the abandoned space of a railway line where a Jew's frozen corpse lies unattended. Nonetheless, the sense of forsakenness comes across clearly. In Hofshteyn's pogrom cycle, the landscape of violence encompasses abandoned fields,

ruined *shtetl*s, and houses without roofs or walls. "Boundless power" ("*ongrenetsdiker shlite*") has been unleashed in the entire space, filled with the arbitrary, limitless, and lawless will of violence. "Bandits' steps" have left traces of destruction everywhere; every speck of space is "shadowed by your shame/ Ukraine." (1922: 8; my translation).

The sixth poem, "Falling" ("*In faln*"), stands at the thematic center of the work.[8] The meaning of '*hefker*' as a poetic quality, an existential condition, and a consequence of violence, emerges mainly from this poem. It consists of fifteen stanzas. The first four unfold in the abstract realm of some "cold and silent wasteland," where the abyss is found, a place removed from normal time and space. Its dimensions are cosmic and mythical, but Hofshteyn's voice does not ascend to the peaks of oratory or prophecy. He remains quiet. The first line of the poem graphically pictures the action of falling: The phrase "a wanderer" runs vertically down the page. The falling stress ("*a VALger*") emphasizes downward motion. The falling poet nearly tumbles into the black maw of the abyss. In "The long expanse of gloomy night," discussed earlier, the threshold to nowhere was far away, removed from the here and now. In this poem, by contrast, Hofshteyn has been transported to the *hefker-shvel*, the threshold of desolation and abandonment.

The fourth stanza introduces poetry with the motif of the sound made by falling, an echo that resounds somewhere; perhaps such an echo will reach the poet, even though it makes no sound (1922: 13):

> A deaf echo,
> far away
> for you here,
> remaining
> kneeling
> with outstretched arms—
> what can it mean?
>
> An opklang a toyber,
> a vayter …
> Far dir do,
> far shteyen
> far knien
> mit hent oysgeshpreyte—
> vos kon er bataytn?

The use of anaphora in the three lines that begin with "*far*" (*far dir do/far shteyen/far knien*), the near rhymes in *vayter/shteyn*/*oysgeshPREYte*, and even "*bataytn*," acoustically repeat that distant echo, come from afar:

Kneeling at the edge of the pit, the poet asks himself a question:[9]

> What are you still in a position to do?
> The most beautiful,
> the purest,
> the greatest of pains, of sorrows
> you can still receive
> a slight string of verses
> rhymed and
> compressed—
> a slight string of verses on a crumpled page
> drifting about some place over there
> in giant baskets of years!

The powerlessness of the poet's own position, his stillness, his immobility, and the silencing of his own voice—make it possible for him to 'receive' the verse that has been lost for years. The creative act is akin to a form of intensified listening, which can only take place when the poet is quiet. The first stanza explicitly asks for silence. The fourth line, "Quiet!..." ("*Un sha!…*") contains both the admonition to be silent and its actualization; the line cuts off, ellipsis points replacing speech. A row of ellipsis points appears between the fourth and fifth lines of the stanza. The poet ceases speaking. The assonance created between "*Un sha!*" ("Quiet!") in this stanza, "*Ikh kni do*" ("I kneel here"), and "*Far dir do*" ("For you here") underscore the poet's quiet self-abnegation and his ability to detect the nearly inaudible reverberations of suffering.

Facing the extreme, at the border of the abyss, a response is still possible. When there is nothing to do and no place in which to do it, the only thing to do is to silence oneself, in order to hear the echo of another's cry. Utterly still, the poet hears the echo of pain, detecting the barely audible, distant sounds. The poet 'receives' the scrap of paper on which some lines of verse have been written by someone else, serving as a conduit of something that originated elsewhere, at some other time, that has been drifting about, as if carried in baskets held aloft—through the passage of time. What he receives is so faint and insignificant that it is hardly noticeable, nothing more than a "*shnirele shures*," a slight or thin string of verses; his silence has made it possible for him to discern a barely noticeable trace left by someone else. Writing poetry is akin to hearing, transcribing, and translating another's utterances. Indeed, the entirety of the poem "Falling" may be imagined as the transcription of those verses that the poet received. The poet and the poem fall to the ground after wandering and drifting in time and space.

The ninth stanza compares drops of blood and lines of poetry, using the term *hefker* (Wolitz 2014: 296-7):[10]

> And if

you should have the fortune,
if your song could be as wild (*hefker*) and pure (*zoyber*)
as the bloody drops
on the far snows of Siberia ….
that were scattered at the last minute
A fox cub from the north,
a pup from the snows.

As a whole, this stanza presents an incomplete hypothesis: The first part ("and if") is not resolved (by the consequence, "then") until a later stanza. Readers must wait for the answer. The third line stands out from the rest, disrupting the dominant pattern by its length, the use of monosyllabic words, inverted word order, and internal rhyme ("*Un zayn vet dayn*"). The combination of "*hefker*" and "*zoyber*" presents difficulties. I have translated "*zoyber*" as 'pure', but it ordinarily means 'neat' or 'tidy'. *Hefker* (unruliness and wildness) is at odds with the orderliness of *zoyber*. The semantic association between *hefker* and purity also requires some explanation. *Hefker* is wild, beyond the boundaries, transgressive, an attribute of a thing or person that upsets categories—not immediately linked with purity. The problem becomes more difficult when Chagall's graphics are taken into account. Chagall illustrated the passage about the courtyard with an image of animals copulating, an outhouse, and a half-naked woman upside down alongside it, suggesting that the "bright pure drops" in the filthy courtyard are the blood drops of a menstruating woman.[11] In Jewish law, the menstruating woman is ritually unclean and can contaminate foodstuffs and other items, and is not sexually available to her husband. Describing these blood drops in the same way as those of a fox and a child, as "bright and pure," pushes readers beyond what is conventional and accepted. *Hefker*, as the desideratum for poetry, also describes the fox's spilled blood and the blood of the innocent child; it is wayward, boundary-defying, and yet still innocent.

Considering other '*hefker*' moments in the poem is helpful. The hunter's act of violence alludes to the murder of Jews; the hunter kills the fox with impunity; the "boundless power" unleashed in Ukraine, the "bandit's steps," and the beatings and murders of Jews are acts of violence for which there is no penalty, carried out in a state of reckless abandonment and, thus, *hefker* in the aforementioned senses I developed above. In the fourteenth stanza, the poet describes his own task as a "seeker, dreamer, and wanderer." He "grasps" and "gathers" the fox's bloody drops from the snow, one by one, transforming the strand of blood into a strand of poetry. As in the earlier stanza, in which the poet detects an echo, here the poet describes his own creativity as attunement to another's pain. Even though sight and touch replace the sense of sound—the poet sees and grasps—Hofshteyn emphasizes the palpable, tactile qualities of vision, and not its abstract capacities for conceptual mastery. The gesture of gathering, as in Hofshteyn's earlier

poem, “On the road,” corresponds to the creation of poetry; whereas in the previous work, the poet had sown his own oats, and collected his own words that he had scattered across untended fields. Here, Hofshteyn gathers the blood left behind by others, including the drops he had seen in filthy courtyards as a child (the blood of a child and a fox): “In your own heart/ it was all the same, whoever had lost them.”

The traces left by pain, injury, and violence may be rendered as poetry. This is the essence of the solace and comfort the poem offers, and the conclusion of the hypothesis raised in the ninth stanza. If the poem and the poet could be as *hefker* and pure as the blood left in the courtyard and on the snow, it might provide comfort. If a human gaze could gather the bloody drops, “Then would this not be comfort?” (*Den iz dos keyn treyst nit?*). Hofshteyn creates a pseudo-etymological sound association between the word for poem (*lid*) and the word for suffering (*laydn*). The sound changes between /i/ and /ay/ normally occur in Yiddish declensions and conjugations. It is as if there were a grammatical relationship between the two terms, as if the plural of suffering was ‘poetry’.

The moral and poetic act of ‘clasping’ and ‘gathering’ the bloodied pains also takes on a graphic and acoustic materiality (Wolitz 2014: 304; Hofshteyn 1922: 16):

> It could even happen,
> that a human heart might clasp them,
> those bloodied pains,
> that a human glance might gather them one by one.
>
> Es kon zikh dokh trefn,
> az mentshlekhes harts zol zey tulyen,
> di blutike veyen
> az menshlekher blik zol zey eyntsikvays klaybn.

The lines that describe the clasping and gathering of others’ suffering surround the shorter line naming that which the heart and the eye embrace, the “bloodied pains.” The /l/ sound in “should” (“*zol*”) and “clasp” (“*tulyen*”) encompass the sound of suffering, /ey/. The sound of the bloodied pains is taken up and encircled by the sounds of the words that mean ‘to gather them up’ (“*zEY EYntsikvays klaybn”*).

Hofshteyn names his poetic practice in *Grief* (*Troyer*) “the act of listening to barely discernable sounds.” He describes the act of creating poems as the task of hearing a cry of pain, catching a scrap of verse floating about that someone else composed at some other remote time. This is a poetic expression of attunement to otherness. In the pogrom cycle, the poet’s capacity for self-

restraint enables him to hear the pain of others and, thus, to bear witness to it. Hofshteyn's representation of his poetic practice resembles the devotional activity of "*hefker* like the wilderness," a deliberate attempt to empty oneself of oneself in order to receive the Torah (Jewish teaching). Rabbinic literature and later commentaries also included another dimension of *hefker* behavior, one that is the antithetical to licentious abandonment—the devotional practice known as *hefker ke-midbar* (*hefker*, like the wilderness or desert), also discussed in the second century. Noting the significance of the giving of the Torah to Moses in the wilderness, the rabbis observe that, to receive its wisdom, one must make oneself "ownerless as the wilderness" or "open to all."[12]

I am arguing for a relation between the devotional practice and its poetic transformation in Hofshteyn's writing. Given his thematic emphasis on inaudible sounds, it is significant that Hofshteyn used a very different aural metaphor in another, far less-known work on the pogroms. While in Palestine, Hofshteyn published poetry and prose in Hebrew.[13] One short work—a prose poem—was titled "In those days: Fragments from my recollections of the civil war in Russia." It was published twice in Tel Aviv in 1925 (Hofshteyn 1925a; 1925b). Hofshteyn's piece describes his experience in Kyiv, which changed governments more than ten times during the Civil War. Denikin's Volunteer Army carried out pogroms in October and August 1919.

In a letter written in 1922, Hofshteyn touches briefly on Kyiv, which he describes as a "separate source of bitter memories," but his memoirist "fragments" are the most explicit available accounts of his internal and external life in war-torn Kyiv (Altshuler and Lifshits 1979: 90). These have not been discussed in the critical literature. I begin with the second part, in which the poet articulates the dimension of personal terror muted in *Troyer*. Hofshteyn is in a city besieged from "outside and inside," where fires are burning even entire neighborhoods. Hofshteyn is guarding a building; his shift is for three hours, and he is grateful for the structure the schedule gives him, as a defense against the "terrifying form" that the next moment might bring. The inhabitants of the building, including Jews and non-Jews, take shelter in the basement, and Hofshteyn notes that, in the past, people used to open the door for those who rang the bell for their neighbors. He wants to know what "they," the attackers, shooting at the night city, are thinking. A noise from the apartment next door produces a new thought: His experience in Kyiv resembles what happened when he was a soldier in the Tsarist Army in the Caucasus. He had served in 1912 and 1913, and several poems in *On the Road* were set there, including one in which he suggests a kinship between the generations of suffering among the Armenian people and himself.[14] Hofshteyn's experience in Kyiv reminds him of his military service in Armenia. He describes the night when he heard the door and the ceiling move about and felt as if he had been hurled back in time to the *toyhu-vavoyhu* (the chaos), the "welter and waste" of the period before Creation,

describing the sounds he heard as the "elements of Genesis talking among themselves" (1925a). The world was being torn apart and the forms of human life and culture that had been developed had suddenly and inexplicably been unmade.

The first part of the memoir is utterly unlike anything else Hofshteyn wrote. It is an allegorical reworking of the Jericho story, written in markedly biblical language, with phrases and words taken from the books of Joshua and Jeremiah. The unnamed "big city" in the story is identifiable as Kyiv due to its mixed terrain of hills and flat areas; Kyiv was organized culturally and spatially along a vertical axis. Jews lived in the lower region. In Hofshteyn's piece, a "giant, wild, and cruel creature" assaults the city with a deafening noise. This creature or monster is not named; it is possible that Hofshteyn had in mind some variant of the Jewish legendary *Golem*. The windows of the buildings are figured as eardrums. At first the city resists, but the "cruel creature" forces Kyiv to listen "and the city suffers from listening," tortured by the unbearably loud sound, until it falls to the ground, "howling from its wounds."[15] It is important to consider what Kyiv meant to Hofshteyn at this time. In his poem "*Shtot*" ("City"), first published in 1919, Hofshteyn did not employ the motifs of shock, mechanization, noise, and crowds, typically associated with modernist representations of the overwhelming experience of urban space. Instead, the city offers the poet comfort, community, and a vital connection to the larger world. A line from the poem gives the sense of the whole: "I arrived in your harbor on the ship of my loneliness" ("*Af shif fun mayn elent bin ikh in dayn hafn gekumen*") (Shmeruk 1964: 236). The city that provided shelter and a world of others had been reduced to mere flesh in pain.

In contrast to the image of the poet as a listener in *Bay Vegn* and *Troyer*, in this work, suffering from listening cannot create poetry. The city surrenders to the creature, which only responds with its inchoate noise, "Boo-boo-buk." In Hebrew the word for creature (*briyah*, בריה), and the sound the creature makes, echo one another. As in the Jericho story, and in an inversion of Genesis, the destruction of the city lasts six days and nights.

Avant-garde poets and prose authors had experimented with the de-evolution of speech into sound and, as I discussed earlier, Hofshteyn also wrote about the poet's capacity to discern the primordial relation between sound and sense in present-day language. In this piece, the very thing that Hofshteyn loved, the medium of his artistry, is a weapon that inflicts terrible pain. The end of the piece returns to the motif of deafness. There is no point in challenging or questioning what is happening, because there is no one to ask, and human artifacts and the natural world are no longer available as interlocutors. "The tree is impermeable," Hofshteyn writes.

The creative interchange between the poet and the surrounding world has been cut off. The poetic vision of the chaos of primordial time and the poet's life experience merge. In conditions

of utter abandonment, the condition of poetry, the possibility of listening—diminish to a null point. Hofshteyn has come right up to the edge of the abyss. He had done so before, in his language about the "*hefker* threshold" in his debut volume and in *Grief*, in which the poet kneels at the edge of the chasm before him. In the prose poem "In those days" the stakes are higher. Poetry has been called into question. Something has been tipped in the delicate balance between mournfulness and joy, so palpable in Hofshteyn's debut volume, reformulated in the kenotic withdrawal found in the pogrom cycle, *Troyer*. Even though the experiment of "In those days" did not generally provide a new point of departure for Hofshteyn's work, reading it against other works of the same period reveals the depths of his "stilled sadness."

Although '*hefker*' does not appear as an explicit term in the Hebrew prose poem, it is, nonetheless, helpful to think about what role the concept plays in Hofshteyn's depiction of the unmaking of the world. '*Hefker*' in its social and political dimension, that is, a zone of abandonment that abuts the social order, and the acts of violence that thrust people outside the realm of social recognition and care, may be seen as a point on the way toward the complete collapse of order. The poet in pain is abandoned; he cannot see, hear, or feel the world. The imagination of this condition as rendered in Hofshteyn's poetic work is part of the recovery process, since creating art is part of the remaking of the world. It is a projection of liveliness into the "impermeable" unresponsiveness of the people and things that surround him.

Notes

1 All citations are from this edition and, unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

2 A useful biographical and bibliographical sketch is found in Shmeruk 1964: 741-4.

3 The three central lines of translation come from Bergelson 2007: 342; the translation is by Lawrence Alan Rosenwald, who only translated what Bergelson cited in his essay; the other parts of the stanza are my translation.

4 This motif occurs in the poem "*In himl-roym*," as well as in "*Gerekhtikayt*." See Hofshteyn 1919: 43, 91.

5 The Yiddish: "Un tsvishn veg un onveg nor a shmoln grobn/Nor vies yunge, tsvishn oyg un zunen-shayn--/Vos kon af erd/Nokh shener zayn?"

6 This stanza was omitted in subsequent publications of the poem.

7 I am modifying the translations found in Wolitz 2014 and Kerler 1998.

8 For a discussion on the significance of these two themes in the work as a whole and especially in this poem, see Finkin 2012.

9 I have modified the translation. For the original Yiddish, see Hofshteyn 1922: 14.

10 I have modified the translation; Wolitz has "magical" for "pure." Finkin translates "*hefker un zoyber*" as "free and clean" (Finkin 2012: 93.n11). For the Yiddish original: "*Un oyber/ Est vet dikh baglikn, / Un zayn vet dayn lid azoy hefker un zoyber*", see Hofshteyn 1922: 13.

[11] For a discussion, see: Wolitz 1995; Harshav 2004: 307.

[12] My discussion of this practice and all the relevant translations come from Jacob Fine (n.d.)

[13] For a discussion of the poetry, see Abend-David 2011: 211. Abend-David does not point out that one of the poems "Along the way" directly recalls the motif of bloody drops from Hofshteyn's earlier Yiddish work *Grief.* The second and third stanzas read:

> Drops of blood,
> On the side of the rock,
> Drops of blood
> From the stone's own flesh.
>
> There, there,
> On the northern snow
> Are my drops of blood.

I have slightly modified the translation.

[14] For a discussion on the Caucasus poetry, see Krutikov 2011: 111.

[15] Hofshteyn 1925a. I am grateful to Daria Semenova, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, for providing me with a translation from the Hebrew.

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