

MOISHE LEIB HALPERN, REBEL POET

Although this Yiddish poet wrote much poetry of despair and reaction, he did at times express spontaneous protest at the ills of our society

By V. J. Jerome

The above essay was prepared for delivery at a symposium on the Yiddish poet Moishe Leib Halpern held last fall under the auspices of the Yiddish literary quarterly Zamlungen, which has just completed its first year of publication. The essay appeared in a Yiddish translation in Zamlungen for October-December 1954.

We are glad to publish this Marxist essay as a measure of protest at the violation of the Bill of Rights in the jailing of V. J. Jerome, who is one of the Communist leaders imprisoned in January under the Smith act. Mr. Jerome is the author of A Lantern for Jeremy, the extremely significant novel of Jewish life in Poland of 1905. The recent confession of ex-Communist informer Harvey Matusow that he lied in his testimony against several of Mr. Jerome's co-defendants promises to bring to light the frame-up nature of the Smith act prosecutions. It is to be hoped that a new trial for Mr. Jerome and his co-defendants will result from the exposure of perjuries that led to their conviction.

The subject of this essay, Moishe Leib Halpern, was born in Russia in 1886 and came to this country in 1908. He wrote for the Freiheit from 1922 to 1925. He died in 1932.—Eds.

I WISH to address myself to two interrelated themes, more correctly, two aspects of a single theme: the question of cultural heritage and the approach to the literary rebel, particularly as this question affects our attitude towards the Yiddish poet, Moishe Leib Halpern. The question of inheritance of culture needs to be examined in its manifold aspects, its fullness, if we are to avoid an oversimplified or one-sided approach.

The modern working class is the historically accredited heir to the cultural treasures of past epochs, as well as to the best creations and traditions of the epoch of capitalism. To inherit culture does not, however, mean to engross wholly, but rather to assimilate *critically*, to sift the important elements from the unimportant, the realistic from the anti-realistic, the progressive from the reactionary. Inheritance of culture is a selective, not a simple conservation. And the conserved culture itself involves analysis and revaluation by the criteria of the working class.

The acquisition of cultural heritage takes place through struggle—a two-fronted struggle: against the tendency, on the one hand, to take over uncritically, lock, stock and barrel, and, on the other, to close the door to all non-proletarian works or to open it only narrowly. If in these re-

marks the stress, of necessity, is on the sectarian danger, the rightist error is however to be remembered in the total view.

Consider a statement of Moishe Litvakov, at one time regarded as an important Soviet Yiddish literary critic, who, presuming to speak as a Marxist, wrote in his book *On Two Fronts*: "No, dear friends, literature is a reflection of existence. And if in the socio-political existence of the Jewish working class there has taken place such a profound break, if in this respect the working class renounces its past, so also in literature, which accompanied that past, it has nothing to inherit. . . . There will yet come a time when the new literature will have carried through its pioneer work, then it will be able to have a calmer and more fruitful relationship to the literary heritage" (p. 61).¹

There is here a mechanical separation of historical development into two stages—the stage of rejecting past cultural contributions and the stage of acceptance. Such an approach to cultural heritage is in reality nihilistic. For, inheritance of culture has meaning only as a process in which the two opposites, adoption and rejection, interact upon each other dialectically. The working class, thus, cannot bolt its doors to earlier cultural values one day and decide to open them another day. It is a false assumption that the progress of the working class excludes historical continuity of progressive ideas.

Such ultra-leftist rejection of cultural heritage tends also to interpret the artist and his work by his class relation in an over-simplified and rigid fashion. Of course, we must evaluate the artist basically in connection with the ideology of his class; but we should not view this connection narrowly, by ignoring the wider social framework of his time, the environing thought processes, all the advancing and retarding influences upon his creativeness.

Indeed, were we to subject writers to such strait-laced measurements of vulgar sociology, then truly, to echo Shakespeare, the evil in what they did would live after them, while the good would forever be interred with their bones. We should end by renouncing and forfeiting all heritage in poets and authors like Goethe and Heine; like Pushkin and Tolstoy; like Emerson, Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis; and, in Yiddish literature, like Peretz, Weissenberg, and Moishe Leib Halpern.

We can learn much from Friedrich Engels' approach to Goethe.

¹ Cited in *Shtern*, Minsk, 1932, No. 3, p. 74 (Yiddish).

Engels perceived a dualism in Goethe's attitude to the German society of his day. On the one hand, Goethe showed hostility toward that society; he sought to flee from it, in contempt and disgust for the life about him. Engels saw him as a rebel, a poet that shared the rebelliousness of his own artistic creations—Goetz von Berlichingen, Prometheus, Faust. He heard Goethe, like Mephistopheles, revile and mock the existing order of things, only soon thereafter to embrace that very status quo, to adjust himself to it and even to defend it, like a very philistine.

Yet how did Engels crown his estimation of Goethe? Did he, for his vacillation and succumbing, criticize him out of existence? Did he, in imperious disdain, forswear all heritage in the poet's bequest? Did he fail to value the highly positive qualities in Goethe's works? Let us see how Engels evaluated that complex master spirit of the age. He wrote: ". . . it is the persistent struggle in himself between the poet of genius, disgusted by the wretchedness of his surroundings, and the Frankfurt alderman's cautious child, the privy councilor of Weimar, who sees himself forced to make a truce with it and get used to it. Thus Goethe is now colossal, now petty; now a defiant, ironical, world-scorning genius, now a calculated, complacent, narrow philistine. Even Goethe was unable to overcome the wretchedness of German life; on the contrary, it overcame him, and this victory over the greatest German is the best proof that it cannot be conquered by the individual."²

And Engels follows this by saying: "We are not throwing it up to Goethe *à la* Boerne and Manzel, that he was not a liberal, but that he could even be a philistine at times; not that he was incapable of any enthusiasm for German freedom, but that he sacrificed his occasionally irrepresible, sounder aesthetic feeling to a small-town aversion to every great historical movement. . . ."³

Herein lies the great lesson for our day. Not condemnation, overpowering everything: *Take back your songs of freedom, you who have at times weakened!*—but the largesse of discernment: *That you should have weakened, you who sang the songs of freedom!*

In this light let us turn to Moishe Leib Halpern.

Halpern, Rebel Poet

I shall endeavor here to present certain social criteria by which Moishe Leib Halpern, that major American-Yiddish poet, who was for a brief space identified with the proletarian left, may, in this third decade after his death, stand out in a true light, in his true worth.

Halpern was a poet of major achievements, beset by soul-rending contradictions. Poet of loneliness, he huddled close to the working people. Prince of pessimism, he pined for life and yearned for a world fit to live in. Hurler

of oaths and bellow of coarseness, he sang of children and of woman's love with tender lyricism. Denizen of cafes where foregathered the petty-bourgeois Yiddish esthetes—*die Yunge*—smug revolvers against social ideas, he was among them, but not of them.

Halpern, by any objective analysis of his writings, must be considered as a poet with strong social orientation and attachment, albeit intermittent, to the working class. In many of his poems, notably during his association with the *Freiheit*, he spoke as a poet of protest, of social discontent, of searing hatred for bourgeois cant and sanctimonious clericalism, of scorn for kow-towing intellectuals.

Halpern possessed class feeling, with class awareness, which, however, failed to attain the level of distinct class consciousness. Spurts of that consciousness were present and his outstanding poems created in such moments revealed clearly the powerful potential within him. In the main, his poems of social protest were less defined along class lines, being rather the elemental hatred of the poor against the rich, of the insulted and injured against those who hold the whip-hand.

Characteristic in this connection is his poem "Zlotchov, My Home," in which delightful folk depiction and satire are penetrated with the poet's pain as he gazes at his Old World birth-town with blighting memories of evil practices and hypocrisy among the wealthy Jewish householders. In the opening stanza the home-sick poet speaks:

"Oh, Zlotchov, you, my home, my town,
With your churchspire, synagogue, and bath,
With your market-wives squatting in the square,
And with your hucksters that, like dogs,
Rush upon the peasant who comes down
With his egg-basket from the Sassov hill—
As the life of springtime wakes in me
My poor, meager longing for you—
My home, my Zlotchov."

In the second stanza, however, we hear:

"But when in my longing I recall
Old moneybags Rappaport as he struts
With bloated belly to synagogue,
And Shayeh Hillel's the saint
Who would even sell the sun in heaven
With its rays like a pig in a poke—
Then, this is enough for me, that, like a candle low
Should burn out my longing for you,
My home, my Zlotchov."

This poem, typical of Halpern's writings exposing social evils, embodies the quality of critical realism that brings out strongly his positive values. The critical-realist method, which flourished in capitalism's ascendant stage, attacks the corruption of class society and many of its oppressive features; in doing so, it brings realistic insight into the life, thoughts and sentiments of the common people.

² K. Marx and F. Engels, *Literature and Art*, New York 1947, pp. 81-82.

³ Work cited, p. 82.

Broadsword Against Social Evil

Of course, such criticism of social ills does not proceed from an essential questioning of the system itself and hence cannot portray life in its forward-course or guide to a basic solution. Thus in this poem the final stanza peters out into the conclusion—

“Be this at least my comforting,
That I shall not be buried in you,
My home, my Zlotchov.”

One cannot touch upon the critical-realist aspect of Halpern without mentioning his stirring “Ballad of Avrom the Butcher.” For profound humanism, for indictment of obscurantism and the tragedies it brings, for sheer masterly depiction of bigotry-venomous small-town life, etched in acid lines that eat into your consciousness until you cry out, *A halt to the infamy!*—this ballad alone establishes its creator as a poet of power.

In his critical poetry Halpern employs the keen weapon of satire, with a formidableness reminiscent of Heine and possibly unmatched in Yiddish poetry. One may be tempted to compare him to Moishe Nadir; but the satiric methods of the two poets bear no likeness. With Nadir satire was the deft thrust of a rapier; with Halpern it was the fearful hack of a broadsword. To read such poems as “Love of Zion,” pointed at the smug bourgeois nationalist; “Damn His Hide—the Phrasemonger!” aimed at the pseudo-intellectual; “The Whore—Our Leadership,” directed at corrupt Social-Democracy, is to hear a voice thunderous in wrath.

In the poem “Damn His Hide—the Phrasemonger!” Halpern says:

“The god-accursed intellectual
Has a pair of rotten white hands
That will not work; so he twists with them
The endless thumb-turned phrasemongering.”

He lashes into the false intellectual—

“. . . that word-and-flea musketeer . . .
Who, if he takes a bribe,
Hand him honor, a whole spittoonful—
Damn his hide!”

It has been said of Halpern that he was anti-intellectual; but this is a false assertion. Not the man of ideas as such, but the pretentious intellectual is the target of his shafts. Halpern’s scorn does not express anti-intellectualism, typified in the cult of Makhayevism (defamation of revolutionary intellectuals in order to create enmity between them and the working class—*Eds.*) in pre-revolutionary Russia. He assails the distorter of culture who

“transforms the struggle into brother-hate,”
who

“dresses up the murder of millions.”
In his vision of the future social order he foresees an in-

tegrated intellectual contributing to the common weal, so that there will be effaced

“the hateful stigma *intellectual.*”

At times he applies to himself this flagellation of the un-integrated intelligentsia. In a poem which, ironically, bears the name “Sunrise,” he cries out:

“Oh, sun, forgive me for my hands,
Forgive me for my white hands.”

The Halpern who thus cries out castigates his own weakness, painfully conscious of the gap between the powerful poetic urge springing from his rebellious unrest and his recurring moods of diffidence and sickly introspection, in his state of half-grasped ideological understanding.

Poet of Despair

Indeed, Halpern must not be glorified; a true estimate of his work must emphasize the decadent and downright reactionary poems written by him at various periods, poems that outweigh in number his positive writings. We read with shock and revulsion the bulk of his Zarkhi poems, with their broodings on despair, emptiness and negation; or the series “From My Slavic Motifs,” with their hideous Jew-Gentile bigotry. These represent an aspect of Moishe Leib Halpern which we emphatically reject: the vacillations, the succumbing to reaction which in his deeper moments he hated in himself. These enter also into the death-motif in this poet who hungered so for life.

Yet the recurrence of Halpern’s death-theme can only superficially be identified with the death-cult in the decadent poets of moribund capitalism. Halpern was no glorifier of death, no singer of swan songs. He loved life passionately, hating and scourging all who marred its beauty, who despoiled its riches, violated its peace, chained its freedom. His invokings of death were the pathos of a poet who lacked sustained and sustaining strength and so sank down in frustration.

Halpern’s death-motif was the pessimism which Lenin, in discussing the contradictory aspects in Tolstoy, characterized as “the ideology that must manifest itself in an epoch when the entire old order is being overturned and when the mass of the people, which has been reared in that old order, which has sucked in with the mother’s milk all the principles, habits, traditions and faiths of that social order, does not and cannot see what new order is being established, what social forces are establishing it and in what way and what social forces are *capable* of achieving emancipation.”

A Rounded Estimate

Halpern gravitated toward the working class; yet he did not fully find himself in its midst. In this lay his tragedy. In his revulsion to the hideousness of the bourgeois milieu, he came over to the working class, to its advanced sector; but he failed to understand the historical role of that class.

