



Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Notes

H. Leivick's

"Ballad of Denver Sanatorium"

A Translation

Editor's Note: One does not ordinarily associate the city of Denver with the flourishing culture of Yiddishkeit most appropriately identified with the Eastern European community of the Lower East Side of New York City. Even less does one expect to discover Denver as the home, however temporary, of leading Yiddish poets. Yet, due to Denver's reputation for pure air and the presence of two hospitals for Jews suffering from tuberculosis (National Jewish Hospital and The Jewish Consumptives' Relief Society), three internationally renowned Yiddish poets took up residence in the city while they received treatment for the disease.

First to arrive in hopes of recovering from the "white plague" was David Edelstadt (Dovid Edelshtat). Born (1866) in Kaluga, Russia, a town outside the Pale of Settlement near Moscow where his family was permitted to settle because his father had served faithfully in the Tzar's army for twenty-five years, the future poet was educated in the Russian language and remained ignorant of Yiddish. His revulsion at the pogroms of 1881 convinced Edelstadt to join the Am Olam movement which hoped to establish cooperative agricultural settlements in the United States, and he emigrated in 1882 at the age of sixteen. Edelstadt settled in Cincinnati where he took up the trade of button-holer, identified with the impoverished workers from whom he learned Yiddish, associated himself with the anarchist movement, and began to write poetry in which he spoke out against the exploitation of his fellow workers. In 1890 he went to New York to become editor of several anarchist journals published in Yiddish. Stricken by tuberculosis in 1891, Edelstadt journeyed to Denver where he died of the disease in 1892 at age twenty-six.

Several of Edelstadt's poems were so popular among the Jewish workers that they were set to music and became anthems of Jewish radicalism. Among his earliest poems was *My Testament* which one history of Yiddish literature claims was "more effective than all the closely reasoned pamphlets of his fellow-radicals. It had an international vogue and was sung in Siberian prison cells no less than in New York sweatshops and cellar assemblies." [Sol Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature* (Middle Village, N.Y., 1972), p. 94.] The first stanza of *My Testament* is inscribed on Edelstadt's gravestone which yet stands in Denver's Golden Hill cemetery. It is these lines which Leivick cites in the "Ballad of Denver Sanatorium."

Solomon Bloomgarten, who wrote under the pen name of Yeboash, was a product of Jewish Lithuania where he was born in 1870. A follower of the East European Haskala, Bloomgarten emigrated to New York in 1890. Suffering from tuberculosis, the

poet came to Denver in 1900 and entered the National Jewish Hospital. During his stay in Denver, Yeboash served for a time as a functionary of the Denver Relief Committee, sponsored by Lodge #171 of B'nai B'rith, which undertook to relocate Jews from the east coast in conjunction with the Industrial Removal Office and to receive Jews being sent to Denver as part of the Galveston Project financed by Jacob Schiff. The poet was also recruited to serve as a trustee of the JCRC (a position he held until his death), and for many years Bloomgarten was the chairman of the Propaganda (public relations) committee of



Leivick in chains after capture by the Russian police. (Photo courtesy of Bessie Glass.)

the hospital. Furthermore, while in Denver, Bloomgarden joined with Dr. Spivak of JCRS to edit a Yiddish Dictionary containing all the Hebrew and Chaldaic elements of the Yiddish Language, illustrated with proverbs and idiomatic expressions (1911). Fully recovered, Bloomgarden went back to New York in 1910, settled in Palestine 1914-1915, and then returned to New York where he died in 1927.

Yeboash not only recouped his health in Denver but was able to resume his writing for which he had had insufficient time in the decade of the 1890s. One critic has noted that Bloomgarden, as a lyric poet, was "Inspired by the awesomeness of the Rocky Mountains and the intensiveness of his spiritual solitude...."

[Charles Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* (New York, 1968), p. 167.]

The third Yiddish poet to sojourn in Denver was H. Leivick whose poem, "Ballad of Denver Sanatorium," is translated into English with an informative and critical foreword by Professor Ernest B. Gilman and presented in this issue of the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Notes.

Professor Gilman is a Denver native who holds a Ph.D. in English from Columbia University. Currently he is a member of the Department of English at New York University. Dr. Gilman's interest in Leivick's poem arose from his research into "the poetics of tuberculosis" which is part of a larger study of the literature written by those, like Thomas Mann, who had some experience of life in a sanatorium.

Foreword

The celebrated Yiddish poet and dramatist H. Leivick was a patient at the JCRS Sanatorium in Denver for two relatively brief periods, first from June 19, 1932 until April 18, 1933, and then again for another year, from September 6, 1934 to September 3, 1935. Grey and thin, his case diagnosed as "far advanced" when he arrived, he left "quiescent," and with a good prognosis. At a send-off party in his honor, two hundred admirers wished him well on his forthcoming lecture tour of South America. For Leivick as for so many who passed through its gates, the Jewish Consumptives' Relief Society had done its healing work: already forty-five at the time of his admission, the poet would be granted another quarter century of productive writing and continuing public acclaim until his death in 1962.

Other patients were less fortunate. Jonathan Newman died on March 26, 1933, and was given a pauper's burial two days later in Section A North, the corner of Golden Hill cemetery reserved for those who had succumbed to the white plague. Just thirty-four, Newman had fruitlessly "chased the cure," as the phrase went, for more than ten years, and from one sanatorium to the next. He lived and died in utter obscurity, all promises unfulfilled. He was, however, to be commemorated in Leivick's most ambitious and rhapsodic poem, an attempt to "weave what legends say" into the death of a man who was "no hero or redeemer," a man so very unlike the famous poet, "somebody unknown."

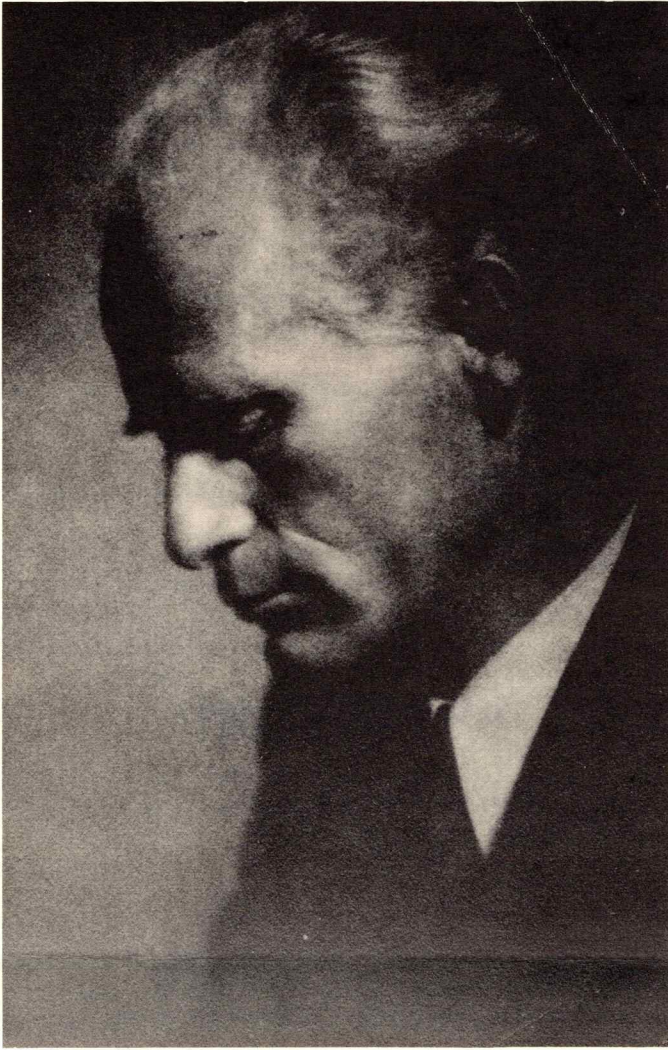
Something magnetic about Jonathan Newman must have attracted Leivick to his subject. A Hebrew teacher by trade, the son of a rabbi, Newman is described in his medical records as a "brilliant young man," "one of the most intellectual patients the JCRS ever had." Like others, Leivick must have been struck by Newman's intensity – the strength of spirit that can be summoned out of a wasted body, or perhaps that preternatural energy with which the consumptive genius had long been thought to burn.

Yet, for all its particularity of detail about Newman's final days, the poem that follows is largely fictional in recreating its own "Nathan Newman" out of the Jonathan Newman who was, in fact, never Leivick's neighbor in the JCRS. Admitted in 1924, Jonathan Newman was discharged from the JCRS in October, 1929, nearly three years before Leivick's arrival. When the poet met him, Newman had already been to another sanatorium in California and back. Apparently dissatisfied with his care, he had returned to Denver and found a bed, his last, across town from Leivick at the National Jewish Hospital.

Leivick had readily agreed to pay Newman a visit when he was told by mutual friends – fellow patients Ben and Bessie Glass – how ardently he was admired by the desperately ill young man. In all likelihood Leivick saw Newman only a few times before his death. Bessie Glass remembers being summoned into Leivick's room to hear the excited poet read her and Ben a draft of the



Leivick and Denver friends; Dr. Gilman's father is the gentleman standing on the far left in the row immediately behind those seated. (Photo courtesy of Jack Gilman)



**Formal Portrait of Leivick circa 1930.
(Photo courtesy Bessie Glass.)**

"Ballad" he had just finished. Ben had given Leivick some of the details of Newman's life that appear in the poem. There was, indeed, a "faithful sister" in the Bronx who would eventually send the money for Jonathan's headstone, although there is no evidence outside the poem of Newman's other correspondent, she who is said to be "a sister and something more." Now the poet, his memory evidently hazier than his imagination, wanted to know if he had gotten things right (Bessie recalls having to correct him on the color of Newman's hair).

Of considerable value as a historical document nonetheless, the "Ballad" offers a powerful account of the everyday, simple realities of sanatorium life. Its notations of the "small table" beside Newman's bed, "a thermometer, a pitcher, and a glass" verbally arranged upon it like the domestic details observed with loving clarity in a Vermeer painting, recreate the world of the patient also captured in photographs of the period, and preserved in the one "tent," or patient's cabin, left as a memorial of those days on the grounds of the former JCRS. In his own simplicity of spirit, Nathan Newman is of a piece with the furnishings of his room, and it is on this humble ground that the celebrated poet and his unknown hero meet. In contrast to the opulence of life in the Alpine sanatorium of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, Spivak, Colorado, housed both the destitute Hebrew teacher, imagined by Leivick at his death as purified of even his few pitiful possessions, and the poet who, his fame notwithstanding, made his living as a paperhanger and rode back to New York on a charity-rate ticket requested for him by the sanatorium.

Yet the answer to the poem's opening question – what is there to say about the "death of one, no hero or redeemer"? – does not finally depend on Newman's spiritual poverty, but on his capacity to be absorbed into Leivick's ongoing, grandly mythic autobiography. Hence the connections between the Siberian winters of Leivick's youthful political exile and imprisonment and the snows of the Rockies, site of the tubercular exile and confinement of his middle years. Hence the theme of redemption through messianic suffering that finally puts the poet and his subject both in the company of Jesus and Moses, from whom they seemed to be excluded at the start of the poem. As Moses stands at his death on the "threshold" of the promised land, so Newman, our guide to the inner mysteries of the tubercular kingdom, stands on the threshold of an ecstatic death – one whose reverberations shake the Rockies to their foundations, much as the world is said to have trembled and cracked at the moment of the crucifixion.

Many of Leivick's more orthodox readers have been troubled by the apparent provocation, here and elsewhere, of the poet's fascination with the figure of Christ. An intentional provocation it is on the part of a writer who fervently believed that the breadth of his own secular and ecumenical vision encompassed all narrower dogmas. Yet among Leivick's heroes there is also a special place for those passionate tubercular visionaries conjured up in the poem, writers who nourish what Leivick calls in a contemporary interview in *The Denver Post* the "deep-rooted philosophical pathos" of the Jews: Spinoza, Heine, and the radical poet Dovid Edelshtat, who died in Denver in 1892, and whose much more elaborate monument still stands not far from Jonathan Newman's on Golden Hill. "Oh, my good friends, when I shall die, / Carry the red flag to my grave": The first verse of Edelshtat's famous socialist fight song *Mayn Tsavoe* ("My Testament") supplies Leivick with his militant refrain, and also with a note of ironic counterpoint. The red flag of the sanatorium is the stained pillow; the "blood of workers" spilled in this kingdom is coughed up by a frail and bedridden hero whose work is the labor of calmly saying "Yes" to death.

Now in his turn at the head of this doomed company, must Leivick share their fate? In 1934 he could not know for sure. As he had been left the song of Dovid Edelshtat's testament, he imagines Newman bequeathing to him his glass and his book. Is this poem to be his own testament, now given to the reader as it was first entrusted to Ben and Bessie Glass at Leivick's bedside? Newman is the poet's instructor in what the age of Spinoza would have called the *ars moriendi*, the "art of dying." It is the example of his transcendent suffering that lifts the burden of death from the poet's shoulders.

"The Ballad of Denver Sanatorium" stands as an extended meditation born of a disease and an institution that are now a fading memory. Immediate in its power as a poem, after more than half a century it might well have struck us as remote in its subject were it not for its fresh poignancy at a moment when once again a wasting illness without a cure claims the young among us. It appears here in an English version for the first time. I am grateful to the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society, and to its director, Dr. Jeanne Abrams, for extending every courtesy to me while I was allowed to do the research in the archives of the JCRS that has made this project possible.

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Jonathan Newman's Gravestone. Photograph taken by Dr. Ernest Gilman in 1988. (Photo courtesy of Ernest Gilman.)

H. Leivick

"The Ballad of Denver Sanatorium" (1934)

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[Yiddish text from *Ale Verk fun H. Leivick* (New York, 1940), I, 499-512]

[499]

It isn't Jesus dying, nailed to the cross,
Or Moses on the threshold of Canaan,
Just Nathan Newman — hear, I'll tell his loss,
On a simple bed by a simple wall.

And yet, in fact, there's nothing much to tell.
If every life were holy to other men,
The angel of death himself would then
See holiness in every human life.

But who holds human life sacred today,
The agony of blood and skin and bone?
These days how can you weave what legends say
Just from the death of somebody unknown?

The death of one, no hero or redeemer,
Somebody's death, the kind of man who'll go
To his rest, not in a covered sepulcher,
But in a plot beneath the Denver snow.

I say: life's holiness is not held in regard;
Worse — we grind it under foot: everyone
Who's able to join in takes part,
And who can't find a foot, a spear, a gun?

Still, my heart, don't give up your belief,
And let my song rise up in faith as well,
That he who is truly exalted shall,
In awe of the smallest limb, fall to his knees.

In fear he takes the other's fevered pulse
And temperature, and on his brow bestows
A kiss, falling himself in death's convulsions,
When the clock hand begins to speed its blows.

The hand of the clock begins to beat
With thunder from a live volcano rent:
A little tear — you can hardly catch it —
Boils like an ocean: violent, turbulent.

[500]

What is the din of cannon and of drums
Against the echo of two tired hands? —
And the dazzling flutter of waving flags
Against the shudder of a shirt collar?

He stands humbly by the sick man's bed
As silent as the field's last blade of grass;
He stands guilty and contorted,
Barely able to keep hold of the glass,

The glass of milk that Nathan Newman failed
To finish off before he left:
The little glass — not one drop spilled —
Runs out, now wasted, by itself.

But Nathan Newman — who is this Newman?
Why don't I tell you what and who he is?
Well — anyway, he won't be back again,
He won't be coming back here any more.

Anyway. A man like this. A Nathan
Newman. A dear boy with curly hair.
Sixteen years old when he came here, the man
Endured his hospital bed for fifteen years.

I could tell you things about his youth.
But nothing, in truth, that I can say
Will make him clearer to you than the fact
That on his bed for fifteen years he lay.

I would describe his body wasted thin,
And his clever face as well, but you will
Grasp his look if I simply say again,
That he lay here for fully fifteen years.

And in his fifteen years of lying in
His little room in Denver's hospital,
The world outside his threshold, down his steps,
Has gone through so much all in all.

[501]
Like thin candles, toward all the world's events
Nathan Newman stretched out his fingers:
And saw through their transparence, receiving
A white world-soul and a white meaning.

He still had a longing for his home town,
But with a smile and a quip he shrugged it off:
"A bed's the same wherever you go," he'd joke,
"And everywhere the same fever and cough."

Hidden in his heart he kept the lineage
Of martyrs, warriors — dream figures,
The bright image of an heroic age,
The vision of a clear, eternal truth.

But you see he was himself prepared
To step into that rank of valiant men:
Theirs was a suffering that Newman shared,
Marching in chains toward a new world with them.

Since he alone on his thin shoulders has
Already borne sorrow and need, the shame
Of oppression, the shame of hate, the shame
For those who have died of starvation.

Captivated, in his town, he would not
Stray far from the black prison door to walk
With the exiles even for a block
On their march to the eternal Siberia.

He was too young for prison chains,
But not too young to catch this deadly thing,
To wander from one hospital to the next,
Until he winds up here at Spivak House.

At Spivak when he came he was the youngest,
And in the course of time outstayed his peers:
His body — the lightest, the most refined —
Suffered through all those fifteen years.

[502]
Shackled to his bed, he would thrash from side
To side, consumed in desire, in burning dreams,
Until he felt that he was purified,
And to his silent walls said, "Yes."

In his yes, a number of things were implied:
I accept it. I smile at it. It's for the best.
The world is here. The room has four sides.
And the doctor says: The god of the world is rest.

The sun comes up just opposite the window,
The sun goes down just opposite the door:
The longest day and the shortest day go
Full circle around my walls and floor.

His yes also means: both pride and resignation,
And a complete break with the other side,
With those who keep on murdering the hours,
With those who continually lynch the time.

The song of time is first sung out in holiness
Here in the kingdom of tuberculosis:
Through flutes — the cellular web of lungs —
The thinnest seconds are breathed out in full.

The break is only with the world of bodies,
But not with the world of spirit born in dreams;
Those martyred in battle — he calls to them,
And look, he begins to stride, or so it seems.

He strides toward them. Whispers a word,
His hands embrace them with affection:
But no. — forbidden. He must, unheard,
A smiling mute, lie down again.

He smiles dumbly. It's good to smile that way.
A big world: a little closet with a lock.
A small table, and on it, two little books,
A thermometer, a pitcher and a glass.

[503]
A watch. A pen. — His faithful sister sent
Them to him as a gift. —
He writes her letters with a steady hand,
Takes pleasure in the firmness of his script.

He loves her. He caresses the dial,
And she loves him much, much more.
And one other is here. He takes a sheet,
And sorrowfully writes a trembling note.

Yes, there is another. but not a sister.
That is — a sister and something more;
He presses her last letter to his lips:
She loves him, and he loves her even more.

He writes: "It's been so long a wait for you to come,
And tomorrow you'll be getting on the train,
So I have taken up my pen in haste,
To let you know: Don't come to see me here again.

"Don't ever come to see me any more,
Not even just to bid me once adieu.
Tear my name out of your mouth, for I've
Already said to death: yes, take me too.

"Forget me. I order you. I decree it.
I clench my teeth. This doesn't mean I speak
To you in anger; on the contrary,
A gentleness sings in my bones.

"Because I love you I must cast aside
Every tie that binds you fast to me,
So I can then more quickly stride
To the goal that I so clearly see.

"At the Rockies' feet adorned with snow —
Such a small graveyard, a child's almost —
An earth clean and undisturbed,
A holiday earth, like a springtime leaf."

[504]

"I've wrestled with myself for years and years
To make this very choice in peace; and just
Now I accept it, not because I have become
Such a strong man, but because I must.

"To the very bottom I must go down,
To search the depths of suffering and pain,
I am sparing you from coming to escort me,
And, after, leaving me and going back again.

"You're young. The world will all be yours to have,
Go live, and take full measure of it then;
Meanwhile, greetings to you, with ardent love
From my pitcher, my watch, my glass, my pen."

Sealed. A ring. The nurse has come in.
"Please, send this letter off first thing today."
The nurse is always good to Nathan Newman;
She takes the letter and gets on her way.

"O wait a second! — Oh, no, no need to wait,
It's good as it is. Please, let it go."
The nurse is gone. From Newman's cracked throat
Onto the white pillow, the red begins to flow.

In answer to the bell the nurse is quick,
Returns to help, stanches the rush of blood.
He lies. His hands outspread. A hand — a stick!
But on his face, a warm smile rests.

"It's mailed?" he asks. "Of course," she answers him,
"But no more talk, my dear." And he obeys.
Suddenly everything begins to spin,
Swinging up and down, faster still it sways.

The swaying stops. He breathes more easily.
With sisterly concern she tucks him in.
She caresses his head with hot fingers.
Into his lungs he breathes the touch of her skin.

[505]

She goes out. In blessedness, he dreams.
He dreams — he sees a light in the wall, and
The light moves, dances and springs into flame;
And look: the veins of a human hand!

A man's hand? — Maybe his neighbor's hand,
From the other side of the wall, — the Yiddish poet? —
But how can the hand have crawled through the wall,
And here it is, already reaching to his bed?

A strange man, that neighbor, he won't lie still.
He hurls himself around as in a cell;
He carries the form of a song within,
And on a bloody threshold seeks to perfect it well.

The neighbor, visiting him yesterday,
Had talked of Heine's and Spinoza's pain
And death; isn't his hand now come to braid
All their deaths in a single wondrous chain?

Oh, it was good for him at last to realize,
That Heine lay for eight years in a pall,
And bravely fought not to shut his eyes,
Until the time he closed them after all.

And better still to hear, Spinoza too
Lay sick, and figured out death ought
To be itself a streaming forth,
The loving radiance of the divine thought.

And look, — a wondrous shiver: In Denver,
After all, lies Dovid Edelshtat! —
To be a third to Heine and Spinoza,
Has such an honor ever been man's lot?

He smiles again — at the impertinence,
(He falls back on the edge of the bed)
To compare oneself with the godlike Spinoza,
And to Heine the romantic poet.

[506]

But then a greeting, intimate and
Warm, from the face of Dovid Edelshtat. —
And now on the walls of the room, the hand
Again. The hand. — It inscribes a poem:

“Oh, my good friends, when I shall die,
Carry the red flag to my grave,
The red flag with the colors bright,
Spattered with the blood of workers brave.”

“Of course it’s good to sing before you die,
But such, you see, is not my destiny:
My fate is that this Colorado earth
Through you, poet, should now belong to me.

“Oh, my good friends, when I shall die,
Carry the red flag to my grave too — ”
And Newman suddenly feels a jolt in the skull
And the drumming chatter of tooth on tooth.

Now something gurgles up into his throat,
And Newman chokes it back, too weak to sing. —
Thus on a bright morning’s broken note
Began Newman’s last wandering.

*

The neighbor — I am he. The dying Newman
Captivated me, chained utterly
To his room. As soon as day would dawn,
I would listen for the footsteps of the nurse.

To hear her greeting, hardly waiting for
Her passing words: he is still here.
Her voice, ever attentive, tender,
Made the fateful sentence all too clear

In the early morn: the days are numbered,
And even the final hours perhaps are near:
Yet a wondrous, special strength would stream
Into Newman’s body from somewhere.

[507]

It flows to him. He lifts his brow.
A glow plays on his lips, his whole
Face takes on a new wisdom, and now
A new breath comes into his lungs.

He lies and hears the noise the doors make,
And counts the rays of early morning light:
He wants only one thing: to stay awake,
Conscious — to be proud to the very end.

As soon as I cross his threshold, he
Feels it right away and says: hello,
And smiles: “Today I am a hero,
I’ve pushed the final hour back a step.

“Don’t stop me from talking. It’s good to start
To speak, at this moment to hear oneself;
I have to say goodbye, I must depart,
But maybe it’s also good without farewells.

“There is something yet for me to grasp before I die:
To reconceive my body with my mind,
Marveling at the chatter of my teeth,
At the sprouting of the brow above my eye.

“Oh, who knows what a finger might denote!
How wonderful a fingernail might be,
How great a miracle a swallow in the throat:
And hear, how timeless is the crying of the feet!

“Strange that of all a person’s limbs the feet
Are always cold, convulsed in tears,
Exhausted, they grow still more tired and weak —
Well, say, where shall I go from here?

“I would give up everything to have the power
To sit erect, if only for an hour,
So as to see death come, quiet and near,
And to say in peace: there is no death here.

[508]

“But what can I give away to anyone?
You know quite well the sum of my estate;
So I beg you — take my few little things
Back to your room today.

“The pen and the watch send to my sister. She
Won’t see me any more — a pity, too.
Maybe it’s good that way. Better maybe.
The book and the glass I leave to you.

“You no doubt think: see, he’s trembling in fear.
I tell you no, and that you can believe.
Although the little crumbs are no less dear
That fall from the sated teeth of life to me.

“I’m tired. I’ll fall asleep and dream. I’ll rest.
I’ll see my sister’s mournful face — sad sight!
While you look through the window toward the west:
See how the Rockies glow in silver light.”

He turns his own head to the window’s light.
He sees the mountains. They have seen him too.
The Rockies with their heads raised white,
So close to the touch, they come to you.



Photo of Jonathan Newman. (Photo courtesy of Bessie Glass.)

The mountains gleam, adorned with bright snow:
Linked in brotherly chains, they stand erect,
Red wings hover over the peaks below,
And turn silver themselves, snow bedecked.

The highest peaks bend over, though, and bow,
Breaking the chain, or so it seems,
And start to span the valleys, striding now
Miles long on vast, primordial feet.

He falls asleep. I sit. I watch him go.
I take his whole being into myself.
Up, down, rumbles his breath,
Dashes itself, like a turbulent flow.

[509]

His body's in convulsions. All the walls shake
Like bursting dams. Torches of red fire
Are kindled in the window panes at break
Of day, and hurled in whirlwinds of desire.

The wind subsides. Drop by drop a cold sweat
Stains Newman's temples as he lies,
Two blue rings appear, sharply etched
Around the rims of Newman's dying eyes.

I sit. I watch. I am myself engulfed,
Myself dissolved into the mystery of suffering,
Of seeing the exhalation of the lung
Through the open window into the sun.

I see it clearly with my own eyes: drawn in,
I myself become part of that breath,
As though the room were covered by a skin,
Stretched taut, and filled with burning, smoke, and death.

His breath sprays sparks. His breath flames.
Froth boils on his lips. His whole frame,
Lashed back and forth, rapt in a daze,
Like a branch in the woods begins to blaze.

Not just one branch. All the trees are ablaze,
The whole hospital is embraced in flame;
And I am there no more to sit and gaze:
Like him, I am a part of the fiery main.

And all the neighboring patients reel
In burning and torrential grief,
Singing their song to death revealed
With words restrained and brief.

And suddenly the peaks become the plain,
Under black smoke the Rockies smolder flat;
The flames go out. The crashing fades away,
The Rockies' fire dies down, and Newman's too.

[510]

And once again: he starts, almost sits up,
On Newman's face a smile begins to crack:
"Please, call the nurse, I'd like to have a wash
And put some fresh clothes on my back."

The nurse comes in: "Hello, my dear Newman."
She undresses him, washes his bony limbs;
She lays him on one side, turns him again,
And cleans his fingernails and teeth.

The sun pours in over stiff ribs
And thorny knees – the sun jumps back.
But the nurse's hands, like kissing lips,
Caress his limbs from head to foot.

She bathes him as a midwife bathes a child,
A newborn just emerged from mother's womb;
She puts him in a shirt fastened with bows,
And smooths the bed white, freshening his room.

She lays him out, covers him with the sheet,
She puts a drink up to his lips,
And Newman jokes: "There once was a king
Who ruled a very, very, very long time."

The nurse begins to laugh; her finger warns
Him not to speak. She goes out. And he,
Cleaned, brightened, light-hearted,
Says: "Good neighbor, come here, please."

He stretches out his clenched hand to me,
In it he holds the watch and pen, I see:
"I have them ready, please take them away,
For something will surely happen today."

His was an expectant, holiday air,
But my knees buckled at the sight.
Not to take it would put him in despair,
And I pulled back my hand in fright.

[511]

But here his hand twisted, faltering,
And between his teeth he said: "I'll give it
To you tomorrow, ha, what do you say?
Let it lie here by me another day."

"Of course, of course," I said, forlorn,
"What's it mean? Let it lie longer than a day."
But my words only awakened his anger,
False comfort was all they could convey.

His eyes began to burn, and struck me
With their fury like a blow: "I am still
Proud enough not to have to beg for alms —
Another day donated to the ill.

"What do you mean — 'longer'? what is this 'lie'?
Do you suppose it's hard for me to die?"
And all the words I thought might ease the sore
Have only served to rouse his pride the more.

But he came quickly to himself again,
And said, "Forgive me," mildly as a child:
"And, please, keep the memory that Newman
Did indeed preserve his pride before he died.

"I hope Spinoza won't be mad at me
For opening my heart to anger's lure;
Not everyone, before his death, can be
As great as he, but can be clean and pure.

"And now, do take these things from me,
Loosening myself from them now means a lot:
I can only close my eyes when I am free,
Not burdened with the smallest things I've got.

"And to her — my sister — say to her that I
Was given my bath by the nurse today,
That my hair was washed, as you have seen,
And that my teeth and nails were clean.

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"And that I didn't suffer at my death,
But saw the sun with eyes clear and new
Just in the middle of the heavens,
And everything was white, and bright, and true."

I took the watch and pen when he was done,
And saw how a last breath is carried away —
While the watch hand runs and runs
And runs — into the radiant day.

*

Nine or ten men see the body cleansed. There,
By an open grave, nine or ten men stand.
A number on a piece of wood shows where
Newman will make his home, beneath this land.

In the neighborhood of Dovid Edelshtat,
In the same row, not far, ten steps away;
They have filled and covered Newman's plot,
And I myself was there that day.

There the eye is drawn to Edelshtat,
To his funereal monument of stone,
On whose granite face his own is cut,
And, as his testament, this poem:

"Oh, my good friends, when I shall die,
Carry the red flag to my grave,
The red flag with the colors bright,
Spattered with the blood of workers brave."

The people go. They leave it all behind,
The fresh grave and the old stone,
They return to the kingdom of fever
In the clear midday. And I, too, am gone.

A day of wonders — Who will see the like again?
Aside from the nine or ten with eyes so bright,
At the foot of Denver's Rocky Mountains,
No one has ever witnessed such a sight.

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