

MOYSHE LEYB HALPERN

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excellent
intro.

In a characteristically dramatic charge to his readers, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote "Faces! Where are your masks?" The theatrical frenzy, the suggestion that faces and masks are none too distinct, and the adroit reversal of the usual sentence are all typically Nietzschean. Yet the epigram might also have been written by Moyshe Leib Halpern, whose poetry provides a varied explication of Nietzsche's inversion.

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For Halpern's face -- that is, the true concern, character and passion of the poet -- is defined by negating all the seductive alternatives that loom enticingly over his 'true' persona.¹ There is an undoubted danger in such unremitting negation. Indeed the very first poem in our collection, "I Say to Myself" is a warning of the danger of consistent derogation. In the poem Halpern parodies the insufferable intellectual who disdains all activity and has the rationalizations ready to justify his stultification. But Halpern's poetic stance itself skirts the same danger, that his only pose will be with arched eyebrow, a hand waving the world dismissively away, and a look of insufferable disdain etched on his face.

Yet Halpern largely escapes the danger, along with another which is present, unintendedly, in his poem "In the Golden Land." It is this poem which illustrates how essentially Halpern is a parodist, how his evocation of emotion is most effective in that form. For here we have (whether this is a result of the translator or the poet I cannot say) bathos of no small sort.

¹. Which, of course, is Latin for 'mask' so perhaps we are back where we began.

I would say that he's being intentionally banal so as to lampoon both positions at once. Also the monosyllabic masculine rhymes (in both the Yiddish and the Eng) are reductionist and crude.

Lines such as: "Why do you, Mama, sap the blood of my heart/ Can you not feel how it pulls me apart" are not, well, terribly evocative. * When Halpern ventures into the sentimental verse that he elsewhere punctures, his foray provides the kind of fodder that his own satiric side would relish.

One of the most charming poems in the collection, "From One of My Letters" is successful precisely because the poet recognizes his infelicity with 'high diction.' After the first verse, in which he suggests that his wife's letters, and little things she does, recall "whole companies of summer birds/ Seeking flower-honey in among nettles" the poet instantly preempts the reader's disapproval:

A stranger who might read these verses through
would probably think: What a peculiar Jew --
Likens his wife to sky and summer birds...

Having thus obliquely ushered us into his confidence (he tells us in the next verse he does not give a hang for our opinion, thus redoubling the charm of having just affirmed it) the poet's diction climbs down from the exalted and giddy heights to everyday, and poetically more effective, diction.

Halpern's poem "The Tale of the World" is the tale of his poetry. It is less a repudiation of foolish ambition (like Shelley's "Ozymandias" which the poem recalls) than it is a declaration that it is the exception, the tiny particular, small and unnoticed, which will triumph. This particularism is the credo of parody and satire, for both would be lost without elaborate theories and grand beliefs which are ever the most

succulent bits for a satiric skewer.

At first glance, the principle 'mask' which Halpern undertakes to expose is human worth, aspiration, achievement. Human beings are apes, who are deluded by elephants apparently wearing pants, by the moon, which apparently shines, and by the sun, which seems to touch the mountains. All three delusions lead men on to their fruitless tinkering with the world in a futile quest, a Sisyphian theme strongly echoed in the last verse of "Man, that Ape" ("He climbs, and falls -- it never ends").

And yet a truer estimation of Halpern would be that he disdains the bloated pretence of human striving, not the striving itself. He makes fun of those who would place themselves above the scramble for food; his affection for his wife has not a whit of satire or slyness; his indignation over bigotry in 'Salute' is not feigned, and reproaching human beings for their follies is an absurd enterprise if they could not, or ought not, to be better than they are.

right! / Halpern's idealism surfaces almost in spite of himself, and this is his third and deepest mask. On the surface is the foolish idealist, the King who wishes to conquer the world, the drummer who is devil-may-care, the father who ~~was~~ in his youth writes poems about moonbeams and sacred scripture. The poet's initial and most eye-catching flourish is to unmask these characters as fools, souls who try to hide their true feelings, or people who grow in the poem to a wiser attitude.

That is the principle act, and it is done so well we are apt

to miss the follow-up, but it is the true performance. As the Wisse article notes, there is genuine pathos in the fly thinking longingly of the dung hill. The end of "The Will":

"This/Will/Be/Done" with its scriptural echo, suggests a sort of gymnastic doubling back, that the original poet of scripture who repudiates scripture has not thoroughly done with scripture.

The satirist who has unmasked the sentimentalist ends up being an

✓ idealist. It has to be that way, or the satire would be empty and worthless. Swift's famous epitaph, "Here lies Jonathan Swift, where savage indignation can no longer tear at his heart" suggests (with allowances for the melodrama of the phrasing) Halpern's ultimate pose -- passionately concerned.

"Yitskhok Leybush Perets" is the sharpest example of such multiple play of implication and true concern. First there is a sense of outraged reverence -- "We Important Persons, who, at most/ Should be prostrate and dumb, now ring around your ghost..." And yet as the poem moves along, Halpern characteristically diminishes Perets' importance, in the process of asking why he should not be 'sold' by his historically avaricious tribe:

Dust of our pride -- what were you? A log not all burned up
Glowing in the gypsy camp at night out on the steppe;
The sail of a ship that wrestles with the wind and sea;
In a wandering wood bewitched, the last standing tree
Where lightning felled great oaks a thousand winters old,
Cut down at the roots. What are you now? On the cold
Ground, a silent man motionless as if penned
In marble by a deathcandle. A beginning-end.

However this is not the final verdict. A few lines later we learn, the poet's recalcitrance having broken somewhat, that

"This wasteland, with you gone, is emptier for me." No one is lonelier than a maverick who has lost a kindred spirit. Moreover, the death of such a lion inevitably recalls Halpern to his own death, which he views with a frightened solemnity that is a far cry from the satirist's mocking hauteur.

Halpern's softness at the core is what saves his satire from a tiring disparagement of his poetic subjects. For it is certainly true that his views of human beings and their reverences is often relentless. His "The Bird" portrays the human animal as a heartless, huddled maw; this intestinal view of man is echoed (less savagely, to be sure) in "I Shall Never Go On Bragging."

More shocking is his poem of his home town, Zlochev.

actually,
it was

Perhaps the misty romanticism of shtetl life was not as advanced in Halpern's day, but in our own time the terrible portrait he limns of Zlochev is surprisingly vicious. For not only does Halpern describe life in Zlochev as hypocritical, cruel and accursed, but he deliberately negates any vestige of feeling for the land by his last lines, "This is the only solace to me: That I won't be buried in thee-- My home, Zlochev." One can hope, after all, to be buried in a place one would not wish to live; the gratitude that Halpern will not even be buried in Zlochev is an aggressive repudiation of everything that his "home" stands for. However, having read other poems, one can detect some affection in the honesty. Halpern cares enough about Zlochev, feels deeply enough, to be true to his perception of it. In

contradiction to those last lines, we do not feel that he has dismissed Zlochev, but that the very vehemence of his denunciation carries a certain fidelity to memory, and that the word 'home' is not as freighted with irony as we first imagined.

Halpern's anger is real, and not all anger is camouflaged affection. His poetry has a biting edge, tinged with the satirist's adolescent affection for shock value. While it may be true, as Wisse writes, that it is hard to tease a consistent doctrine from his poetry, that is not necessarily ~~be~~ a weakness. To attack the shortcomings of society in order to set up a counter-dogma may render the criticisms themselves less pungent. People are more apt today to appreciate Shaw entertainingly loathing cant than Shaw laboriously loving Fabian socialism.

Halpern had a variety of masks, all of them set up so that he could strip to the cynic beneath. But beneath the cynic was yet another face, one saddened by the dislocations in his life, the cruelty of his old home and the impersonality of the new one. The face of Halpern, so far as we can see its contours under multiple masks, is the quintessential face of the parodist -- it looks like someone who never reconciled himself to the ills of an imperfect world.

First rate. Could I have a copy
of this for my files?

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