The persona "Moyshe-Leyb" in the poetry of M.L. Halpern

by

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Abstract

While much has been written on the Yiddish poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, there is a paucity of critical material which deals with the issue of persona in his poetry. This is unfortunate since the use of persona takes centre stage in Halpern's oeuvre. This work will discuss the issue of persona in Halpern's poems, and will focus specifically on one of Halpern's personae: "Moyshe-Leyb." I will begin with an overview of the relevant literary criticism on Halpern, and a discussion of the major themes found in his poetry. Furthermore, I will discuss Halpern's connection to literary modernism, and this movement's paradigm of persona. Finally, I will examine Halpern's possible motivations for choosing a persona with his own name, and the themes and issues found in these poems.

Resumé

Bien qu'on a écrit beacoup sur le poète yiddish Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, il y'en a très peu de matérial qui s'occupe avec l'issue des personnages dans sa poésie. Ça c'est infortune puisque l'utilisage des personnages est très important dans l'oeuvre de Halpern. Ce travail va discuter l'issue des personnages dans les poèmes de Halpern, et va mettre au point un de ces personnages: "Moyshe-Leyb." Je vais commencer avec un examen du critique litéraire relevante sur Halpern, et une discussion des thèmes majeures dans sa poésie. De plus, je vais discuter la connection entre Halpern et la mouvement de modernisme litéraire, et la paradigme des personnages de cet mouvement. Finalement, je vais examiner les raisons possibles que Halpern a choissi un personnage avec son même nom, et les thèmes et issues qu'on peut trouver dans ces poèmes.

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Poyk ikh, az di poyk zol platzn,

Un ikh dzhindzhe in di tatsn,

Un ikh drey zikh rund arum -

Dzhin, dzhin, boom-boom-boom.

Dzhin, dzhin boom!

-Moyshe-Leyb Halpern,

"Der Gasnpoyker"

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M.L. Halpern is considered to be one of the most original and talented Yiddish poets of all time. His work had a profound influence on the development of Yiddish poetry. Halpern came to New York from Austrian Poland (Galicia) in 1908 at the age of 22. In New York, he met other young Yiddish poets and writers who came to be known as *Di Yunge*. *Di Yunge* ("The Young Ones") were a group of Yiddish poets who came to America from Eastern Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century. They reacted against the bombast and rhetoric which they saw in the popular Yiddish poets in America at that time. This group of writers, called the "Sweatshop Poets," consisted of Jews who had immigrated to the U.S.A. in the late decades of the nineteenth century. Their poetry was very much a reaction to the terrible conditions of immigrant working class life, and the trauma of the specifically Jewish character of this plight. This included the flight from terror in Europe, as well as the effects of secularization on the Jewish immigrants in America. The Yiddish proletarian poets wrote didactic poetry which preached class consciousness and the class struggle. This poetry had little in the way of tradition inherited from earlier Yiddish literature, and its poetic language was marred by *daytshmerish*, i.e. a highly Germanized Yiddish which was

then considered "modern" by many. *Di Yunge* strove to distance themselves from this type of poetry which they considered inferior, and thus the poets of this new generation became united by their common dislikes. Many of them believed in "art for art's sake." Whatever the view of individual members of *Di Yunge* on the autonomy of art, they favoured a silent type of poetry in which they strove to refine and beautify language.*Di Yunge* marked the beginning of a serious modern literature in Yiddish in the United States. These new poets created poetry in the styles of neo-romanticism, impressionism, symbolism, and produced the first expressions of literary modernism in American Yiddish literature. Because of Halpern's age and approach to literature, he is categorized as a member of *Di Yunge*, this second generation of American poets. Still, Halpern had his individual approach to poetry as did other members of *Di Yunge*. While this group was brought together by what they didn't like about Yiddish literature, they were very much divided about what they wanted it to become. Therefore, this group was not a cohesive unit, but rather a band of writers in constant feud over literary issues.

This work focuses on the issue of persona in the poetry of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. Halpern is a major voice in Yiddish Literature who stood at the centre of the modern renewal of Yiddish poetry. This essay will

analyze the poems containing the persona "Moyshe-Leyb", themes and issues found in these poems, and the role and function of this persona in Halpern's oeuvre. The use of persona is central to his work and not enough has been done to spotlight this device. I will begin with an overview of the criticism written about Halpern as well as with an examination of the issue of persona in literary criticism. Finally, I will examine selected poems which contain the "Moyshe-Leyb" persona, and show how this persona is a deliberate and self-conscious choice of the author used to express ironic distance and convey different perspectives.

While much criticism has been written on Halpern, very little of it focuses on the issue of persona, and only a tiny fraction of this deals with the persona "Moyshe-Leyb." Halpern created a large gallery of characters, each one unique. It is the purpose of this study to analyze the significance of "Moyshe-Leyb" in Halpern's work and to see how he employed it in his poetry. I will begin with an overview of the significant criticism on Halpern which will highlight the major themes present in his poetry. Many of these themes are connected with literary modernism. It will be helpful to this study to discuss some central tenets of literary modernism, as well as to locate it in literary history.

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In "The Name and Nature of Modernism" Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane seek to define and locate this movement of the arts. While other periods in literature seem easy to define, such as Romanticism or Neo-Classicism, they write that the attempt to define Modernism is an almost impossible task. Other movements in art have their own recognizable meanings and their definitions can be understood as general descriptions of entire periods.[1] However, as they rightly assert, Modernism has consistently avoided one comprehensive definition of style. Still, there are certain principles and characteristics of Modernism which have been accepted by many literary historians and critics as, for the most part, universal to modernist art. Furthermore, there are certain modernist techniques and styles which Halpern uses and these will be highlighted. In general, Modernism was a reaction against the cohesive style and humanistic approach to literature as seen in nineteenth century movements such as Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism. This, write Bradbury and McFarlane, meant "not only radical remaking of form, but also .... the tendency to bring it closer to chaos, so producing a sense of

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[1] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name And Nature Of Modernism," in Modernism, 1890-1930 (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), p.23.

'formal desperation.'"[2] Therefore, they infer that this mode of experimentation with art led not only to sophistication and novelty, but also to alienation, bleakness, darkness, and disintegration.[3]

It is generally agreed upon that World War I had a profound impact on the emergence and development of literary Modernism: "The catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the continuity of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world."[4] Because of the unprecedented destruction and chaos caused by World War I, many artists felt that they needed new artistic forms to convey this disorder. Some prominent features of literary Modernism include: fragmented utterances; unclear connections in a piece of literature which seem unrelated and are left to the reader to interpret; the breaking of traditional narrative continuity; a way of representing characters very different from accepted forms of literature; and the violation of coherent

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[2] Ibid., p.26.

[3] Ibid.

[4] M.H. Abrams, "Modernism and Postmodernism," in A Glossary Of Literary Terms (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), p.119.

narrative language.[5] Bradbury and McFarlane write:

> Modernism .... is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art .... of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud, and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaningless and absurdity. It is the literature of technology. It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions.[6]

A prominent feature of the modernist movement is the approach to art with the attempt to "make it new." This included creating new artistic forms, styles, and introducing previously neglected or forbidden subjects.[7] Moreover, these artists usually portrayed themselves as alienated and pitted themselves against the literary establishment. One important goal of the artist, according to these trends, and which is prominent in Halpern's poetry, is the tendency "to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Bradbury and McFarlane, p.27.

[7] Abrams, p.120.

dominant bourgeois culture."[8] This was a drive for radical renewal in art to which M.L. Halpern is closely connected.

In his book Moyshe-Leyb Halpern In Ram Fun Zayn Dor ("Moyshe-Leyb Halpern In The Context Of His Generation")[9], Eliezer Greenberg presents an examination of Halpern's life and poetry. The author's main goal here is to contextualize Halpern within the literature of the poet's time, European and American Modernism, and also within the broad tradition of Modern Western Literature. He makes these connections through an examination of Halpern's writing style, the different influences on Halpern, and the impact Halpern's poetry had on subsequent writers. Greenberg discusses the different elements of Halpern's poetic style, including his use of "shock", his moving away from conventional poetic forms, and constantly questioning and criticizing human civilization. The themes which motivate his poetry include his deep hatred of the big city and his eternal quest for truth. The great majority of Halpern's poems which Greenberg presents to support his arguments are taken from the two volume collection of

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Yiddish has a problem of many different types of orthography which are very difficult to standardize. For the purposes of this study all citations have been modernized and transliterated as if they were written in the modern standardized orthography, except where the poetic quality of the line cited depends on a non-standard Yiddish.

Halpern's work which was published after the poet's death. Greenberg edited this collection of poetry not collected in book form in Halpern's life time and published it in 1934, two years after Halpern died.

In his book Dikhter un Dikhtung ("Poets and Poetry") Avrom Tabachnik discusses the writing style of M.L. Halpern. He does this by situating it within the context of European modernist literature and within the framework of Modern Yiddish Literature. Tabachnik also pays close attention to form; he highlights Halpern's different styles and techniques. Furthermore, claiming Halpern as one of the greatest Yiddish poets of all time, Tabachnik sets out to resolve some generalizations made about the poet by previous Yiddish critics, which he feels are incorrect. Moreover, Tabachnik makes many claims about what he feels motivates Halpern's poetry. Specifically, he describes Halpern's poetry and the inner turbulence which fuels Halpern's writing through a close psychological reading. This is closely connected to Tabachnik's claim of Halpern's constant obsession with the truth and how this plays a crucial part in his poetry. In other words, Tabachnik is very concerned with the *how* and why of Halpern's poetry. Furthermore, Tabachnik writes about the split within Halpern of "poet and anti-poet" in psychological terms. He puts this issue also in the context of literary modernism as well as

Modern Yiddish Literature. This, he claims, is what Halpern is about and he demonstrates this with examples from Halpern's poetry. Finally, Tabachnik debates whether Halpern's approach to poetry is problematic for the poet himself.

Tabachnik stresses that Halpern is an innovator. He writes that Halpern was a pioneer of Modern Yiddish Literature because he introduced new styles and forms of language into Yiddish poetry:

> By broadening the limits of the Yiddish poem, by introducing expressions, words, pictures, images, which were not imagined until then in Yiddish poetry, Halpern not only freed himself, but others as well. This was a time when .... Yiddish poetry (was) under the influence of Moyshe Leyb Halpern.[10]

However, he feels that Halpern has at times been misunderstood by Yiddish critics and Tabachnik is intent on setting the record straight. He is primarily interested in correcting "the most popular image" of Halpern which is "old and limited," and which "is based only on his very first poems."[11] Here we see Tabachnik agreeing with Greenberg that the posthumously collected poetry represents Halpern's finest and most significant work. Greenberg writes:

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[10] Avrom Tabachnik, "Tsu A Kharakteristik Fun Moyshe Leyb Halperns Stil," in Dikhter Un Dikhtung (New York: Knight Printing Corporation, 1965), p.236. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[11] Ibid., p.233.

> I have intentionally quoted widely from his unpublished poems, because I have the feeling, that many poets and the majority of good readers of Yiddish poetry seldom took the effort to fully acquaint themselves with his last two books of poems, where his most mature creations are found.[12]

Greenberg does not forsake Halpern's earlier poetry, but states that all the themes and styles seen in his later poetry can be traced back to their nascent stages in his earlier works. For example, Greenberg discusses Halpern's attack on the type of person whom the poet disliked and often mocked in his verse, the cocky intellectual who enjoyed conveying the impression that he knows and sees all when in reality he is blind and impotent. With this one theme Greenberg shows how it developed in and, in his opinion, improved Halpern's poetry. He offers two examples, one from Halpern's earlier works and the other from his last poems:

> And you with glasses on your nose,
> And the forehead of an accountant-artist,
> Stand in the middle of the night
> Like a manager in a factory
> With pencil and paper
> And like a blind man.

And:

> Now all the mountains lie outside
> And the wise ones like blind bears,
> Lift up their nasty heads

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[12] Eliezer Greenberg, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern In Ram Fun Zayn Dor (New York: Moyshe-Leyb Halpern Branch 450, Workmen's Circle,1942), p.81.

And cannot find their foreheads.[13]

Here Greenberg shows how Halpern's treatment of this specific type became more severe in his later poetry.

Tabachnik, commenting on the two volume collection assembled by Greenberg, writes: "if one does not take into account [these] .... poems .... one does not know Halpern."[14] Moreover, Tabachnik writes that the poems in these two volumes are: "possibly the most important [of Halpern's poems]."[15] Why does Tabachnik single out these posthumously published poems as Halpern's best work? He does not directly answer this question like Greenberg does, but rather shows his own preference by giving higher praise to Halpern's unpublished poems than to his published works. While Tabachnik, like Greenberg, does not forsake Halpern's earlier poetry, he claims that his aesthetic is strongest and most pronounced in his later works, particularly in the Greenberg collection, thus making these his best poems.

The aesthetic Tabachnik refers to here is clearly a modernist one

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[13] Ibid., p.64.

[14] Tabachnik, "Tsu A Kharakteristik....," p.233.

[15] Tabachnik, "Moyshe Leyb Halpern - Poet Un Anti-Poet," in Dikhter Un Dikhtung, p.218.

which he tries to integrate into Yiddish poetry through Halpern who is, arguably, the most modernist of modern Yiddish poets. Greenberg, like Tabachnik, situates Halpern as a modernist. He does this by connecting him to ideas which are fundamental to modernism. For example, he writes that Halpern "felt the heavy burden which oppressed man originates in the idea that life is splintered, wild, and no longer an organic part of the cosmos."[16] Furthermore, he states that the great accomplishment of modern art is that it serves as a critic of modern life and mirrors it in a hallucinatory way, something Halpern does in his poetry.[17] While these feelings and motifs are definitely present in the two books Halpern published during his lifetime, In Nyu York ("In New York," 1919) and Di Goldene Pave ("The Golden Peacock," 1924), in the poems which Halpern wrote after the publication of these two collections, "there is even greater despair, an even stronger feeling that everything is senseless, even greater angst, even deeper fear of the darkness which expands beyond the skies."[18] By stating that the posthumously collected poetry is Halpern's most achieved work and emphasizing the modernist aesthetic

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[16] Greenberg, p.61.

[17] Ibid., p.106.

[18] Tabachnik, "Tsu a Kharakteristik...," pp.251-52.

expressed therein, Tabachnik is for all intents and purposes claiming that Halpern is at his best when he is the most modernist, an opinion with which Greenberg would no doubt agree.

Halpern's modernist style developed throughout his career. A major turning point in this development came in 1922. In April, 1922 the communist Yiddish daily newspaper *Freiheit* ("Freedom") was founded. Like most Yiddish writers of his time, Halpern struggled financially throughout his life. However, Halpern's financial situation was worse because, unlike most Yiddish writers, he refused to earn money by writing for the Yiddish press. Halpern felt that to write pieces for the vulgar daily press meant "selling out." Therefore, Halpern chose to starve rather than to compromise his principles. However, when *Freiheit* was established, Halpern felt that he would not be compromising himself, or "selling out" by writing for a communist, non-mainstream newspaper. Halpern was a major contributor to this newspaper until 1925. These years represent a new phase in Halpern's poetic development, a dive deeper into literary modernism. Ruth Wisse writes:

> The poetry that Halpern published in *Freiheit* was considerably denser than anything he had published before. A visionary with a sharp pictorial imagination, he had begun to give freer reign to metaphors and similes that had an existence almost independent

of the 'plain meaning' of the text.[19]

Furthermore, this period saw "the development of a private, disjunctive, and intricate web of images that did not present a clear sequence of thought" in Halpern's poems.[20]

Eliezer Greenberg is chiefly concerned with situating Halpern within the entire frame of modern European and American literatures. He does this by comparing Halpern to many different writers throughout the book. However, it seems that he attempts to make many connections where there are none. In fairness, he does indeed make some very interesting and valid comparisons between Halpern and poets such as Heine and Rimbaud. Moreover, he is correct in suggesting that Halpern might very well have been influenced by Baudelaire whom he read in German translation.[21] Halpern was indeed influenced by German literature. He studied it at the University of Vienna. In fact, his first poems were written in German. Furthermore, having grown up in Galicia and spent his teenage years in Vienna, Halpern, as can be seen in his early poetry, was influenced by

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[19] Ruth R. Wisse, A Little Love in Big Manhattan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP,1988), p.128.

[20] Wisse, pp.127-28.

[21] Ibid., p.76.

writers such as Dehmel, Liliencron, and especially Heine.[22]

It is, however, in other comparisons where the connections between Halpern and other authors seem contrived. For example, in discussing Halpern's method of addressing himself in his poems as "Moyshe-Leyb," Greenberg writes:

> Walt Whitman asks himself in different poems:
> - What do you hear, Walt Whitman?
> and: - Oh take my hand, Walt Whitman!
> and Moyshe-Leyb:
> - Hey, hey, Moyshe-Leyb, what are you standing here for!
> or: - The brat Moyshe-Leyb dances!
> and: - Moyshe-Leyb will invent a ship that leaves![23]

While it is unlikely that Halpern read Whitman's poetry in English, it is likely that he read some of Whitman's works in Yiddish translation.[24] In

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[22] Wisse, p.76.

[23] Greenberg, p.13.

[24] Many of *Di Yunge* came to literature through the dominant language of the land of their birth, whether Russian, Polish or German. If they did make contact with foreign literatures, it was through translations of these works into familiar tongues. For example, members of *Di Yunge* who came from Russia read the works of the French symbolists translated into Russian. Upon arriving in America, many of *Di Yunge* did not take time to make contact with English language literature. This could possibly be explained by the fact that these Yiddish writers were almost all working men, and could simply not afford to take time off to study the language well enough to be able to appreciate it literarily. Of course, a glaring exception to this trend is the poet I.J. Schwartz who translated the works of Walt Whitman, as well as other American writers.

fact the two quotes of Whitman's which Greenberg offers are both taken from I.J. Schwartz's translation of "Salut Au Monde" published in the first volume of Shriftn (1912), a journal to which Halpern began contributing his own works two years later. Therefore, while Halpern was probably familiar with this specific poem in its Yiddish translation, there is not enough evidence to show a significant connection between the two poets in this respect.[25] Halpern's addresses to or comments on "Moyshe-Leyb" are indeed the main subject of this present work. They are quite complicated and, as will be shown, they are not as simple as Greenberg posits.

Both Greenberg and Tabachnik are very concerned with locating Halpern within a Jewish, and particularly Yiddish context. Tabachnik emphasizes certain techniques within Halpern's overall style which are reminiscent of traditional Jewish texts, especially the Talmud, and the way in which these texts were studied. Furthermore, Tabachnik contends that these methods are used both earnestly and mockingly by Halpern.[26]

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[25] Halpern was greatly influenced by the literature written in the language of his youth, i.e. German. This was a dominating cultural language in Galicia, where Halpern lived until the age of 12, and the language of culture in Vienna where the author spent his teenage years.

[26] Tabachnik, "Tsu A Kharakteristik...," p.241.

Halpern's poetry is characterized largely by discussions and supposed teachings, as well as by a parody of these styles. In his search for a poetic language true to daily speech, Halpern came back to the traditional character of Yiddish which is heavily influenced by the language of study. At the same time, Halpern parodied this very language. Greenberg makes this connection as well, though in an indirect manner. He compares Halpern's soliloquizing to Mendele Moykher Sforim's (1835?-1917) form of speaking of himself in the third person: "*Omer Reb Mendele*" (Thus said Reb Mendele). This is an ironic use of a Talmudic form of discourse, and while it does bring to mind the study of sacred texts in Jewish religion, Greenberg invokes it to connect Halpern with Mendele, and not with traditional Jewish learning. Moreover, the two critics contextualize Halpern within Modern Yiddish Literature and offer two different frames within which Halpern's work, in particular his language and style, may be located: the prose and poetry traditions.

In addition to comparing him to Mendele, albeit in a quite cursory and superficial way, Greenberg connects Halpern to the "Sweatshop Poets" in America. Halpern, Greenberg writes, was very much under the influence of the German romantics and especially Heine, upon arriving in New York in 1908. However, this influence quickly wore off and Halpern soon began

writing in the style of the Yiddish labour poets, in particular Morris Rosenfeld.[27] In fact, Greenberg calls Halpern "the bridge, the link in the chain which connected the previous generation of poets here [the "Sweatshop Poets"] with *Di Yunge*."[28]. As will be pointed out later, this is a simplification of the nature of this relationship. Though Greenberg allows that most of these poems written in this "sweatshop" mode were never collected in book form by Halpern, they still represent a significant part of his development as an artist.

Tabachnik compares Halpern to the three classic writers of Modern Yiddish Literature, Mendele, Sholem Aleykhem, and Y.L. Perets, in language and in style. Specifically, he compares Halpern's monologues in his poems as well as his "deep" Jewish style to Mendele:

> Each turn and bend of a line, each inflection, each intonation, each idiomatic expression.... each stylistic accomplishment in the cited poems, as well as in those not cited, is basically and deeply Jewish - Jewish like Mendele's prose style.[29]

Furthermore, Tabachnik asserts that Halpern, like the three classic writers, created a language which was heavily based upon the spoken

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[27] Greenberg, p.17.

[28] Ibid., p.22.

[29] Tabachnik, p.237.

Yiddish of ordinary Jews.[30] Tabachnik makes this comparison in order to create a chain of continuity between Halpern and the classic writers. However, there is in fact very little continuity. While it is true that both Halpern and the classic writers made a special effort to write in a kind of idiomatic language of East European Jews in their works, their motives were very different. As Dan Miron illustrates quite clearly in A Traveler Disguised, the classic writers, Mendele and Sholem Aleykhem in particular, wrote largely under the influence of the Haskalah. Since Yiddish still suffered under the stigma of what Miron labels "the aesthetics of ugliness" until well into the 1880's, the Yiddish writers of this time were very limited in how they could employ Yiddish as a literary language. Therefore, Miron states, the only way Yiddish could function was through the mimicry and exposure of East European Yiddish language and gesticulation. Furthermore, this was done in order to demonstrate to its intended audience their shortcomings and faults, and thereby serve its purpose as a chiefly didactic and socially utilitarian literature.[31]

Halpern wrote in a modernist vein and was clearly more interested

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[30] Ibid., p.240.

[31] Dan Miron, A Traveler Disguised (New York: Schocken Books, 1973). This issue is discussed in Chapter 2, "A Language As Caliban," pp.34-66.

in writing about his inner turmoil than dedicating his entire literary career to enlightening the Yiddish speaking masses like Mendele. Halpern's simple language had to do with his constant preoccupation with truthful representation in his poetry. Here we encounter Tabachnik's claims about Halpern's poetic style and motivation for writing. The rebellion expressed by Halpern in his poetry, Tabachnik claims, is rooted in Halpern's obsession with uncovering the truth in his poems. Greenberg writes that for Halpern, poetry was no more than a means to find the truth in life.[32] This often meant turning things on their heads or "vandalizing" them, that is to say purposely destroying things through poetry and often not excluding himself or his poems. This vandalism, according to Tabachnik, is manifested in different ways in Halpern's oeuvre. One clear example is Halpern's discrediting the worth of literature, both biblical and secular. His attack on the latter is intensified by the fact that it was carried out at a time "when at least one Yiddish critic - B. Rivkin - proclaimed Yiddish Literature as a 'substitute for religion'."[33] Tabachnik illustrates this type of attack by quoting Halpern's poem "Dos Hob Ikh Geredt Tsu Mayn Eyntsikn Zun Bam Shpil Un Mer Tsu Keynem Nit" (This I Spoke To My

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[32] Greenberg, p.71.

[33] Tabachnik, "Poet Un Anti-Poet," p.214.

Only Son At Play And To No One Else). Speaking of poets, Halpern writes:

> They fabricate riddles from hard steel
> To resound, when they are opened, like between a monkey's teeth
> A hollow nut. They believe that it is beautiful -
> With faces almost saffron yellow -
> To circle, like dogs at night around a strange threshold
> Around the word, which for them is a house with a door in front,
> Through which to be entered. -
> And in back a door, like a cat and mouse one should
> Run back outside.
> And once again inside.
> They believe what is written down can last forever,
> When one clothes it with the warmness of the sun which warms
> Ice and shit.[34]

Tabachnik writes that this excerpt is a good example of Halpern's ar.. aesthetics which "was a part of his essential convictions, almost something which was organic in him."[35] Furthermore, this was a reaction to the aestheticization of language by his contemporary poets ("they"), *Di Yunge*, who looked to beautify and refine language in poetry. While this poem does seem to attack his contemporary poets specifically, it also attacks art in general. The traditional Jewish idea of giving great value to something which has been written down was applied to art and Halpern despised this idea. He felt that art was ephemeral and meaningless, and

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., pp.214-15.

that artists like *Di Yunge* took their own roles and art too seriously. However, Greenberg contends that Halpern's exposure to poets associated with *Di Yunge*, such as Mani Leyb and Zishe Landau, benefitted him greatly. This, Greenberg explains, helped Halpern, a noisemaker by nature, learn some restraint in his poetry. Unfortunately, Greenberg offers no corroborating evidence in the form of specific passages from Halpern's work in order to support this assertion.

In comparing Halpern to *Di Yunge*, Ruth Wisse points to Halpern's poem "Der Gasnpoyker" (The Street Drummer) as a symbol of how Halpern considered himself in relation to poetry. Halpern identifies here with a noisy, common image and portrays the narrator, or poet, as "a tramp, a social outcast, a street musician - not a refiner of language and sentiment but a rhythmic noisemaker, pounding his drum."[36] While some other poets associated with *Di Yunge* strove to create harmony and stillness in their poetry, Halpern was noisily hammering out his verse with a conscious sense of being alone:

> That's the way I tore through
> Tore through, bit through
> As if with my head through a wall,
> Over path and road and land
> With my teeth -

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[36] Wisse, p.86.

Chop the stone!
Chop the stone and remain alone!
Dog and bum, rogue and wind.
Wildly, wildly through the strangeness!
I have no coat, no shirt,
I have no wife, no child.
I bang as if to split the drum,
And I crash the cymbals,
And I spin myself round-around -
Dzhin, dzhin, boom-boom-boom.
Dzhin dzhin boom![37]

In comparing Halpern to Mani Leyb, a poet considered to embody the tenets of *Di Yunge*, Wisse explains that while Mani Leyb sought harmony in a world of conflict, Halpern believed that poetry was meant to recreate life's tension.[38] Wisse also refers to Halpern's style as "antipoetic." Specifically, this can be seen in Halpern's pioneering move in Modern Yiddish poetry using the spoken idiom of the Yiddish speaking Jew and presenting it to his readers as poetry.[39]

Halpern did not believe in the refinement of language or of images. He saw this as masking the truth and responded to this *sheyne reyd* (beautiful language) by mocking it, as well as by including much *grobe*

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[37] Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, "Der Gasnpoyker," in In Nyu York (New York: Farlag Matones, 1954), p.36.

[38] Wisse, p.94.

[39] Ibid., p.101.

reyd (vulgar language) in his poetry. In fact, he would even denounce poetry in general, not even sparing his own work. He mocks art yet he himself is an artist:

> Here is how I tricked myself.
> Just as the sun arose
> I went out to gather
> goat turds to put in my poem,
> which I just wrote down yesterday
> about the moon with its light.[40]

These tendencies can be clearly seen in the above quoted passages. This, Tabachnik explains, is rooted as well in Halpern's obsession with the truth.

Tabachnik writes that the main source for the negative as well as the positive elements in Halpern's poetry is Halpern's truthfulness and his uncompromising straightforwardness.[41] Here, as Ruth Wisse points out, we see a major difference between Halpern and Mani Leyb. While Mani Leyb tried to transform the ugly urban imagery he saw into beautiful landscapes, Halpern wanted to expose it for what is really was. He felt that Mani Leyb's type of poetry was deception and that the real role of the poet was to reveal the truth which had been made false by poets like Mani

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[40] Halpern, "Mayn Tsavoe" (My Will), in Di Goldene Pave (New York: Farlag Matones,1954), p.151.

[41] Tabachnik, "Poet Un Anti-Poet," p.220.

Leyb: "When you live among deafening elevated trains and tenements that blot out the sky, you cannot be expected to sing of the holy temples and fairy princesses."[42] There is a close connection here with Halpern's use of unrefined language. He was heavily criticized for his use of vulgar language in the pages of *Freiheit*. In response to this he published "Der Muser Zoger un Falsher Poet" ("The Moralizer and the False Poet") in March, 1923:

> I know they will say, Moishe Leib is coarse,
> If he were to mention an unclean place
> But - God forgive him - what is he to do
> If their shouting does give off the true
> Stench of an unclean place?[43]

Furthermore, "his rebellious nature, his tendency to throw himself into something with such impetus .... often caused him, in his truthfulness, to penetrate to the greatest extremes, until the denial of every illusion, every beauty, until the denial of his own calling."[44] This point can be matched with Tabachnik's assertion that Halpern hated all forms of consolation. Tabachnik claims that Halpern felt consolation was an empty

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[42] Wisse, p.127.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Tabachnik, "Poet Un Anti-Poet," p.220

lie invented by humans, and Tabachnik connects this to Halpern's vision of the world which is ruled by brutality, darkness, and wildness. Furthermore, any attempt to bring "light," that is consolation, would be denied. According to Tabachnik's interpretation of Halpern's poetry, any attempt to bring light would be severely punished by the ruler (the night) and would be going against the rule and will of God.[45] Tabachnik presents this example to prove his point:

> It may be,
> That he who does not see to go alone
> At night, in the darkness, should not go;
> And he who must, should with feet and hands,
> With self-sacrificial devotion possibly scramble,
> Like a shadow over the sheer walls,
> Because the night wishes it this way and desires it -
> The night, when it comes to conquer the earth,
> And therefore its punishment is so great
> For the one for whom
> A light shines through a window.[46]

While the catastrophic and far reaching world events in Halpern's lifetime, such as World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the Great Depression, certainly made their mark on his poetry, the greatest

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[45] Ibid., p.227.

[46] Ibid., p.228. This is a quote from the poem "Zarkhi Vegn Di Zibn Royte Berd ("Zarkhi About The Seven Red Beards")," in the Zarkhi cycle in Di Goldene Pave, p.245.

influence on Halpern's work, without question, was his deep hatred of the big city. In fact, these historical events did not seem to affect Halpern in the same way as they did the other poets of his generation. For example, after the atrocities of the First World War became known to the American writers, there was a period of a great romanticization of the *shtetl* and a feeling of nostalgia gripped immigrant American Jews. *Di Yunge* wrote longingly of their homes in Eastern Europe, and began to question their decisions to leave these homes a decade earlier.[47] Wisse offers as an example of this feeling a poem by Zishe Landau, a poet associated with *Di Yunge* whose poetic tone changed from ironic to nostalgic after the shock of the war:

> For every Jewish dirty lane
> I weep and mourn for every shop.
> For every tavern, pawn shop and inn
> for our false weight and measure.
> For every merry Jewish brothel
> that stands in some Gentile town
> for everything that was ours
> and now vanished with the smoke.
> All that is Jewish is pure and bright!
> Rebuild that poor life anew![48]

With all its ugliness and imperfection, Landau embraces the *shtetl* in its

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[47] Wisse, "*Di Yunge*: Immigrants or Exiles?," in Prooftexts (Baltimore: Jan. 1981, 1:1, pp.43-61), p.47.

[48] Ibid.

totality in the face of its destruction. Halpern, on the other hand, did not feel this same nostalgia. His epic poem "A Nakht" ("A Night") was not a nostalgic longing for home but a nightmarish phantasmagoria of Jewish history and personal terror. While it was no doubt influenced by the chaos and horror of the war, we see Halpern's feelings for home in a poem he published in May, 1923 in *Freiheit* entitled "Zlochov, Mayn Heym" ("Zlochov, My Home"):

> Oh, Zlochov, you my home, my town
> With the church spires, synagogue and bath,
> Your women sitting in the market place,
> Your little Jews, breaking loose
> Like dogs at a peasant coming down
> With a basket of eggs from the Sassov mountain -
> Like life in spring awakens in me
> My poor bit of longing for you -
> My home, my Zlochov.[49]

In this first stanza of the poem we immediately encounter a strongly negative image of the Jews as "little" and like hungry, desperate dogs. These are the first things that the poet can remember, and, as one reads through the poem, one finds no positive memories or images of the *shtetl*. Halpern can find no comfort in these memories and curses the town where he was raised. Moreover, the only tiny bit of satisfaction he can glean

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[49] "Zlochov, My Home," in Di Goldene Pave, pp.20-22. Translated in Benjamin and Barbara Harshav's American Yiddish Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.409.

from the entire poem, and indeed from his experience as an emigrant from his hometown, is that he will not have his eternal resting place there:

> And this, indeed, is my only consolation
> That they will not bury me in you -
> My home, my Zlochov.[50]

Here we cannot find the same nostalgia as expressed by poets like Landau at this time. Halpern still saw the *shtetl* as an unhappy place which he is glad he left. Yet his new home, the big city, was equally as unsatisfying to Halpern.

In Halpern's later poetry: "Manhattan becomes .... a symbol: the last, bitter sum of man's fate in all prisons - in the big cities of the world."[51] The big city represented industrialized civilization which Halpern hated because it oppressed man and made him superfluous. Greenberg writes: "Civilization gave birth to a machine and the machine devours its own mother."[52] In addition, "Humanity, according to him [Halpern] is sentenced to be sterile, and must suffer from its own industrialized and materialistic civilization. From this stems all evils; this is [Halpern's]

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[50] Harshav, p.411.

[51] Greenberg, p.73.

[52] Ibid., p.83.

central idea."[53] Greenberg even goes as far as to say that all of the other motifs in Halpern's poetry are of slight importance, compared to that of a demonized city.[54] Greenberg asserts that however much Halpern may detest the city, he is a product of it and his poetry always contains a very urban character. Furthermore, Halpern is the type of poet who cannot escape the reality of the city and as a result can only create urban poetry. The best example of this big city feeling in Halpern's later poetry and, arguably, from his entire oeuvre, is the poem which Greenberg quotes in its entirety in support of his argument: "Dos Lid Fun Sof Zuntik" ("The Song Of Sunday's End"):[55]

> Near the steps on the first floor,
> in the stale, dark corridor
> cries a mouse and with her as one
> a grimy hand in mussed-up hair.
> - The bit of love in big Manhattan.
>
> The hair - a whiff of colouring which is cheap,
> The hand is like leather stiff and hard.
> Two equal partners who have maybe
> never waited for something better.
> - The bit of love in big Manhattan.

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[53] Ibid., p.103.

[54] Ibid., p.104.

[55] The Yiddish word *lid* means both "song" and "lyric poem." Unfortunately, no translation can capture that interplay.

But it is strange, when two people are heard
silent in the dark,
why doesn't "Sammy" say something?
why doesn't "Bessie" say something?
- The bit of love in big Manhattan

But maybe they speak and it is not heard
on account of the suppressed silent scream
from the seven times seventeen iron beams,
on the dark ceilings above them?
- The bit of love in big Manhattan.

Ceilings upon ceilings and beds and beds
and the air is steamy and coal smoke,
and from the above floors to the bottom - an abyss,
up to - a field of high clouds.
- The bit of love in big Manhattan.

A big city at night, such a distant strangeness
it embraces in the darkness in you,
millions of sleeping husbands and wives
like drunks bloated with beer.
- The bit of love in big Manhattan.

Children sleep like monkeys on trees,
on balconies under fire-escapes,
and the moon - the chimney sweep,
shakes ashes over the heads.
- The bit of love in big Manhattan.

And Bessie the "goirl" knows nothing,
and Sammy too with an open mouth
and Monday which comes swimming before the eyes -
like a desert empty and bare for miles.
- The bit of love in big Manhattan.

And even Bessie's mother, the old one,

she no longer asks - "where is the girl?"
and it doesn't bother her that the black hair
became blond and red.
- The bit of love in big Manhattan.

But one should not think that this is a sick one,
he who thinks about this at night.
a tired one only of his own sadness
he lies and smokes his pipe and thinks.
- The bit of love in big Manhattan.[56]

Ruth Wisse writes that romance in the tenement houses was a popular theme for American Yiddish writers. Moreover, Wisse writes that Halpern used the traditional ballad form in order to destroy its romantic charm.[57] Indeed, Halpern shows the reader here that the only type of love possible in the big city is cheap and remote. Unlike many of *Di Yunge*, Halpern cannot prettify this situation, nor can he separate himself from it.

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[56] Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, "Dos Lid Fun Sof Zuntik," in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, vol. 1, pp.42-44. Quoted in Greenberg, pp.72-3. Halpern cleverly includes himself in the last stanza of this poem. Halpern was known to smoke a pipe, and even drew his own self-portrait smoking one. This last stanza is a signal to his readers to identify this character with the poet himself.

[57] Wisse, A little love..., pp.168-69. Kathryn Hellerstein writes: "Halpern gives the ballad the appearance of an unadorned *object trouve*, but frames it invisibly with narrative devices. These devices serve to undermine the assumptions on which the ballad form rests, assumptions concerning both the communal audience and the poet writing for that audience." Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Demon Within: Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's Subversive Ballads," in Prooftexts. Baltimore: Sept. 1987, 7:3, p.227.

Another theme in Halpern's poetry which both Greenberg and Tabachnik discuss is his willingness to shock, *pour epater le bourgeois*. Greenberg writes that this began early in Halpern's career as a means of protest. Halpern wanted to shake the parvenu out of his comfort with the only artistic weapon he had: shocking language and imagery.[58] Greenberg asserts that this feeling becomes more pronounced and developed in his later poetry,[59] as does his entire poetic style. However, Greenberg asserts that Halpern's true power in his poetry lies in his ability to ask questions, contradict popular opinions, and argue with himself within his poems. In fact both Tabachnik and Greenberg, in reference to Halpern's poetry, quote Yeats who wrote: "From fighting with someone rhetoric is created, from fighting with oneself - poetry is created."[60] In these instances, Greenberg believes that Halpern is artistically at his best. Halpern asks many difficult existential questions but he rarely provides any answers:

> Only become muddled in a wisdom-knot, with nails tear and bind -
> What do you know more than clouds and wind?
> What is known as the world?
> The game of cat and mouse by starlight?
> The sadness of the tree which is silent down to the dead pile of

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[58] Greenberg, p.37.

[59] Ibid., p.42.

[60] Greenberg, p.48, Tabachnik, "Tsu A Kharakteristik....," p.245.

earth?
Should the rooster which wakes us give away his comb, the red one,
Together with his head to the dog in the yard -
When he is slaughtered?[61]

Tabachnik conducts a study of Halpern's poetic style which he describes in psychological terms. He writes that Halpern is a type of split personality of "poet and anti-poet." Tabachnik states that Halpern wrote in two different modes, lyric and satiric, within conventional as well as unconventional poetic forms. He writes that satire was an "organic" need for Halpern. However one can still find many lyrical qualities, particularly in his earlier poetry. Tabachnik defines lyric poetry thus: "Modernist or not, the essence of lyric is nevertheless music, feeling, softness, dreaminess, prayer, a pursuit of blending with things, with the world, with God."[62] These are qualities usually associated with lyric poetry. Tabachnik categorizes Halpern as a type of misanthropic satirist whose satire is woven with the threads of the author's soul: "He lives with it and breathes with it."[63] A satirist, claims Tabachnik, sharpens the edges which divide things, as well as exaggerates these divisions. He contends

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61 Greenberg, p.65.

62 Tabachnik, "Poet Un Anti-Poet," p.221.

63 Ibid., p.222

that the satirical or " Evil Moyshe-Leyb" is more pronounced in the collection of posthumously collected works and, according to Tabachnik, his best poetry. Moreover, Tabachnik asserts that in these poems the lyrical or "Good Moyshe-Leyb" is lost. Therefore, Tabachnik implies that Halpern's work as a satirist, or "anti-poet" is more significant than his work as a lyricist or "poet." Furthermore, by labelling these later poems, which are imbued with a clearly modernist aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic), as anti-poetry, yet still favouring them as the artist's most accomplished work, Tabachnik is making general claims about the categorization of poetry. How, on the one hand, can he call these poems the work of an anti-poet, while, on the other hand, proclaim them as an indispensable part of the Modern Yiddish canon? Also, Tabachnik makes a value judgement at the end of the first essay: "Luckily .... the poet in Moyshe-Leyb was stronger than the anti-poet. However much he chased poetry away, he was not able to be free of it."[64] Tabachnik resolves this seemingly paradoxical situation by asserting that even though Halpern may have consciously tried to write "anti-poetry," beautiful and lyrical poetry still flowed from his pen. In other words, Halpern's rough, crude, tumultuous, modernist writings possess an aesthetic of their own which, not only is

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[64] Ibid., p.232.

just as valid as a traditional or romantic aesthetic, but in Halpern's case produced a more significant and better poetry than what he wrote earlier.

Both Greenberg and Tabachnik place importance on the poetic forms Halpern employed at the different stages of his career. Greenberg writes that after Halpern published his first book of poems, In Nyu York, his style became more elastic. He left conventional forms of poetry and experimented with newer and more appropriate forms for his new ideological understanding.[65] Tabachnik also sees a close relation between form and content in Halpern's poetry. He claims that when Halpern could not control the chaos in his own life he would mirror it instead in his poems, and particularly in unconventional forms of poetry. Once again, Tabachnik notes that these forms appear most frequently in the works collected after Halpern's death without which one cannot know, not only the "entire Moyshe-Leyb, but also .... the true Moyshe-Leyb."[66] The entire distinction between "poet and anti-poet" suggests a type of "split-personality disorder" in which different forces within Halpern's head are struggling to be the dominant voice in his poetry. Tabachnik suggests this by stating that Halpern had many different dramatic characters in his

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[65] Greenberg, p.43.

[66] Tabachnik, "Poet Un Anti-Poet," p.219

poems who often interrupted each other in mid-speech.[67]

This leads to the query as to whether this very approach is problematic for Halpern's poems; in other words, does his poetry suffer because of the "split-personality" writing style of poet and anti-poet, or aesthete and anti-aesthete? Tabachnik writes that Halpern's pessimistic view of life in time became nihilistic because Halpern felt that he could not correct the grave problems which he faced in his life. Therefore, he vented his rage through "vandalizing" his own poetry like "an idol worshipper beating his God which cannot help him."[68] According to Tabachnik, the hopelessness, despair, and disappointment "devoured the feeling for poetic sublimation, took Halpern's will and desire to give his ideas, his tragic life experiences .... the monumental artistic expression that the material in his poetry earned and to which Halpern was suited, according to his titanic powers."[69] Furthermore, Tabachnik states that a

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[67] Ibid., p.224. Tabachnik offers the poem "Zlochov Mayn Heym" as an example of this method. Tabachnik claims that while the first voice in the poem reminisces in a nostalgic and longing way for home, the second voice cuts in with negative images and memories. However, it is not clear that there are indeed two voices in this poem. It seems more like one voice both remembering and criticizing his own birthplace.

[68] Ibid., p.217.

[69] Ibid., p.219.

writer who does not find poetic sublimation for his tragic life experiences will never conquer his tragic fate and therefore will never be redeemed. This very quality of Halpern's poetry sets him up as a tragic poet for he is never redeemed through his poetry.[70] Here one can infer from Tabachnik's argument that while the poet may suffer in his personal life, the poetry does not. This is to say that, according to Tabachnik, when Halpern is at his most tormented, despairing, and hopeless in his personal life, his poetry is at its best. Therefore while his inner life may be an unredeemed disaster, Halpern's poetry only benefits from his inner struggles which produce his most enduring and artistically superior work.

Greenberg, as was noted earlier, also feels that Halpern's later poetry was his best. Apart from the aforementioned reasons why Greenberg feels that this poetry deserves much attention, he states that these later works are so significant because they reflect, to a great degree, Halpern's reality and life experiences in a pure and authentic way.[71] Halpern's health and financial situation worsened throughout his career and by his last stage of creativity from 1924 to 1932, he suffered terribly in his personal life. Halpern is no longer the *enfant terrible* who

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[70] Ibid., p.218.

[71] Greenberg, p.124.

mocked the establishment, but a broken man whose once rebellious poetry now sounds more like confession.[72] Although Greenberg acknowledges that these last poems are less accessible to the reading audience than were the earlier more realistic works, he asserts that they are very complicated, nuanced, and sometimes confusing poems which represented Halpern's reality.

It is clear that Greenberg would agree with Tabachnik's assertion that Halpern was at his best at his most modernist. Greenberg hints at this by describing the techniques which he feels dominate Halpern's last poems: "....poems, where the sudden metaphor dominates, the surprising image, the unexpected association, where the ostensibly 'by chance' irrational details are more important than the main theme."[73] Add to this Greenberg's assertion that Halpern was not capable of creating harmonious art and we see Greenberg understanding Halpern as a modernist.

Although these critics prefer Halpern's last works, the persona "Moyshe-Leyb" appears primarily in Halpern's earlier works. Therefore, the poetry considered in this study will be drawn mostly from Halpern's

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[72] Ibid., pp.124-25.

[73] Ibid., p.131.

first book, In Nyu York (1919). However, before considering these poems, it will be helpful to present a brief overview of the issue of persona in literary criticism.

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While the term persona is highly debated in literary criticism, there nevertheless exist some generally agreed upon characteristics of the term. Moreover, there are certain issues connected with the use of persona which form a significant part of the debates around the term. Specifically, these include the questions of authorial sincerity and truthfulness as value judgements of the author's work. In addition, it is important to note whether these issues are necessary or useful criteria by which to evaluate the literary worth of a poet and his creations. Furthermore, the term persona has undergone a transformation through time, and these different understandings of the concept of persona will be contextualized for the purposes of this study. For example, because it is clear that Halpern wrote in a modernist mode, the modernist paradigm of persona is most appropriate to this examination of Halpern's use of this literary device.

The Latin term persona is generally translated as "mask." It refers to a device of transformation and concealment which an actor wore while performing on stage.[74] In literature, persona is understood as a means by

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[74] Robert C. Elliot, The Literary Persona (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,1982), p.21.

which the author distinguishes between himself and one of his fictional characters. This distinction, however, becomes obviously complicated when a poem is written in the first person singular form. The reader wonders whether the speaker is the poet himself or a fictional character using this first person form. Another basic question the reader asks, upon confronting a character who speaks in a poem, is why does the author bother to employ a fictional character to speak his words? This leads to the issues surrounding persona.

While a great part of the criticism on persona in poetry deals with the "I" of the author, it is still quite applicable to this study. The focus of this work is the persona "Moyshe-Leyb" in the four volumes of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's poetry. As will be shown below, Halpern used a persona with his own name in order to create ironic distance between himself and his artistic creation. Still, a naive reader of his poetry would automatically assume a high degree of identification between Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and "Moyshe-Leyb." Here we confront both issues of sincerity and truthfulness in relation to the artistic employment of persona.

Robert C. Elliot, in his excellent study of the role of persona in literature, writes that the Puritan "I" and notion of persona "give us a

paradigm of sincerity."[75] The Puritan period of English literature is co-extensive with Cromwell's reign (1649-58). The poets associated with this period include Milton, Henry Vaughn, and Edmund Waller. The Puritan belief is that the "I" of the poem, simply put, is identical to the real-life author. Elliot quotes Joan Webber who states that the Puritan "I" is "active, timebound, as simple and visible as possible, desirous of being taken literally and seriously."[76] The "I", in this understanding of it, is meant to be a truthful, sincere representation of the author. This, of course, as Elliot points out, collapses the distinction between art and life. If this belief of the function of the "I" in a poem is assumed to be true, then how does one distinguish between poetry and real-life utterances? Therefore sincerity, concludes Elliot, is a dubious ideal. To support his assertion, Elliot poses four questions of this paradigm of sincerity, as applied to literature in general. First, if a writer must be truthful or sincere, then what kind of truth is demanded of the author? Must he convey historical accuracy about himself? Must he speak about his psychological truth? What kind of poetry would this lead to? Second, is it necessary for the poet to actually feel the emotions which he describes?

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[75] Ibid., p.42.

[76] Ibid.

Would the proponents of this paradigm of sincerity not accept Emily Dickinson's poetry about the sea, for it is known that she never did actually see the sea in her lifetime? This leads to a debate over the value of poetry in Elliot's third question: Must the "I," or in this case "Moyshe-Leyb," truly *be* the poet in order for the poetry to have value? If "Moyshe-Leyb" is not really Halpern at all but merely a fictional construct, does this lessen the poetic value of his work? And lastly, Elliot asks whether it is not possible for an artist to fake sincerity. In other words, how is the reader to truly know the entire life experience and psychology of an author to be able to judge his poetry on the basis of sincere expression?[77] The use of sincerity as a criterion of artistic excellence is therefore not helpful as it dismisses too many possibilities of creation. Simply because an artist may be deemed insincere is not reason enough to condemn poetry which otherwise may be quite meritorious.

Another issue which has sparked great debate is the insistence by certain critics of truth in poetry. Elliot writes that these critics believe that if an author writes in the first person, and does not provide obvious signs that this act is a ruse, his words must be taken at face value. "Specifically, when an author writing in the first person makes an

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[77] Ibid., p.50.

assertion about himself, and signals no disclaimers, he is claiming to tell the truth and should be believed."[78] This approach, Elliot argues, leads to sterility. Unequivocal identification of author with persona speaking the truth robs the poem of its merits and accomplishments. An examination of Halpern's "Memento Mori" can illuminate this point. While not written in the "I" form, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern employs the persona "Moyshe-Leyb" as the centre of this poem, and gives the reader an inner view of this character's emotions through an omniscient narrator:

> And if Moyshe-Leyb, the poet, tells
> That he saw Death on the high waves -
> Just as he sees himself in a mirror,
> And it was in the morning, around ten -
> Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?[79]

Here Halpern himself addresses the issue of truth and persona: "Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?" One can read a double meaning here. The first, the literal meaning of the poem, is the question as to whether the addressees of "Moyshe-Leyb"'s thoughts would believe him if he revealed to them his feelings about, and his encounter with death. The second, more covert meaning, is whether Halpern's reading audience will believe this poem to

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[78] Ibid., p.67.

[79] "Memento Mori," translated in Harshav's American Yiddish Poetry, p.393.

be a sincere presentation of the author's own feelings. Inevitably, Halpern used the persona "Moyshe-Leyb" as a device to create ironic distance between himself and his poetical creation. Perhaps here the author is addressing the issue of sincerity and persona.

This poem also reveals another basic concern with persona. This is the belief that the author is using a persona because he feels that the mask permits him to say certain things that he otherwise could not say. A modernist view of the advantages of using a persona states:

> The mask permits the poet to say things that for various reasons she could not say in her own person or could say only with a loss of artistic detachment; it permits the poet to explore various perspectives without making an ultimate commitment; it is a means for creating, discovering, or defining the self; it prevents the poet from being hurt by self-exposure or being led astray by the limitations of her own vision; it is a means for expressing anxieties and frustrations, or ideals that the poet may not be able to realize in her own life but to which she is committed.[80]

This sense of artistic detachment and the exploration of different perspectives in poetry is very important to Halpern. In the instance of "Memento Mori," it could be suggested that the poet did not want to admit in his own voice the pull and attraction of death for him. Therefore, he employed a persona and ascribed these feelings to him. However, a

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80 "Persona," in Alex Preminger, T.V.F. Brogan, editors, The New Princeton Encyclopedia Of Poetry And Poetics (Princeton, N.J:Princeton UP, 1993), p.901.

persona with the name of "Moyshe-Leyb, the poet" is a rather transparent one, and the reader cannot help but assume a certain level of identification between author and mask. This has to do with Halpern's desire to achieve ironic distance between himself and "Moyshe-Leyb." By referring to a character in the third person, the author ascribes these feelings and thoughts to someone else. However, by giving this character his own name, as well as the title of "poet," Halpern's own *metier*, the reader cannot help but see through this thin disguise.

Still, sincerity and truthfulness as criteria of artistic value have no place in this study. As Robert Elliot writes: "Sincerity .... clashes inevitably with ideas of the persona, whether employed functionally by the poet or analytically by the critic. Masks, irony, dissimulation, artifice - all associated with the persona - are suspect when sincerity holds sway."[81] The demands for truth and sincerity in poetry betray a naive approach to poetry, and are neither helpful nor useful in this discussion.

"Moyshe-Leyb" is by no means Halpern's only persona. There are a whole set of characters through which Halpern speaks in his poetry. These include personae with names such as Zarkhi, Leyb-Ber, Yohama, and Kuni

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[81] Elliot, p.32.

Lemel.[82] Greenberg writes that Halpern was probably not aware of the theories and issues surrounding persona, and merely used these names instinctively to try and attain a critical artistic truth.[83] For Greenberg the issue of persona in the works of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern is a rather simple one: all of the personae are equal to Halpern himself. They are merely representations of the poet.[84] In fact, in reference to the Zarkhi character, a complex and interesting creation as will be shown, Greenberg simply equates this persona with the real-life author: "And when Zarkhi (Halpern) cannot sleep...."[85] This, however, is an oversimplification of matters and a naive approach to the use of personae in Halpern's work.

Zarkhi is a character who appears, primarily, in a thirty-eight chapter poem cycle in Halpern's book Di Goldene Pave (1924). While there

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[82] These names all have significant relevance. Zarkhi is based on the Ashkenazi male first name Zorakh, of biblical origin, Leyb-Ber (literally "Lion-Bear") is a traditional Ashkenazi male double appellation, like Moyshe-Leyb, Yohama is reminiscent of an exotic Asian name, and Kuni Lemel is a male double appellation which came to be synonymous with "fool."

[83] Greenberg, p.47.

[84] This argument is presented in chapter 7, "Gezang Tsu Der Zun" ("Song To The Sun"), in Greenberg.

[85] Greenberg, p.54.

are a few poems in which this character appears in the posthumous set of poetry, as well as in other works which remain in manuscript form. Zarkhi's major appearance is in the aforementioned cycle entitled "Zarkhi Bam Breg Yam" ("Zarkhi At The Seashore"). Khone Shmeruk describes this character as:

> A runaway or a reject from the nearby New York big-city vise, Zarkhi hangs around day and night by the seashore and weaves his visions, meditations, and questions, about which even he himself cannot find any answer .... It is a tragic grotesque figure which embodies the contradictions of human and Jewish existence in the modern chaos.[86]

Indeed, this is a very intense and complicated character who stands at the centre of these often long and dense poems. The reader will wonder where the name of this persona, who figures so prominently in Halpern's poetry, came from. While the origin is not certain, Shmeruk offers one possibility. In 1910, a story appeared in a journal associated with *Di Yunge*, *Literatur* (Literature) entitled "Khaverim" (Friends).[87] It was written by Herman Gold and it featured a character named Zarkhi, an "oddball" Yiddish writer

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[86] Khone Shmeruk, "Umbakante Shafungen Fun Moyshe-Leyb Halpern," in Di Goldene Keyt (Tel-Aviv: 1972, 75:1), p.212.

[87] Yoyl Entin, M.Y. Khayimovitsh, Yoyl Slonim, editors, Literatur - Zamelbukh, vol. 2 (New York: Hoypt Farkoyf In Mayzls Bukhhandlung, 1910), pp.56-70.

who did not seem to fit in to society.[88] Shmeruk suggests that the name was familiar to people associated with *Di Yunge* at this time, and that perhaps Halpern took this persona from this source.

Zarkhi first appeared in Halpern's poetry in 1919. This was in a poem entitled "Perpetuum Mobile" which was published in the humour magazine "Der Groyser Kundes"[89] (The Great Prankster), a publication to which Halpern submitted a significant amount of work. This poem was later reworked as "Di Balade Fun Kashtakhan" (The Ballad Of Kashtakhan) and published in Di Goldene Pave. This persona was developed further in the pages of Freiheit between 1922-24, sometimes featured in poems under the title "Fun Der Serye Zarkhi Bam Yam" ("From The Series Zarkhi At The Sea").[90] In addition, as Shmeruk notes, Halpern had conceived to write a novel about Zarkhi, and at its centre a romance between Zarkhi and a female character named Mirtl.

Halpern included a cycle in Di Goldene Pave under the heading "Moyshe-Leyb Bam Breg Yam" (Moyshe-Leyb At The Seashore). These are nine poems which deal with themes and ideas very similar to the Zarkhi

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[88] Shmeruk, p.215.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

cycle. The question of course is why did Halpern choose two different personae and include them in two different cycles if they are basically the same? If, as Greenberg posits, Zarkhi is equivalent to the real-life poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, then "Moyshe-Leyb" must certainly be as well. Greenberg writes that the experienced reader can easily see through the different veils, or personae, that Halpern employs, and therefore a character with a name as transparent as "Moyshe-Leyb," the author's own name, must certainly be a direct representation of the man himself.

While it is not the purpose of this study to evaluate the qualitative differences between the two cycles, it will suffice to state that Greenberg's approach is simplistic and naive. There are incredible interplays and subtleties involved in these two cycles. A few surface examples will clearly illustrate this point. First, the poem "Perpetuum Mobile," in which Zarkhi first appeared, was reworked. given the new title "Di Balade Fun Kashtakhan," and included in the "Moyshe-Leyb" cycle with the Zarkhi character omitted. Second, Zarkhi appears in the Moyshe-Leyb cycle in the poem "Mit Zikh Aleyn" (Alone With Oneself). Admittedly, as Shmeruk writes, the reader encounters, stylistically, many similarities between the two cycles. Specifically, both contain the same kind of grotesque fantasy, both contain parallel contradictions, and, of course,

both are set at the seashore.[91] One more interesting connection between Zarkhi and Moyshe-Leyb is the appearance of Mirtl as the object of Moyshe-Leyb's desire in the poem "In Halber Nakht"(In The Middle Of The Night), included in the Moyshe-Leyb cycle. Still, this is not enough evidence to make identical the personae of Zarkhi and Moyshe-Leyb, and furthermore, one cannot simply state that these characters are direct representations of their creator.

This study, while concerned with the persona "Moyshe-Leyb", will focus, however, only on one of the poems in the "Moyshe-Leyb" cycle. This is because "Moyshe-Leyb" himself only appears in name in one poem, the aforementioned "In Halber Nakht", published first in Shriftn in 1921 under the title "Moyshe-Leyb Bam Breg Yam In Kuni Ayland - In Halber Nakht" ("Moyshe-Leyb At The Cony Island Seashore - In The Middle Of The Night").

Shmeruk writes that the use of persona in Halpern's poetry originated with the author attempting to avoid the conventional lyrical "I" which dominated his earlier works. According to Shmeruk, this began in 1915, a few years prior to the publication of his first book of poetry, In Nyu York. The poet searched for equivalents to the "I" which could function either to distance or narrow the gap between author and

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[91] Ibid., p.212.

persona.[92] The majority of the poems which will be considered in this study are taken from Halpern's In Nyu York, because this is where "Moyshe-Leyb" appears most. This persona appears in twelve of Halpern's works: in nine poems in the first book of Halpern's published poetry; in two poems in Di Goldene Pave; and once in his posthumously published works.[93]

Halpern's personae are further complicated by the manner in which he interchanges them and combines them in his poems. For example, Moyshe-Leyb makes his first appearance in In Nyu York in a poem entitled "Gingeli."[94] Here the character is called "Der Takhshit Moyshe-Leyb " ("The Brat Moyshe-Leyb").[95] Gingeli is a woman who is the addressee of

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[92] Ibid., p.213.

[93] Moyshe-Leyb appears in the following poems: In In Nyu York: "Gingeli" (pp.44-46), "A Shiksl Bam Yam" (pp.104-5), "Nisht Zayn Shiksl" (p.106), "A Guter Kholem" (p.107), "Zhum-Zhum-Zhum" (p.108), "Memento Mori" (p.109), "Madam" (pp.120-21), "Ladushka" (pp.125-29), "Glat Azoy" (p.159). In Di Goldene Pave: "Der Muser-Zoger Un Falsher Poet" (pp.129-32), "In Halber Nakht" (pp.199-207). In the first volume of posthumously published poetry: "Di Heytser" (pp.87-89).

[94] Halpern, In Nyu York, pp.44-46.

[95] *Takhshit* comes from the Hebrew-Aramaic component of Yiddish. In Hebrew the word literally means "jewel." However, when the word is used in its singular form in Yiddish, its idiomatic meaning is "brat," or "scoundrel."

the poem. This character turns up in several more of Halpern's poems, sometimes as an incidental character, other times as the centre of attention. In the poem "Bam Vayn," ("Drinking Wine") in In Nyu York, Gingeli is shown to be a princess who is married to a man named Yohama, another character who turns up on occasion in Halpern's poetry. For example, he appears in the poem "La-La," published in In Nyu York, as the subject of the narrative. The poem begins:

> Yohama dreams like a child,
> The tree becomes an apple tree
> Yohama sings in his dream.
> He sees seven beautiful children
> Wearing small shirts
> Circling around the tree
> Singing his la-la la-la.[96]

Whether Yohama is merely a stock character in Halpern's poems, or a direct representation of the poet himself is an interesting query. Shmeruk points out that the first version of "La-La," published first in a literary almanac Halpern co-edited in 1915 entitled Fun Mentsh Tsu Mentsh ("From Person To Person"), featured the "I" as the main character of the poem. The poem begins:

> Heart, my heart you, like a girl
> In a white fluttering dress,
> You play with me in my dream,

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[96] "La-La," in In Nyu York, pp.135-36.

You play and sing la-la.
I see seven beautiful children,
Wearing small shirts;
They sing la-la, la-la.[97]

Therefore, Shmeruk concludes that this poem at first was close to the poet, as it was written in the first-person "I" form, and became distanced from him with the substitution of a persona for the lyrical "I." Shmeruk gives another example of the frequent interchange of personae in Halpern's poetry, this time one which starts off distanced from the author in the first version, and brought closer in its final published version. On October 14, 1923, Halpern published a poem in Freiheit entitled "Ven Harsh-Ber Iz Nokh Geven A Yingele" ("When Harsh-Ber Was Still A Little Boy"), with the persona "Harshber" at the centre of the poem. This poem was later revised and published in Di Goldene Pave as "Di Balade Fun Mayn Viglid" ("The Ballad Of My Lullaby"). From the title alone we see the shift in emphasis. Compare the opening paragraphs of the two works:

Once in a wintry evening.
The lamp was not yet lit,
Harshber cried, like all small boys,
Before going to sleep.
His grandmother took him upon her lap
And this is what she told him.[98]

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[97] Shmeruk, p.213.

[98] Shmeruk, p.214.

> Once in a wintry evening, the lamp not yet
> Lit, I cried like all small boys
> Before going to sleep, my grandmother took me upon her lap, and this is what she told me.[99]

As Shmeruk states quite clearly, these quotes show us that it is impossible to simply equate the poet with his personae, even when dealing with a persona with the same first name as the poet, or in a poem with the "I" as centre.[100] Halpern is constantly shifting between personae, and there is no consistency in his application of the different personae in his poetry.

From these examples we can also learn that persona plays a big part in Halpern's conscious choices in his poetry. If he chooses a persona in a certain poem to be called "I," then the reader can be certain that this is a deliberate choice, and were the author to call a character in another poem by a name like "Moyshe-Leyb," or "Zarkhi," these different personae each have their own characteristics and must not be confused with one another. Here we encounter a problem in the criticism on Halpern. Especially in the Yiddish critics such as Rivkin, Tabachnik, and Greenberg, we see references to the poet, in other words the historical person Moyshe-Leyb

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[99] Di Goldene Pave, p.44.

[100] Shmeruk, p.214.

Halpern, as "Moyshe-Leyb." Many Yiddish critics and writers knew each other personally and it is likely that they addressed and referred to each other on a first name basis. The critics found it acceptable to identify person with persona. However, in the case of Halpern criticism this poses a problem. By referring to Halpern as "Moyshe-Leyb," the critic confuses the boundary between art and life. As we will see, "Moyshe-Leyb" the persona, while close to the poet, is by no means the equal of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. We see this difficulty as well in English language criticism on Halpern, specifically in Benjamin Harshav's introduction to his bilingual anthology American Yiddish Poetry. In reference to the poem "Dos Hob Ikh Geredt Tsu Mayn Eyntsikn Zun Bam Shpil Un Mer Tsu Keynem Nit" Harshav writes: "Toward the end of this poem, in a long, wildly associative tirade, the speaker, Moyshe-Leyb, warns his son against war."[101] In fact, the speaker of this poem is clearly the first person "I." By calling the speaker "Moyshe-Leyb," Harshav dismisses the self-conscious decision made by Halpern to differentiate between different literary personae. Who is to say that "Moyshe-Leyb" is the author? For that matter, who is to say even that the "I" in Halpern's poetry is a direct reflection of himself? Halpern chooses his personae very carefully and not without reason. If Halpern

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[101] Harshav, p.16.

would have wanted all the speakers in his poems to be direct reflections of himself, then he would not have created such a variegated gallery of characters and speakers.

In choosing the name "Moyshe-Leyb," Halpern plays upon the Jewish tradition of double names in Europe. The double name, such as "Moyshe-Leyb," was a very common appellation in traditional Eastern Europe Jewish society. By giving this central character this name, Halpern appealed to his readers to identify with this persona on an intimate level of the traditional society from which they originated before this tradition was disrupted. This was not some fantastic or exoticly named character, but rather one with a quite common and familiar name.

One more crucial point that needs to be made is that "Moyshe-Leyb" is rarely the main speaker in a poem. The speaker is usually an unnamed voice who has an omniscient view of Moyshe-Leyb's thoughts and feelings. This speaker is the reader's connection to Moyshe-Leyb, and it is upon him that we are completely dependent for any insight at all into the mind of Moyshe-Leyb. Therefore the voice of the person writing down the words on paper is not Moyshe-Leyb, but someone who observes him carefully and is, figuratively, in his mind. Another possibility is that "Moyshe-Leyb" may be addressing himself in the third person.

"Moyshe-Leyb" goes by a few different titles in Halpern's poetry. Usually referred to simply as "Moyshe-Leyb," in a few poems he is given titles such as "Moyshe-Leyb Der Poet" ("Moyshe-Leyb The Poet"), "Der Takhshit Moyshe-Leyb" ("The Brat Moyshe-Leyb"), and "Der Sultan Moyshe-Leyb" ("The Sultan Moyshe-Leyb"). The title that no doubt suggests the closest level of identification to the author is "Moyshe-Leyb The Poet."

There are a few themes which figure prominently in the poems featuring the persona "Moyshe-Leyb." These include this character embracing death, having love affairs with non-Jewish women, acting indifferently to acknowledged contradictions in the world and about himself, and his unsuccessful attempts at love with women he greatly desires. Instead of writing about these themes in the first-person "I" form, or with the name of a different persona, Halpern chooses the name "Moyshe-Leyb" as the central character of these poems. This, as will be shown, is a self-conscious choice which is done deliberately to create ironic distance between persona and author. In using any persona, the poet usually tries to distance himself from the action and feelings of the poem. However, when Halpern chooses a persona with the same name as his own, he is in fact narrowing the distance between creator and creation. While not identical to one another, as Greenberg would have it, there is still a

significant connection between poet and persona. An overview of the themes in the Moyshe-Leyb poems will help to illuminate this discussion.

In the poem "Memento Mori," Halpern writes about Moyshe-Leyb's encounter with death which appears to him at the seashore. Instead of being repelled by it, as would naturally be expected, Moyshe-Leyb instead is inexplicably attracted to it:

> And if Moyshe-Leyb, the poet, tells
> That he saw Death on the high waves -
> Just as he sees himself in a mirror,
> And it was in the morning, around ten -
> Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?
>
> And if Moyshe-Leyb greeted Death from afar
> With a wave of his hand, and asked how things are?
> Just when thousands of people were
> In the water, madly enjoying life -
> Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?
>
> And if Moyshe-Leyb, tears in his eyes,
> Swears that he was drawn to Death,
> As a man is drawn at dusk in desire
> To the window of a woman he adores -
> Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?
>
> And if Moyshe-Leyb paints Death for them
> Not gray and not dark, but dazzling and colourful,
> As he appeared, around ten in the morning,
> Far away, between sky and waves -
> Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?[102]

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[102] "Memento Mori," translated in Harshav's American Yiddish Poetry, p.392.

The setting here is most probably Cony Island. This was a largely Jewish neighbourhood at this time. This place provided a type of relief for New York residents where they could temporarily escape the oppressiveness of the big city and enjoy some time at the beach. After World War I, subway access was established which allowed people to reach Cony Island by public transport. This meant that now literally millions of people travelled there, and Cony Island became a type of mass resort with great crowding. This was, therefore, an escape from the city, but not from the crowds. Yet while "thousands of people were in the water, madly enjoying life," "Moyshe-Leyb The Poet" can think only of death. The theme of death appears frequently in poems containing the Moyshe-Leyb persona. It appears in a similar fashion in the poem "A Guter Kholem" (A Good Dream):

> Above, the sky
> Is blue and wide.
> A tired Moyshe-Leyb
> Stretches out in the sand.
>
> Moyshe-Leyb dreams
> That they come with ropes
> And catch him, and drag him
> Back to the city.
>
> An angel comes flying
> And spreads out his hands.
> A fire starts, and
> The city burns down.

The city dissolves
Like smoke in the wind;
Moyshe-Leyb hovers
High in the sky.

He floats above, sure
As a fish in the river;
Indeed, he's an angel
Among angels.

He begins to sing
And to praise God
Who took pity
And burned down the city.[103]

Here we see a theme constant in Halpern's work: hatred of the big city. Here "Moyshe-Leyb" has a day dream that God destroys the city and he is grateful for this act. The city is destroyed and "Moyshe-Leyb" is killed, as certainly are others in such a destruction. Here again we see "Moyshe-Leyb" embracing death as a pleasant escape from life. "Moyshe-Leyb" becomes an angel and is free from the oppressive life of the city. In both poems, death is welcomed, but in the latter one the message is stronger: the only way to find peace or happiness in the modern world is through death.

Another feature found in the "Moyshe-Leyb" poems is the character

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[103] "A Guter Kholem," translated in Kathryn Hellerstein's In New York - A Selection (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982), pp.77-79.

contemplating the world and his place in it, and that these thoughts do not seem to bother him. We see this in two poems: "Zhum-Zhum-Zhum" ("Buzz-Buzz-Buzz"), and "Glat Azoy" ("For No Good Reason," translated in Harshav as "Why Not"). In "Zhum-Zhum-Zhum" Moyshe-Leyb is awakened by a fly buzzing around his nose:

> It seems to him that quietly
> They point him out with pride
> And say that in the whole land
> There is no finer talent.
> he pretends to look off somewhere
> As if he simply doesn't hear,
> And the quick-witted fly lands on his nose.
> It seems to him that someone bows
> Down to his head and distinctly says
> That in the whole world
> There exists no finer ass.[104]

Moyshe-Leyb, half-asleep, hears two contradictory opinions of himself. First, he hears that he is highly regarded as a talented artist, and then he hears that he is thought of as an ass. The word used in the Yiddish is *ferd* which literally means "horse" but, in reference to a person takes on the negative connotation of "fool." Still, this insult does not bother him:

> So he scratches his nose
> And dismisses it as gossip,
> And he yawns a big yawn,

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[104] Translated by Kathryn Hellerstein as "Buzzing," in her In New York, p.79.

And rolls over on his stomach.[105]

In "Glat Azoy":

Moyshe-Leyb stops in the middle of the night-
To ponder whether the world is right.
He stops and listens as his thoughts appear-
Someone whispers in his ear
That everything is straight and everything is crooked
And the world spins around everything.
Moyshe-Leyb plucks a straw with his nails
And smiles.
Why? -
Why Not.

Just so, he plucks a straw, at night-
And once again a thought arrives.
Again he listens - a thought appears-
Someone whispers in his ear
That nothing is straight and nothing is crooked
And the world spins around nothing.
Moyshe-Leyb plucks a straw with his nails
And smiles.
Why? -
Why Not.[106]

Here as well we see "Moyshe-Leyb" hearing two contradictory opinions from an unknown voice. And again, he seems unbothered by this contradiction and merely smiles. Moreover, the rhymes and constructions are banal, almost like nursery rhymes. This is done by Halpern to contrast

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[105] Ibid., p.79.

[106] Harshav, p.395.

the absolutely frightening content of these poems with simple and flat forms. There is a great gap here between form and content. The form is nonsensical and joke-like, while the content is horrible and frightening.

A theme found in quite a few of the "Moyshe-Leyb" poems is the persona's love affair with a non-Jewish woman. In "A Shiksi Bam Yam" (A Shiksi [a non-Jewish peasant girl] By The Seashore), "Moyshe-Leyb" believes that he sees a "*shiksi* from my grandfather's field." The poem is filled with sexual overtones:

> A world with rye, far and wide,
> A summer-sun which burns;
> And like the sun - a fiery one
> Her flesh in my hands.[107]

At the end of the poem, however, the reader gets the feeling that Moyshe-Leyb is becoming homesick, and the identity of this woman, as well as the entire memory that Moyshe-Leyb is conjuring up, become less clear. Moyshe-Leyb is reminded here just how distant his life in the old country has become:

> And though I almost convince myself,
> That this just happened,
> It is indeed clear to me that I haven't seen
> A field for already ten years.
>
> Ten years, Moyshe-Leyb, ten whole years -

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[107] "A Shiksi Bam Yam," in In Nyu York, p.104.

How quickly life disappears.
Like water from a pot, which cracks,
It bursts and runs out.

A ship departs, there remains at least
A bit of smoke with foam,
Ten years disappear like a cat.
Which jumps over a fence.[108]

This brings us to another important aspect of the "Moyshe-Leyb" persona, namely, the setting of most of these poems. While the background of these poems is most often the beach, we can assume that Halpern intends it to specifically be Cony Island. While this area is explicitly noted in quite a few of the poems, it is implied in others. For example, in "Memento Mori," the poet tells us that he embraced death at the moment: "just when thousands of people were in the water, madly enjoying life." The setting here is most definitely Cony Island. A significant aspect of Cony Island for the poet is that it is the closest the average immigrant Jewish New-Yorker would ever again get to the ocean, and thus to the old country. "You can never go home again." Therefore, what more appropriate setting for an immigrant character who longs for home?

Another theme in the "Moyshe-Leyb" poems is turbulent love related to suffering. In the poem "Madam," "Moyshe-Leyb," a self-described poet,

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[108] Ibid.

threatens the woman whom he is courting that if she thwarts his love attempts he will kill himself:

> Madame, if you tell me to take leave of you,
> Be sure, I will go - but right into the river.
> You surely know, how high the Williamsburg bridge is.
> I will jump from the top, and I will break my neck.[109]

But at the end of the poem, he mocks this notion of dying on account of unrequited love as a silly romantic act:

> Oh, how truly fine
> And how artistically-original this would be,
> If this would actually have happened. - I am sorry.
> I am not yet ready for such a work of art.
> And meanwhile I still hate sea-water like poison.[110]

Thus "Moyshe-Leyb" goes back on his threat to the woman, and asks her to refill his glass with wine.

In "Ladushka," Moyshe-Leyb is inexplicably drawn to a woman, so much so that he begins to hate her, and her control over him, and therefore wishes her dead:

> Hey, Ladushka, dearest, bite off your tongue
> And throw yourself from seventeen flights up
> And be killed, you bitch, -
> You lay just like a rag by the threshold
> Under each soldier -

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[109] "Madame," in In Nyu York, p.120.

[110] Ibid., p.121.

A fire upon you![111]

In "Gingeli," "Moyshe-Leyb The Brat" waits outside the home of the object of his desire in the freezing cold. At first, he ignores the cold and imagines spring blossoms in order to stay warm. However, by the end of the poem he can stand the cold no longer and he begins to crow in a mad act. He has given up waiting patiently for Gingeli, and is now just another lonely and sad character in the night:

> The Brat Moyshe-Leyb crows,
> The watchman sings tri-li-li,
> The bum answers haptshi,
> The dog goes woof-woof-woof,
> The cat goes meow.[112]

In all three of these poems we find "Moyshe-Leyb" as a pathetic character who cannot find happiness in love. In all three instances he is thwarted by the women he desires and there is no happy ending in sight. It seems as if Moyshe-Leyb is inevitably meant to be alone.

We see this theme as well in "In Halber Nakht." "Moyshe-Leyb" is at his usual place, the seaside at Cony Island, and imagines himself as an Arab sultan with a harem of twenty two wives. He feels that if he were in this position, the woman he seeks after, Mirtl, will no longer shun him.

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[111] "Ladushka," in In Nyu York, p.125.

[112] "Gingeli," in In Nyu York, p.46.

The unnamed narrator addresses "Moyshe-Leyb" thus:

> You will lay down in the sultan's spot
> And you will picture yourself, that you are him,
> You will no longer have to be the one,
> Who lies by the sea in Cony Island in the rain.
> Mirtl will close the door
> In front of someone else - and not in front of you.[113]

Still, with his large harem, "The Sultan Moyshe-Leyb" is unhappy. Mirtl has been kidnapped and brought back to Cony Island and her new husband is "a little Jew with a harp." This could very well be a reference to Zarkhi who is described in the cycle "Zarkhi Bam Breg Yam" as playing an old rusty harp on the Cony Island seashore. This symbol of course is based on King David who, with his harp, is the symbol of Jewish religious and secular poetry. By making Zarkhi a "little Jew," Halpern demeans this symbol.

"Moyshe-Leyb" sends a eunuch to fetch her back, but she explains to the messenger that she will not be returning with him to the sultan:

> But when she saw in his hands
> His letters - her sultan Moyshe-Leyb,
> She cried over Allah's great punishment.
> Already seven years - she said - seemingly endless
> She waited.
> The day tormented her and the night deceived her
> And she kept hoping to be saved.

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[113] "In Halber Nakht," in the cycle "Moyshe-Leyb Bam Breg Yam," in Di Goldene Pave, p.199.

But now she cannot return to her old self in the land,
Her child - her only happiness,
Born here - would long for here,
For her little friends ---
Allah's and the sultan's holy Mecca
Is for her a name only of tobacco.[114]

In the final section of this long poem, Moyshe-Leyb is his old self again, and he lights a symbolical bonfire which the narrator compares to the candle placed at the head of a corpse in Eastern European Jewish tradition. Moyshe-Leyb has accepted the fact that he will never be together with his beloved and sways over the bonfire as if reciting *kaddish*, the prayer for the dead.

It is fair to say that for Halpern's reading audience, when they saw a character in a poem named Moyshe-Leyb, they most probably were quick to identify it with the author. Even literary critics such as Eliezer Greenberg agree that "Moyshe-Leyb" is merely an equal of Halpern. It is, however, not likely that a poet as self-conscious and full of irony such as Moyshe-Leyb Halpern would relegate this persona to such a banal role in his oeuvre. Robert Elliot writes about the different motivations a writer may have in creating a persona. The first motivation is social motives an author may adhere to in writing through a persona. Elliot gives the

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[114] Ibid., p.203.

example of Christopher Isherwood. In several of his stories set in Berlin of the 1930's, the persona Christopher, who acts as narrator, is described as detached and indifferent in relation to the frenzied sexual activity going on around him. Isherwood, a homosexual, did not want to present his character as a homosexual because of social reasons. He feared that this would have created a scandal.[115] The second category is artistic motives a writer may have in choosing a persona. Again, Elliot uses the example of these same stories by Isherwood. He explains that by creating Christopher as a homosexual, it would have diverted the attention away from the stories and the readers would have become more interested in Isherwood's personal life than in his writing.[116]

For Halpern, the first motivation seems irrelevant. He was not afraid of scandal, nor of offending anyone. His personality was outwardly strong, and throughout his life, he chose to suffer, and even at times starve, rather than compromise his integrity. The second category, however, fits in very interestingly with Halpern's use of Moyshe-Leyb. Halpern endows Moyshe-Leyb with very peculiar habits and feelings indeed. Here is a brat, a lovelorn poet, a sometimes dejected, sometimes indifferent man longing

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[115] Elliot, p.73.

[116] Ibid.

for death, an escapee from the big city pondering life at the seashore. By naming this oddball "Moyshe-Leyb," he knew that this would cause his readers to identify this character with the author. This is exactly what Halpern had hoped for. Indeed it may have distracted them from the writing momentarily, but, unlike Isherwood, Halpern took pleasure in this. He could, at the same time, both express his inner angst, yet still attribute these emotions to an imaginary character, no more real or less exotic than Zarkhi, Leyb-Ber, or Yohama. True, this figure is grounded in reality at Cony Island, a real and familiar location. Nevertheless, "Moyshe-Leyb" is inevitably an artistic, fictional creation. With Moyshe-Leyb, Halpern was, figuratively, having his cake and eating it too. It allowed him to express his rage and discontent, as well as act out his fantasies, through a *doppelganger*. And if he no longer wished to identify with this persona, he could simply justify his detachment from it by perceiving it as just another one of a repertoire of characters. These poems were not written in the "I" form, but rather addressed to a third person, "Moyshe-Leyb," and therefore Halpern could at once be both close to and distanced from this character. Halpern could come very close to taboo subjects, such as embracing death, or sexual relations with non-Jewish women, yet still maintain his own distance from them.

In these poems we see Halpern using the persona "Moyshe-Leyb" to practice self-flagellation in public. The poet punishes himself in front of his readers. "In the end Halpern is lost, his struggle with self apparently beyond solution. He assaults himself with a barrage of self contempt, succumbs at moments to impatience with culture and mind."[117] One of Halpern's major themes is that art is worthless and meaningless, yet he struggles with the fact that he himself is an artist. Therefore, he himself is not beyond his own reproaches, and he vents his rage and punishment upon the persona in his poetry most closely associated with himself. The best example of this can be seen in the poem "Gingeli":

O, Gingeli, my bloody heart,
Who is the youth who dreams in the snow
And drags his feet like two wooden beams
In the middle of the street at night?

It is The Brat Moyshe-Leyb,
Who will sometime freeze
As he fantasizes about
Spring-time and flowers.
And he will already lie in the snow
And will no longer stir, -
He will therefore also walk in cornfields
In his dreams.

The Brat Moyshe-Leyb dreams,
The watchman sings tri-li-li,

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[117] Irving Howe, "The Yiddish Word," in World Of Our Fathers. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976, p.438.

The bum answers haptshi,
The dog goes woof-woof-woof,
The cat goes meow.

O, Gingeli, my bloody heart,
Who crawls in the snow back, forth,
And sees himself sitting by the fireplace
In the middle of the street at night?

It is The Brat Moyshe-Leyb
Who is too lazy to imagine;
He freezes in the snow and sees before him
A closed palace
And himself the king there
Guarded by guards
And all his years gone by
Like suns at dusk.

The Brat Moyshe-Leyb longs,
The watchman sings tri-li-li,
The bum answers haptshi,
The dog goes woof-woof-woof,
The cat goes meow.

O, Gingeli, my bloody heart,
Who twists and writhes
And hops by the light of the lamp
In the middle of the street at night?

It is The Brat Moyshe-Leyb,
Who dances in the snow,
So that his feet
Will not completely freeze;
Thereby he sees the snow on himself
Like blooms shining in the sun
And little girls with hair let down
Decorated with fire wreathes.

The Brat Moyshe-Leyb dances,
The watchman sings tri-li-li,
The bum answers haptshi,
The dog goes woof-woof-woof,
The cat goes meow.

O, Gingeli, my bloody heart,
Is there then a rooster in the city?
Who delivered such a cry
In the middle of the street at night?

It is The Brat Moyshe-Leyb,
Who has nothing to worry about,
And while it seems to him that the day
hid itself somewhere,
And while it seems to him that
The last rooster had been choked,
He himself crows
And wishes himself good morning.

The Brat Moyshe-Leyb crows,
The watchman sings tri-li-li,
The bum answers haptshi,
The dog goes woof-woof-woof,
The cat goes meow.[118]

"The Brat Moyshe-Leyb" begins by trying to alleviate his suffering by dreaming of flowers and spring. He is freezing in the snow, yet he thinks at first that merely imagining a warm scene he will, literally, warm him up: "The Brat Moyshe-Leyb dreams." By the next phase of the poem he realizes that mere imagination will not help him and so begins to crawl a

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[118] Halpern, "Gingeli," in In Nyu York, pp.44-46.

bit, but still does not give up on a still passive game plan: "The Brat Moyshe-Leyb longs." By the third phase "Moyshe-Leyb" realizes that he will soon freeze if he does not take immediate action, and so tries to physically warm himself up: "The Brat Moyshe-Leyb dances." He still keeps imagining warm scenes at this point, but by the next and final part of the poem, "Moyshe-Leyb" realizes that no amount of imagining will help him, and so, in a mad fit, he crows like a rooster and wishes himself a good morning in hope of ending the cold night, and therefore his suffering. However, he is not successful because in the last stanza we still hear the sounds of the other night characters: the watchman, the bum, the dog, and the cat. The night continues indefinitely, and so does "Moyshe-Leyb's" suffering.

Here Halpern is saying that sweet dreams have no practical application in the real world. They will not relieve anyone's pain, and therefore they have no worth. What good did dreaming do "The Brat Moyshe-Leyb"? In the end of the poem he becomes insane and it seems as if he will be stuck indefinitely in the freezing cold. The whole poem builds up to his final shriek, yet when it is over, we see the same scene as when the poem first began, except that now "Moyshe-Leyb" has become despondent and desperate.

Here we see a clear connection between Halpern's use of persona and literary modernism. Modernism reflects and responds to the fragmentation of society and the fragmentation of the self. Halpern's use of "Moyshe-Leyb" shows this very clearly. In "Gingeli," he lashes out at "Moyshe-Leyb" who is seen as being close to the poet himself. Halpern criticizes art, yet he himself is an artist who can communicate these feelings only through the very art of poetry he criticizes. The impossible love which "Moyshe-Leyb" has for "Gingeli" can never be realized. "Moyshe-Leyb" represents the artist, and "Gingeli" represents art. Halpern's deep belief was that art is worthless and meaningless, and just like one can never hope for redemption or meaning through art, "Moyshe-Leyb" will never realize his love with "Gingeli." Moreover, the clear message is that romantic impulse leads to insanity or death.

Furthermore, Halpern punishes himself in this poem for the very transgression that he considers reprehensible. At the beginning of the poem, "Moyshe-Leyb" gives great value to art, and by the end he is punished by being turned into a crowing and freezing madman. This shows Halpern's divided self, the split between poet and anti-poet which Tabachnik discusses, which is a direct consequence of the chaotic and fragmented nature of the tragedy of human life.

This fragmented nature is further exaggerated by the oppressiveness of the big city. The fragmented self is also intensified here and this can be seen in the inherent urban character, and hatred of the big city in Halpern's poetry. In the poem "A Guter Kholem," we see how Halpern's hatred of the city becomes so intense that he celebrates its destruction, and is himself redeemed only through death. This is the ultimate self-punishment.

iv

An important function of the "Moyshe-Leyb" persona is to get the audience to look at Halpern's poetry from a different point of view. By stating: "Will they believe Moyshe-Leyb?," Halpern pulls the readers away from their normal perspective and forces them to view the situation from his vantage point. Were the poet to state: "Will they believe me?," Halpern would not have succeeded in making his audience conscious of his perspective. By referring to himself in the third person, Halpern forces the reader to recognize the poet's difficulty of communicating with his readers. If he were to speak about death as a positive thing, would they believe him? If he were to explain to them that he took great pleasure in his encounter with death and was drawn to it in a longing way, would they believe him? Halpern recognized that these feelings were contradictory to the public opinion of his readers, and the only way to communicate these emotions to them was through applying them to a third person. Furthermore, by giving this third person the same name as his own, Halpern was able to communicate to his readers his own difficulty in expressing these feelings himself. Moyshe-Leyb was a catharsis for Halpern. It allowed him to release his anger and frustration. Furthermore, he was able to do this while maintaining an element of the truth that he

so sought after. After all, he did not attribute these feelings to a complete stranger, but to a familiarly named outcast who shared the poet's own feelings and sensibility.

There is an interesting ambivalence in the "Moyshe-Leyb" persona. While on the one hand the poet uses "Moyshe-Leyb" as a means for punishing himself, the persona is also a clownish character who thumbs his nose at respected society.

The hatred of the big city pervades Halpern's poetry. This is no doubt his most dominant theme. It's connection with the issue of persona and literary modernism is central to Halpern's oeuvre. Halpern cannot escape the big city. The furthest he reaches is Cony Island, yet this is still very much part of New York, hence the overwhelming urban character of his poetry. Moreover, "Moyshe-Leyb" is a doomed character. He is trapped in this urban environment of fragmentation and chaos, and is sentenced to suffer by the poet himself. Halpern punishes "Moyshe-Leyb" in order to punish himself in public. This further reinforces his own divided and fragmented nature, and sets him solidly within a modernist framework.

v

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