

STRUCTURING THE WORLD VIEW IN HALPERN'S IN NEW-YORK

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By 1918 Moshe Leib Halpern was planning to publish his first book of verse. It would appear in the following year with the title *In New-York*.¹ Many critics of Yiddish poetry consider this collection to be a major landmark in the literature.

A. Tabachnik says:

האלפערנס סאַמע ערשט בוך „אין ניו-יאָרק“ איז זײַן גאַנצסטע, סאַמע פּאָעטישסטע
און סאַמע קינסטלערישסטע בוך. עס איז איינס פֿון די געצילטע ענאָכע-סאכענ-
דיקע ביכער אין דער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור. ²

And Itzik Manger goes even further:

זײַן בוך „אין ניו-יאָרק“ טיז איינס פֿון די גרויסע לידער ביכער פֿון
דער סאָדערנער פּאָעזיע בכלל. ³

Few Yiddish critics, however, go beyond wonderment, praise, and quoting particularly fine lines or poems.

But what is the uniqueness of this book of poetry which draws such appreciations? The late Eliezer Greenberg was on the right track in underlining its personal lyricism in contrast to the revolutionary melodies of Rosenfeld.⁴ But the “Yunge” at the time were already seeking a more personal mode.

The uniqueness I propose is in the very concept of the book itself. It is my thesis that Halpern is the first Yiddish poet to have conceived of a fully integrated book of verse which projects a dynamic personal vision: his world view. (I define “world view” as the way the poet sees himself in relationship to the world as expressed through the central images and the inherent structures as manifested in the work of art.) In short, sometime in 1918, as Halpern was assembling his past poetic production, he was inspired to recast the poems into a larger and more mature frame in which old and new texts were interwoven to form a new work of art: *In New-York*. By dispensing with a mere chronological presentation of his previous work, Halpern had indeed discovered a new literary strategy which fused the past and present into a meaningful poetic whole.

The originality of this literary strategy in Yiddish literature has not been recognized earlier. Yet Eliezer Greenberg had already noted that Halpern had abandoned many poems published in the *Montrealer Folks-Tsaytung* and in *Der Kibitzer*.⁵ This proves that Halpern was busy making aesthetic choices as he assembled his book.

In the five sections of *In New-York*, only the second section, *In der fremd*, originally published in *Shriftn* (1913), and the fifth section, *A nakht*, published in *East Broadway* (1916), are complete entities. But the two poems "Der Gasn-Poyker" and "Pan Jablonsky," both originally published in 1915, appear in the first section amidst *entirely new* but related poems. And the Peretz dirge which first appeared in *Literatur un Leben* (1915) opens the fourth section, *Ovnt*, also composed of entirely new verse. In short, Halpern consciously deleted weak old poems and kept those poems—without respecting the chronological sequence of their previous publication—which served as crystallization points for new poems and the new work of art. Halpern, at some point in 1918, then discovered the poetic structure for his world view in which the work becomes greater than the sum of its individual poems. What that discovery was will be treated in due time. The remarkable fact is that each poem is linked to the next in one long chain by a repeated word, phrase, image, or theme. The interlocking of poems, in fact, is one of the technical devices by which the encompassing world view and the integration of the work is accomplished.

At this point we need to know the basic images, metaphors, and symbols that constitute the elements of the major components of the world view. How does the poet use the images to build his personal vision? We must attempt a synoptic if static construction of Halpern's world view, which he names *In New-York*.

We begin with four generic components: the foreign city, grotesque nature, degenerate society, and time. Around these four categories cluster the repetitive images which create the *neshome-landshaft* of the poet.

The City for Halpern is defined as a labyrinth. The walls form the physical and mental barriers of his existence. They plague him indoors and affront him outdoors.⁶

... האקסן הענט אַרױף
 הערן טורעסס, ברײַטער, העכער ...

(p. 28)

There is no escape from walls because they form the city labyrinth in which he is trapped.

זי שליטט אים אבן מיט טויזנט אנדערע
 אין גלום פון אבן-הענט

(p. 73)

movement of smoke and by their horizontal line to intensify and represent depression.¹³ A blue cloudless sky in Halpern's verse is rare. In fact, clouds continually appear in the two colors which dominate his landscape, gray and red. The gray clouds, like gray hair, gray eyes, gray autumn, etc. reinforce negative moods, pessimism, aging, and exhaustion.¹⁴ The red clouds, like red eyes, red harps, red fire, red blood, etc. are intensifications of negativity.¹⁵ Red is the active agent leading to violence and death:

(p. 31). רויט איז דער סויט.
Halpern's expressionist use of a single color to intensify despondency underscores his pared style.

In the urban scene even the flora and fauna appear out of place and unhealthy. The celebrated poem "Undzer gortn" deforms and belittles nature in the city and is emblematic of nature representation throughout the collection. The decaying trees without leaves do symbolize the dessication of life, but Halpern often uses trees with more personal significance. He becomes a victim of a dying culture compared to a tree.

(p. 78) ז' אן אַסנעבראַכן אַז-יגל פֿון אַ בוים אַ לאַנג-אַארדאַרסן.

The tree, traditionally a symbol of life, becomes the symbol of lonely death whether from a hanging, a lynching, or abandonment.¹⁶ Grass and flowers too have no place to live and bloom,¹⁷ nor do birds, except in cages or transformed into subway light bulbs (p. 13). The bird is generally the poet's symbol of lyricism and freedom.¹⁸ But in alien surroundings like the poet, it does not flourish. That it will become the ironic *Goldene pave* is already hinted at in the opening poem of the collection. As a favorite motif of the poet-painter Halpern, the bird recurs throughout his poems as an important linking image.

Cats do not fare well either.¹⁹ They appear in the verse amidst refuse. The predator and urban filth combine to become an object of disgust. They are symbols of the aggressive violent city.

Dogs play an ambivalent role as the vehicle of many similies in which the tenor is the poet or mankind:

(p. 72) אַ סענס זיצט לעבן סיר, און ביסטרע, הי אַ קראַנקער חונט

The dog is a symbol of man's brutish animality, but at the same time a pathetic victim.

(p. 195) הי אַ חונט אַ פֿרעסן מעס מען דיך פֿון אלע סירן סר-בן,

Halpern recognizes in the dog a range of emotions, not the least of which are loneliness, helplessness, and suffering. The dog is another metaphor of the poet's condition.

The third element of nature in Halpern's verse is shoreline imagery: the shore, the sand, the sea, and ships. They encircle the city and isolate it. The shoreline magically attracts the poet to view the sea, which is both emptiness and eternal hope.²⁰ The shoreline becomes the border of his personality. Love saves him from the water, which looms both erotically and self-destructively before him. At the shore he finds and expresses love.

און בענקסט סענס אַמעקסוג-ן אַפּל
 עבט סױן זיך אַלײן
 פֿאַרלעז די שטאַט און גי צום ים אַרױם
 און אױפֿלױן זאַמער ביים ברעג און לעבן דיר
 זאָל ויצן אַ סײַדל.

(p. 110)

He can only share his real emotions with another being at this psychological and physically symbolic border.

But the sea plays a central role in Halpern's world view.²¹ It serves as the separator of the old from the new. At times it is a barrier, at times a happy distancing element. On the rhetorical level the sea provides the vastness for comparisons to his loneliness (p. 110) and for his erotic oceanic moods (pp. 47, 69, 110). On the other hand, the sea's unpredictability becomes a metaphor of life itself. At times the poet becomes the sinking ship into oblivion (p. 224). In general the sea functions as the last circle bounding the isolated poetic voice. If it is a source of psychic renewal and an object of aesthetic beauty, and if it leads to delusory love, it is finally the last horizontal but forever enclosing barrier of his labyrinthine world view.

At the center of the world view is the poetic voice, his persona Moshe-Leib and the odd personages and degenerate society created by the poet. The grotesque dominates the human presence. The poet populates the collection *In New-York* with prostitutes, drunkards, beggars, a down-at-the-heels Polish noble, despicable grandparents, odd girl friends, Gingali and Lădushka, and escapist fantasy figures such as the mentsh-ele, queens, dwarfs, jealous lovers, etc. The personages of the beloved R. B. (Rayzele Baron) and barren wife are the only affecting figures. The guard, *Der vekhter*, represents the sinister conventional morality who appears throughout the collection as a goad.²² Who are these creatures? Besides reflecting the urban blight, they represent the painful past, the unpleasant present, and distorted imaginings of the poetic voice. The most

endearing figure is the *takhshit Moyshe-Leyb*, the down-and-out rascal, the persona of the poet whose existence concentrates and objectifies the poet's poetic self.²³ The poetic voice of the first-person poems—and often combined with the second person—dominates the collection *In New-York* and is the central consciousness of the world view. The first-person narrator, unlike Moshe Leib, the ageless adolescent, lives with a crushing sense of time and setting. He defines himself perfectly as a victim and a loser moving through the grotesque reality in the poem:

הוֹיִקֶר רֵוּ ו

גוֹט אַיִז סײַר אַווי אױף אײַביק

(p. 168)

א פֿאַרפֿאַלענער צו זײַן.

He is the wanderer trapped in the foreign city. The word *fremd*, used repeatedly both as adjective and noun, describes his condition.²⁴ His loneliness is always accompanied by tears. Ironically, his favorite rhyme with *fremd* is *hemd*, symbol of poverty, insecurity, and desperation to warm and protect himself.²⁵ His alienation, therefore, is obvious. The poems expose his desperate efforts to escape his condition. He takes to sleeping and finds himself unable to (p. 173); he flees to dance halls, to frenetic dancing which leads to *danses macabres*.²⁶ He has unhappy love affairs, but he also expresses anti-feminine attitudes (p. 86).²⁷ He is always invoking blood for passion or violence in a grandiloquent fashion.²⁸ He wears his heart on his sleeve. Sometimes he seeks refuge in his childhood, without success (pp. 134-148), and at other times he races into dreams and fantasies leading to death. Certainly the *Nakht* poems point to his failure as a messianic figure. His own self-ambivalence, well recognized by earlier critics in the poem *Mayn umru fun a volf*, depicts his entrapment. It is the poetic voice, in short, which gives the world view its wholeness and tension.

Time is the fourth component of the world view. The clock ticks on the wall and he

(p. 152)

גוֹנֶעט שְׂפֵאַנרײַק בֵּה זײַך אַלײן רײ אַזײַם.

The poet has a very strong sense of linear time. Daily events may repeat in apparent circularity but time is a straight line leading to his death. The sun and moon, dawn and sunset, night and day are usually paired elements to underline the eternal return against which the poet copes.²⁹ Halpern uses these traditional symbols under the sign of the grotesque. Sunlight means work, exploration, unpleasant daily routines. Only when love and revolutionary politics are invoked does sunlight take

on its positive significance. Nighttime is for love, creation.³⁰ Halpern, however, is ambivalent about night. Poems written before 1917 treat the night as a traditional symbol of isolation, misery, and horror. The later poems written with the book in mind, I believe, use nighttime more positively, and the image reinforces temporal linearity in the poetic structure.

We are now in a position to provide a static synoptic vision of Halpern's world view in the book *In New-York*. At the center on a bed is the poetic voice, impotent and hemmed in by tenement walls from which he wishes to escape.³¹ The door, the demarcator between his inner self and being-in-the-world, leads out to a society of human wrecks surrounded by neglected flora and fauna. The streets through which the poetic voice wanders circle endlessly between walls of stone and iron.³² Under the stifling weight of smoke and gray clouds, the voice moves through the city to its border: the shoreline and empty sea—the limits of his being. Escape is impossible from this labyrinthine wasteland, ironically called the Golden Land (pp. 31, 32, 50, 56). The centrifugal movement ceases at the horizon and centripetally reverts to the bed in an endless shuttle between the prison of his being and the prison of the world. Through the fusion of self and place, the poetic voice defines his world view: alienation and deformation.

The synoptic world view is, however, basically spatial and therefore static. It depicts the daily reality which humiliates the poet. The book *In New-York* marks, I believe, a response, not a mere depiction of the synoptic vision. The response manifests itself on the *temporal* level. Had Halpern only collected his early verse and new production in a chronological fashion, we would end up only with the synoptic vision of his world view. But it was his refusal of that vision which is so important. This is the impetus which drove Halpern to seek a new aesthetic form. He understood that a temporal solution—albeit a tragic one—was better than the passive acceptance of the given picture. Therefore, he sought a dynamic world view which manifested itself in the new book, the first book of Yiddish verse to have an overarching unity based on a linear temporal flow. This new *programmatically* expression, a transcendent world view, is structured on three levels:

1. natural time—one day in the life of a foreigner, from morning to night,
2. the life of the *Poete Maudit* from childhood to death,
3. the generational epic repetition of the ejection from the Garden of Eden into the exile of Israel.

In New-York takes the form of an epic journey, which is consciously divided into five sections like a neo-classical tragedy which observes the unities of time, place, and action.

From *Undzer gortn*, the first section, beginning at dawn, to *A nakht*, the fifth section, ending towards midnight, there is a quantifiable progression of dawning light imagery into the darkening imagery, marked by the very titles of the fourth section, *Ovnt*, and the final section, *A nakht*. This sequential flow of time, a day's journey into night, although certainly not original with Halpern, was already a modernist poetic organizing principle successfully employed by Halpern to knit the poems and provide a linear "plot line" or dramatic intensity about the lyric statements. The time flow increases the power of the repeated central metaphors by weaving them into the general fabric. What appears static in one poem, then, is but the preparation for the coming peripetia in the next. Halpern's new structure, therefore, effectively incorporates the patterned tedium through repetitive images in a dramatic progression leading to a tragic solution.

Although the surface structure is "a day in the life of the protagonist," the potent structure is based on the cliché: a man's life is the length of a day. *In New-York* presents the cursed poet's existence from childhood to apocalyptic death. Each section develops a stage of his life. *Undzer gortn*, the first section, places the reader *in medias res* at sunrise in the urban setting. This expository section establishes the image of the poet as outsider, his alienation and the synoptic world view from which he wishes to escape. The second section, *In der fremd*, relates the passage from the old country to the shock of the new. It also recollects the childhood past in the fashion of oral epics. Section three, *Blond un bloy*, presents the love life of the protagonist. Its central core is the tragic love story which culminates with a still-born death. *Ovnt*, the fourth section, built upon the Peretz dirge, espouses a nihilism that places all human relations and meaning in doubt. The protagonist, befuddled and despairing, recognizes death as a viable solution to his misery. The last section, *A nakht*, plunges the poetic self into a phantasmagoria replete with pogrom motifs and scorn for all previous theological systems and concludes with the protagonist's violent death. Halpern organized these sections temporally, therefore, to reveal the continuous battle—albeit foredoomed—against the static world view. What emerges ultimately is the modern sense of overwhelming frustration seeking desperate solutions. That Halpern could mold so

effectively both description and resistance into an organic whole with such a distinct poetic voice in the book *In New-York* is surely an astonishing aesthetic feat in early modern Yiddish poetry. But Halpern sought further resonances.

The epic journey structure is more than an individual's life story. The hero is the Diasporic Jew. The journey structure permits the narration of the collective first person of Israel-in-Exile. Halpern makes him lament his impossible condition trapped in an alien world, a Gentile modern culture, and encumbered with a Jewish tradition in desuetude.

In New-York is a grotesque retelling of Jewish history from Genesis onward. Through the use of the first-person collective (alternating between the singular and plural), Halpern snarled at his personal and immigrant generation's hope of finding a Garden of Eden—a terrestrial Golden land. Punning acerbically, Halpern discovers: "Gold vert fun blut un fun ayzn gemakht." (p. 32)

The title of the first section, *Undzer gortn*, establishes the collective identity of the book through the first-person plural possessive adjective and through the noun by its historical allusion to the lost pastoral idyll. The first poem, of the same title, transmutes the lost Garden of Eden into a contemporary garden of ugliness by deformation. The famous tree of life hardly bears seven leaves. Grass is sparse, and the bird of Paradise can barely sing or tend its young. *Der vekhter*, an alien figure, even dares to chase supposed owners out of "Undzer gortn." Or is it? The sardonic humor of Halpern places contemporary reality against the seductive but hollow myth of Jewish messianic rejuvenation.

Expelled again from the garden into the city streets, one more Jewish generation discovers that the desired Paradise on earth, America, is a delusion:

(Poem 6, title)

אַזוי איז אונדז באַשערט.

This generation can escape no more than the other exile generations could. But for Halpern, Jewish life is drying up and the traditions are being placed in doubt. *In der fremd*, the second section, continues the expulsion both from "Undzer gortn" and from the nostalgic paradise of childhood. The anthologized "Benk aheym" בענק אהיים poem underscores the lost childhood home and continues the dying tree motif of Paradise lost and exile. *Blond un bloy* moves the generation along with the poetic voice through the mature pains of love and marriage. Staking the daydreams, the last artificial

paradise, the poet reveals a generation typically sinking into unredeemed misery. *Ovnt* carries the generational despair even further with death as a possible relief. Halpern scorns himself and his trapped generation in the poem: *Vos narstu zikh op*. Can one really flee somewhere?

The last section, *A nakht*, accepts the challenge. It is clearly the most narrative section in the book and offers a last resistance to the status quo. *A nakht* is one more pathetic effort to end the Exile of Israel. The poetic collective voice stills and the singular becomes a Jewish messianic figure, a knight in white who would restore the original garden. The narrative culminates in apocalyptic scenes of pogroms, bestiality, and slaughter amidst which the poetic voice becomes a Christ-figure mocked and scorned. Both Christian and Jewish traditions falter as murder fills the air. Even the messianic myth of Judaism with its historical linear fulfillment fails both the poetic voice and generation. The function of poetry then is to inscribe the disaster and to escape death through artistic resurrection.

We are left with the last question. Why did Halpern choose the title *In New-York* for his book of poems and thus for his world view? Notice that specific New York sites are unimportant. The only place names mentioned—and only once—are Broadway (p. 106), Coney Island (p. 106), and the Williamsburg Bridge (p. 120). New York City, furthermore, is also only mentioned once. “Mayn heym iz New-York, di fraye feler shtot” (p. 67).

In New-York, then, is not external reality but the collective metaphor of Halpern’s world view, the poet’s inner life, his *neshome-landshaft*. Halpern cleverly fused his personal vision to the place name, New York, which denotes the modern city by the Hudson and connotes immigrant alienation. This, of course, is what Federico Garcia Lorca did fifteen years later in *Un Poeta en Nueva York*. New York, then, provides the temporal and spatial cover into which the poet’s vision is transmitted through image and sound. The city name provides the angle of vision, an effective entrée into the world view. With the preposition *In*, not the city of New York but the poet’s experience *in* the city becomes the subject matter.

Leivick, Liessin, Glants-Leyeles, and Glatshiteyn wrote effective poems capturing the psycho-physical reality of New York City. But they used New York and its sites as images or themes for subjective inspiration. Halpern never used New York City in this way. He was more inner-directed.

At some point in 1918, he realized that his personal

experiences were those of a generation trapped in the same conflict with time, space, city life, nature, society, and history. Looking over his short poems, his *lider*, Halpern had the same magical insight as Balzac discovering *La Comédie Humaine*, that all his *lider* were as shards from his world view, which conjoined in the central metaphor he discovered: New York. In short, New York is the metaphoric equivalent of his collected moods, vision, and world view. Thus, Halpern fused the place of his physical being with his mental being as reflections of one another. With this discovery, Halpern began the task of fusing his old and new poems together in an integrated new work of art which offered Halpern's mature world view. This first tightly organized book of verse "Yiddish literature" emerged in 1919 with the title *In New-York*.

NOTES

1 All page references to *In New-York* use the following edition: Moshe Leib Halpern, *In New-York* (New York: Matonas Press, 1954).

2 A. Tabachnik, *Dikhter un Dikhtung* (New York: private press, 1965), p. 219.

3 Itsik Manger, *No'ente Geshtalten un Andere Shriften* (New York: private printing, 1965), p. 384.

4 Eliezer Greenberg, *Moshe Leib Halpern* (New York: M. L. Halpern Arbeter Ring Brentch 450, 1942), p. 22.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6 Halpern, *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 31, 33, 36, 38, 41, 53, 69, 73, 75, 76, 92, 152, 175, 179, 196, 203, 205, 208, etc.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 18, 63, 70, 75-82, 109, 123, 127, 131, 158, 169, 175, etc.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 48, 85, 86, 123, 140, 195, 196, etc.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 18, 25, 26, 28, 34, 35, 39, 43, 44, 63, 67, 73, 75, 76, 95, 122, 123, 130, 139, 152, 154, etc.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 18, 22, 27, 47, 48, 128, 147, 215.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 31, 32, 50, 224.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17, 18, 21, 26, 28, 47, 69, 72, 73, 107, 126, 149, 152, 169, 170, 183, 184, 198, 213.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 23, 63, 67, 73, 124, 130, 144, 170, 173, 183.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 64, 65, 67, 72, 92, 109, 129, 130, 131, 138, 151, 152, 157, 171, 173, 193, 218.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 37, 55, 64, 80, 86, 104, 118, 121, 127, 142, 149, 155, 164, 173, 176, 179, 186.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 67, 134, 135, 150, 192, 198, 199, etc.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 23, 44, 48, 54.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 16, 22, 23, 31, 34, 35, 52, 148, etc.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 18, 42, 44, 47, 52, etc.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 63, 100, 110, 112, 121, 139, 140, 224.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 47, 57, 63, 91, 121, 127, 142, 167, 169, 173, 224.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 44, 45, 120, 128, 151.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 104, 106, 107, 108, 109, 121, 125, 159.

24 *Ibid.*, *Fremd*: pp. 63, 64, 65, 66, 68, 70, 71, 91, 95, 106, 110, 124, 128, 129, 139, 157, 167, 174, 176, 177, 188, etc.

25 *Ibid.*, *hemd*: pp. 16, 17, 22, 23, 25, 36, 49, 50, 54, 69, 86, 105, 135, 206.

- 26 Ibid., pp. 34, 35, 45, 47, 51, 54, 74, 86, 92, 102, 106, 132, 135, 142, 153, 197, 198, 199, 215.
- 27 Ibid., pp. 17, 27, 49, 86, 92, 119, 121, 124, 126, 129, 170.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 31, 43, 44, 53, 86, 95, 96, 118, 122, 128, 149, 155, 170, 173, 188, 197, 198.
- 29 Ibid., moon: pp. 161, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, etc.
sun: pp. 14, 15, 21, 25, 28, 29, 38, 39, 49, 63, 126, 130, 131, 135, 153, etc.
sunlight/light: pp. 29, 38, 39, 58, 63, 81, 109, 112, etc.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 39, 40, 43, 48, 54, 58, 64, 82, 122, 133, 142, 143, 166, 167, 168, 173, 174, 177, 183, 188, 204, 217.
- 31 Ibid., bed: pp. 53, 57, 137, 198, 202, 203, 205, 219.
- 32 Ibid., stone and iron: pp. 28, 29, 32, 34, 175, 176, 177, 205, 223.