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MOYSHE-LEYB HALPERN'S NEW SPRING SONG

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THE FIRST SPRING DAY

Moyshe-Leyb Halpern

Like dancers lightly over slick hard stone
We go in millions, and each one alone,
And our large sun shines brilliant as gold and burns
In window-glass on seven-story walls,
On balconies, on blankets, and on pots,
And on the diapers hanging over steps,
Fluttering proudly as flags in spring wind.
And by a first-floor window sits a mother
Almost naked—on her lap a child
Who holds in both small hands some bread and butter,
And reaches with his lips for his mother's mouth,
Which, opening, sends out a long, full yawn
Into the street, a first spring-welcoming.
Afterwards, you look around a moment,
And noisily, far off, like a water mill,
With a window-pane in front, an automobile
Comes rushing through the street, roars wild and loud,
And rushes by, and leaves a smoking cloud
Which mingles with sun and dust, and stretches far,
And shimmers in rainbow colors,
And graciously bestows its gasoline
Odor on us, big-city dwellers,
Who are (the doctors say) tubercular,
And to die more slowly, need pure air.
Meanwhile, there, slouching at the corner,
With hands in pockets, pale as an autumn day,
A young man, skinny, with such dreamy eyes,
Composes his spring song of love and pain;
Quietly in his heart this man determines
To purchase with his pay for this creation
A shirt, a suit-coat, and some new brown shoes,
Visit a barber who will cut his hair,
Then stop at a café where he will sit,
But not too long—
No, pardon, he will need to write
Another spring song
For this our marvelous world,

Craving to hear about a flower which blooms,
About a yellow bird which trills and trills
And trills a little more.
Translated from *In Nyu-York by Kathryn Hellerstein*

In the eleven years between his arrival in America in 1908 and the publication of his first book of poems, *In Nyu-York*, in 1919, Moishe Leyb Halpern developed poetic principles which distinguished his poetry radically from that of the previous generation of Yiddish writers, the "sweatshop" or labor poets. Halpern departed from this generation's didacticism by turning his attention to the form and process of poetic composition. For Halpern, the poet no longer declaimed with the representative voice of political ideology. Rather, he spoke with an individual voice, which recorded a unique experience coinciding only to some degree with that of his class and people. In "Der ershter, frilingtog Halpern reinterprets a Yiddish verse convention of the 1890s and first decade of the 1900s, the spring song, in terms of his new poetics.

The poets of the previous generation wrote verse of didactic intent, in order to further the cause of the labor movements in which they were involved. This didacticism produced, among other genres and forms, that of the spring song, the poem celebrating seasonal renewal. For the labor poet, the coming of spring signified both regeneration in the natural world and spiritual reawakening, as workers were again reminded of their oppressed conditions by rallies and strikes on May 1, designated as International Labor Day by the Second International Socialist Congress, in Paris, 1889. Labor poets, such as Morris Rosenfeld and David Edelstadt, wrote poems commemorating the onset of spring as a phenomenon of both nature and politics. Some spring songs, which praise the season's arrival, are pastoral, portraying the coming to life of the rural landscape and its shepherdesses in idealized, conventionalized terms.

For example, in his rambling poem "Friling,"[1] Morris Rosenfeld portrays the coming of spring in terms of the nightingale's song, which greets the fields, trees, flowers, shepherdess, and swan. All of nature signals God's role in the seasonal change. The nightingale warbles in the fields:

golden brokhes far der may (Golden blessings for May) (st. 6)

while spring rain falls like

a kiler brokhe-regn . . . a himlishe matone
(A cool blessing-rain . . . A heavenly gift.) (st. 9)

washing the forest clean and inspiring the trees to praise God "mit frumkayt un kohne" (piety and fervor). Even the shepherdess is characterized as "a lebedike tfile" (a living prayer–st. 5). In springtime, "dos nokhes fun di yorn" (st. 13), all creatures and spirits celebrate. The soul lives in a new style (di neshome firt a nayem shtat–st. 14), as life takes the world as its wife (dos lebn hilkht zayn horiat / er iz di velt mekadish–st. 14). Only the swan does not sing praises to the changing season, because its song is reserved for the moment of its own death. The swan reminds the poet of his mortality and the transcience of all life. Rosenfeld calls forth hackneyed pastoral terms to describe the coming of spring, although the Hebraic metaphors give the poem what charm it has.

Other spring songs lament the oppression of the workers by contrasting the rebirth of the countryside with the urban workers' perpetual poverty. These spring songs call upon the revolution, which will, they say, bring pastoral spring to city workers, symbolizing the great equalization of class in the social millenium.

For example, in his "Der friling,"[2] David Edelstadt prophesies the change in the world's order after the revolution. The poem commences with a description of spring in the same conventional terms Rosenfeld used: the sun shines, the flowers blossom fragrantly, the nightingale sings, and stars illuminate the pleasant nights. Like Rosenfeld, Edelstadt's imagination and spirit quicken with the season. But unlike "gliklekhe dikhter," fortunate poets, Edelstadt thinks not of wine and love but rather of the proletariat, who will never know the pleasures of spring until they are freed from their oppression. Only when spring, the season of liberation and life, can be experienced by all people will the poet of the people celebrate it in a suitable manner. Poets who belong to the upper classes, "fortunate poets," can indulge their fantasies with songs of wine and love, the conventional subjects of spring songs. Edelstadt's social conscience, though, prevents him from falling prey to such pursuits:

> on vayn zaynen mir nikhter, on libe zaynen mir fray.
> (without wine we are sober, without love we are free.) (st. 3)

Only the fortunate poets and rich people can participate pleasurably in Nature's regeneration:

> nakhtigal, zunenshayn, blumen, heylike sheyne natur!
> vi zol ikh begrisn dayn kumen ven du bist far dem raykher nor?
> (nightingale, sunshine, flowers, holy, beautiful nature!
> how shall I greet your arrival when you are for only the rich?)
> (st. 8)

The worker and the conscientious poet are both cut off from nature's cycle. Only when the revolution has changed the social order, will the poet

> zen blien yedes mentshlekhes hertz arum mir
> (see every human heart bloom around me) (st. 9)

Only then will the poet be able to praise nature's seasonal manifestations. Edelstadt utilizes the coming of spring as a metaphor for the socialist revolution he hopes for. By using the season as vehicle for a political statement, the poet reduces both the season and the workers' poverty to stylized, abstract terms.

To Halpern, such pastoralism and millenialism in Yiddish poetry served political purpose in the 1890s and first decade of the twentieth century, alerting the Jewish worker to the possibility of his salvation. But in the 1910s, Yiddish poetry had surpassed the role of mere education. By the time Halpern composed "Der ershter frilingtog"[3] Yiddish poetry had developed a sense of aesthetic purpose. In 1915, Halpern had reviewed Rosenfeld's *Bukh fun Libe* (1914) *for Literatur un Lebn.*[4] In that review, he acknowledges Rosenfeld's importance and achievement as a poet of political activism twenty years earlier, but criticizes Rosenfeld's later poems on aesthetic grounds. Rosenfeld lacks the ability to describe things of the world: "And not only was Rosenfeld not a lyricist, but he was pleased almost entirely by the intellectual rather than the descriptive in poetry" (104).

When he writes, in a poem called "Di Ferfirte," about a working girl who is seduced by her boss's son, Rosenfeld generalizes and categorizes the characters so that they represent good and evil, worker and boss–moral categories which encourage sensationalism and lead the reader away from the richness of human experience. Halpern asks, "Why didn't he know that the truth of life must be sacred to the artist, that he should not cripple himself for the sake of the cheap market-woman called sensationalism" (104)? Halpern continues, defining "truth":

> The true life of the Jewish working girl is as rich in images as the sea is rich in waves. And the true artist has to do no more than open his eyes, and images will float before him like hosts of white doves under a pure morning sky. (105)

Halpern describes the seduction story at length from the girl's point of view, calling forth her background, thoughts, dreams, longings, and aspirations as factors of her submission to the boss's son. As Halpern

retells the poem, the working girl is transformed from a victim, an embodiment of wronged virtue, into a human being with a past and a future, with motives of her own.

Halpern criticizes Rosenfeld for writing love poems, on the grounds that the older poet is practicing the wrong craft:

> In other words: Morris Rosenfeld, the robust smith who is a master at forging plowshares, horseshoes, and iron tires for wheels, wanted, with the same hard hammer, to forge such finely complex products as golden rings. Rosenfeld hasn't been spoiled, he only has forgotten that plowshares, horseshoes, and iron tires for wheels are necessary, and thus they may be less beautiful, but more useful. But since golden rings, perhaps set with jewels, are luxuries, they must, if they want to be valuable, embody the highest degree of beauty. Thus one must judge them by other standards, and moreover work them with other hands, and even more so, from other materials. (107)

Rosenfeld was adept at writing poems of the sweatshop, of social protest; but the skills he had developed for this genre were inappropriate to the love poem. Halpern's distinction between genres indicates the importance he placed on the poet's choice of the form a poem takes.

Finally, in criticizing Rosenfeld's love poems, Halpern implies the standards within which he attempts to practice his own craft. He complains:

> From the first to the last page . . . not one true experience, not one poem which could have grown from one's own blood. Instead of images—florid language, instead of passion—blasphemous speech, instead of pure lyrical mood—crude market-cries. (111)

To Halpern, love poems should contain images, passion, and lyrical mood, rather than the "tzuker- un honig-zise verter," the sweet, hackneyed words and rhymes of the spring song:

> ober vos mer lider ikh hob geleynt un vos mer fis mit zis altz zikher bin ikh gevorn az dos gantze bukh iz geshribn on hent un on fis, on gezunt, on layb un on lebn. (111)
>
> (but the more poems I read and the more feet with sweet, the surer I became that this entire book was written without hands and without feet, without health, without body and without life.)

Halpern objects to rhyme for the sake of rhyme and to easy, senseless

rhymes such as "feet and sweet." Conventions of diction and form, hackneyed expressions and rhymes, interfere with the poem's relationship to the world. Poems composed of clichés and conventions are written "on hent un on fis," unconvincingly, literally, without arms and legs, the appendages for touching and moving. Most important to Halpern, poems should, through form and diction, be true to experience.

In "Der ershter frilingtog," Halpern reinterprets the genre of the spring song from the pastoralism and millenialism of his predecessors into the terms of the city-dweller's actual experience of spring. The poem's title informs the reader of the occasion of the poem, a celebration (we imagine) of the first spring day. Contrary to our expectations of a pastoral scene, we find ourselves on a crowded city street:

> Mir geyn vi tentzer laykht af glatn hartn shteyn,
> Mir geyn milionenvayz, un itlekher aleyn,
>
> (Like dancers lightly over slick hard stone
> We go in millions, and each one alone.)

These two lines not only set the scene, but connote a relationship between the poet and his subject. The poet is of the people he describes, "mir," we. But in identifying with the city-dwellers, the poet asserts his isolation, and indeed that of each member of the masses. These lines contain the paradigm for Halpern's emphasis on the particular image in his poetry. "We," poet and people around him, go through the city and through life in millions. We can be abstracted and categorized as a group. Yet, each of these millions is alone. Each is a unique entity, requiring particular observation and description.

The next five lines introduce the sun, nature's means of signalling that spring has arrived, and show the city's response to the coming of spring:

> un undzer groyser zun shaynt blank, vi gold un brent
> in fentstergloz fun zibngorndike vent,
> af ganikes, af kolderes un tep,
> un af di vindlen oykh, vos hengen af di trep
> un flatern vi fonen shtoltz in frilingsvint.
>
> (And our large sun shines brilliant as gold and burns
> In window-glass on seven-story walls,
> On balconies, on blankets, and on pots,
> And on the diapers hanging over steps,
> Fluttering proudly as flags in spring wind.)

The spring sun shines on all people and all things, uniting them with

its light, just as the nightingale's song unifies the countryside for Rosenfeld. The sun shines "brilliant as gold" because, in the city, gold binds industrial workers to their jobs, and bosses to their sweatshops and factories. As the forests and fields put forth leaves, grasses, and flowers when the sun shines, so the city blossoms with household items, set out to air. Blankets have kept people warm all winter; in pots they have prepared the food that nourished them; the diapers are signs of birth, as the human race regenerates. Such regeneration signals the triumph of life over the hard winter season, of the workers' surviving their poverty. Thus, the diapers flutter as proudly as the flags of a conquering nation.

Now the poem focuses on two people who embody this regeneration:

un bay a fentster afn ershtn shtok a muter,
naket nokh kimat—un afn shoys a kind
vos halt in beyde hentlekh broyt mit puter
un tsit zikh mit di liplekh tsu der muters moyl,
vos efnt zikh un shikt—a genets lang un foyl—
an ershtn frilinggrus in gas aroys.

(And by a first-floor window sits a mother
Almost naked—on her lap a child
Who holds in both small hands some bread and butter,
And reaches with his lips for his mother's mouth,
Which, opening, sends out a long, full yawn
Into the street, a first spring-welcoming.)

As the world quickens with life, the mother yawns her greeting, awakening with the season.

As the poet's focus shifts, in line 14, from the mother and child back to the street, the tone of his voice changes, too. Until now, the speaker has described the domestic items and scene in a straightforward manner. He has evoked what is—the way spring comes to the city. From line 14, though, the voice takes on an ironic tone, as Halpern contrasts what is with what ought to be, the urban with the pastoral:

dernokh—du kukst zikh um un s'nemt a rege bloyz,
un royshndik fun vaytn vi a vasermil,
un mit a shoyb fun fornt kumt an oytomobil—

(And afterwards, you look around a moment,
And noisily, far off, like a water mill,
With a window-pane in front, an automobile
Comes . . .

Halpern compares the automobile with a water mill not only because in Yiddish the two words rhyme, but because the water mill is an emblem of man's coexistence with nature: a water mill on a rural stream harnesses the water's power in order to grind grain harvested by people as sustenance. The automobile rushing down the city street not only sounds like a water mill, the instrument of man's harmonious coexistence with nature, it also embodies a creature of nature. Like a wild animal, it rushes through the street, roaring "vild un hoykh." But Halpern reminds us not to be taken in by the analogy, for the automobile is a machine, which befouls the air with "a volkn roykh." The cloud of smoke has its own beauty, though. Like a spring shower, the car's exhaust leaves a rainbow:

un lozt nokh zikh a volkn roykh,
vos misht zikh oys mit zun un shtoyb un tsit zikh lang
un shimerirt in regnboign-farbn,

(and leaves a smoking cloud
Which mingles with sun and dust, and stretches far,
And shimmers in rainbow colors,)

It also produces fumes, "gezolin-geroykh," which pollute the air. Springtime calls forth the urban animals, which are really machines that give off deceptive manifestations of beauty. This beauty is deceptive because it contributes to and reminds the city-dwellers of their imminent deaths. The cloud of smoke

shenkt zayn gezolin-geroykh mit groys genod
tsu undz, di layt vos veynen in der groyser shtot,
un zaynen (vi doktoyrim zogn) lungenkrank.
Un darfn reyne luft pamelekher tsu shtarbn.

(graciously bestows its gasoline
Odor on us, big city-dwellers,
Who are (the doctors say) tubercular,
And to die more slowly, need pure air.)

This passage is a modernization of Rosenfeld's swan song in "Friling," which reminds the world of mortality at the time of renewal. The contrast in Halpern's metaphors between the pastoral and urban elements creates an ironic tone in this part of the poem. This irony is comparable to Edelstadt's in his political spring song, where he contrasts the blooming season with the workers' condition. Halpern, though, registers his protest against the urban conditions in a tone that includes the comic. The comic irony allows the truth of social inequality to shine from these lines, but it prevents the implicit protest from being simplistic or strident.

The last part of the poem focuses on the poet, a young man, pale as an autumn day "vi a harbsttog blas," who slouches at the corner and daydreams. The young man seems less of this world than the mother and child, because he probably cannot afford the bread and butter that the child holds. He cuts a romantic figure: dreamy-eyed, undernourished, melancholy, he composes a spring song about love and pain—or woe—"un trakht a friling-lid fun libe un fun vey." The young man's spring song covers the conventional themes of the labor poets' spring songs. Love, in Rosenfeld's "Friling," flourishes concurrent with the rebirth of nature: the shepherd girl holds a flower in her hand and "reyne libe in ir buzim." Pain, in Edelstadt's "Der friling," is the perpetual condition of the oppressed worker:

keyn goldene frilings shtraln kumen ahin nit arayn;
in finisternish leben un faln di kinder fun keytn un payn.

(none of golden spring's beams come in here;
In darkness live and die the children of chains and pain.)

The workers, responding to the seasonal cues of rejuvenation, are condemned by their environment to a circumscribed experience of life.

But contrary to our expectations, Halpern reveals this young poet of romantic guise to have utilitarian motives in the composing of his spring song. While he works on his poem, the young man decides what to do with the money he will earn by selling his creation, presumably to a Yiddish newspaper. He enumerates his quotidian desires:

tsu geyn un ayntzuhandlen far zayn shafungsloyn
a hemd, a nayem rok un broyne shikh a por,
un baym barbirer kirtzn zikh di lange hor
un af a kave vet dokh oykh nokh blaybn

(To purchase with his pay for this creation
A shirt, a suit-coat, and some new brown shoes,
Visit a barber who will cut his hair,
Then stop at a café where he will sit).

In the middle of his reverie, the young man realizes that he will not earn enough money to fulfill all his desires from the sale of just one poem:

un vet dos nit—
nu, vet er shoyn, bimkhale, muzn shraybn
nokh a frilinglid
(But not too long—
No, pardon, he will need to write

Another spring song).

He must write yet another spring song in order to earn enough money to sit for a while in a café. This song, like the first, will appeal to its audience, which Halpern calls "undzer vunderlekher velt" (our marvelous world), the Yiddish-reading audience of the 1910s, which demands conventional spring poems about love, pain, and nature:

fun a blum vos blit
un fun a geln geln feygele vos trelt un trelt
un trelt nokh abisl.

(about a flower which blooms,
About a yellow bird which trills and trills
And trills a little more.)

This audience demands conventional descriptions of a kind of spring it will never experience on the Lower East Side. The flower blooms and the bird trills in a gesture of idealistic hope for both the pastoral and the millenial springtime. Halpern's poem is a new spring song, which rejects the conventions and their implicit ideals about spring, oppression, and poets. The little yellow bird trills and trills year in and year out in the lines of Halpern's predecessors. It "trills a little more" for Halpern's dreamy young man, ironically and wearily in this season of rebirth. Halpern satirizes the poet's need to please his audience with hackneyed images and ideas. This very audience will not appreciate his own attempt, in "Der ershter frilingtog," to recast the genre in new terms.

The disintegrating form of the poem embodies Halpern's satire. In the first six lines of the poem, he sets up a "convention" or metrical norm for the poem of rhymed hexameter couplets. Although the rhyme scheme varies from the couplet in lines 7-10 and 19-24, the basic form is followed in the first 32 lines of the poem. However, in line 33, where the young dreamy man comes to the end of his reverie and realizes that he cannot stay in the café vey long, because his spring song won't bring in enough money, the form of the poem begins to crumble. The remaining lines vary in length from six iambs to two, and the rhyme scheme changes from abab to a complete dismissal of rhyme in the last four lines. The seemingly simple form of the hexameter couplet has tangled itself in an intricate pattern, and finally peters out. This complexity of rhyme and meter grows as the young poet, craftsman of rhyme and meter, realizes the futility of communicating with his audience and the small returns for his craft, and resigns himself to write the clichés his readers want to hear.

The syntactical form of the poem unites it and gives it a cumulative force. Five sentences are drawn out into forty lines. The sentences maintain their continuity by independent rather than subordinate clauses. Twenty of the forty lines in this poem begin with the conjunction "un," and. These long, compound sentences accumulate details of spring in the city. Like Whitman's lists, the paratactic sentence structure serves to convince not by reason, but by an overwhelming quantity of evidence, which speaks for itself. By juxtaposing image after image, Halpern stresses the poet's responsibility to "open his eyes" to the images that "float before him like hosts of white doves under a pure morning sky" (105).

The focus of "Der ershter frilingtog" moves from a general view of the city to the individual mother and child, the automobile, and the poet. We observe the poet first as if from a tenement window. Then we move close enough to see that he has dreamy eyes. We enter his mind, and read his thoughts about buying shoes. Finally, we become the poet, and we realize with him that "our marvelous world" desires only to hear about an idealized version of nature, not about human nature. Halpern's spring song reinterprets the expectations of his audience and the conventions of his poetic predecessors in terms of his scruples about poetry. The poem moves from generalization to specification, from a description of the cityscape to an evocation of the inner workings of the poet's mind.

NOTES

1. Morris Rosenfeld, *The Works of Morris Rosenfeld* (New York: Di Internationale Bibliothek Farlag Komp., 1910) 4, 11–14.

2. David Edelstadt, *Edelstadt's Shriftn: A Zamlung Fun Ale Zayne Poetishe Shriftn in Poezye un Proze* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1923), pp. 73–75.

3. Moishe Leyb Halpern, *In New York* (New York: Farlag Matones, 1954), pp. 21–22.

4. "Der Alter un der Nayer Morris Rosenfeld," *Literatur un Lebn* (March 1915).