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| Halpern, Moyshe-Leyb (1886-1932) |
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| Moyshe-Leyb Halpern is a Yiddish writer who wrote during the first half of the twentieth century, often considered one of the most original and iconoclastic poets of Yiddish modernism. Halpern was born in the town of Zloczew in eastern Galicia where he received a traditional Jewish education. Soon he was exposed to the currents of modern culture, first in Vienna for his studies and then when he immigrated to New York in 1908. Halpern initially joined the Yiddish symbolist group in America, Di yunge, identifying with the group’s emphasis on a need for new forms of Yiddish literary expression, in particular a focus on the conflicted subjective experience of the urban intellectual. However, Halpern soon broke with this group and their devotion to apolitical aestheticism due to his conviction that literature needed to attend to the material conditions of the writer’s imagination. As an immigrant Yiddish writer in the industrial chaos of New York, Halpern felt that any search for aesthetic beauty is automatically undone by the persistence of the oppressive, ugly, and abject realties of the urban experience. At odds with the very tools of poetry, Halpern is difficult to place within a coherent literary group or generation; his work refuses categorization, often belligerently, within any artistic hierarchy, and has instead been dubbed by Julian Levenson as a ‘modernism from below.’ Halpern’s poetry articulates a ruthless self-critique of the poet who becomes helplessly complicit in aestheticizing his own suffering and the suffering of the working class. His poems reflect this struggle in their employment of radical poetic strategies that often evoke traditional forms only to immediately deconstruct them, exposing the impotence of the artistic act, despite the poet’s stubborn and compulsive need to write. Halpern is considered, in Chana Kronfeld’s terms, the ‘deviant paragon’ of the Yiddish avant garde in that he announces a transition from Yiddish poetry’s early impressionism and aestheticism to its later phases of experimentation and iconoclasm. |
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| Further reading:  (Grossman)  (Harshav)  (Harshav, Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry, a Historical Anthology)  (Kronfeld)  (Levinson)  (Levinson, On Some Motifs in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern: A Benjaminian Meditation on Yiddish Modernism)  (Wisse)  (Wisse, A Yiddish Poet in America) |