

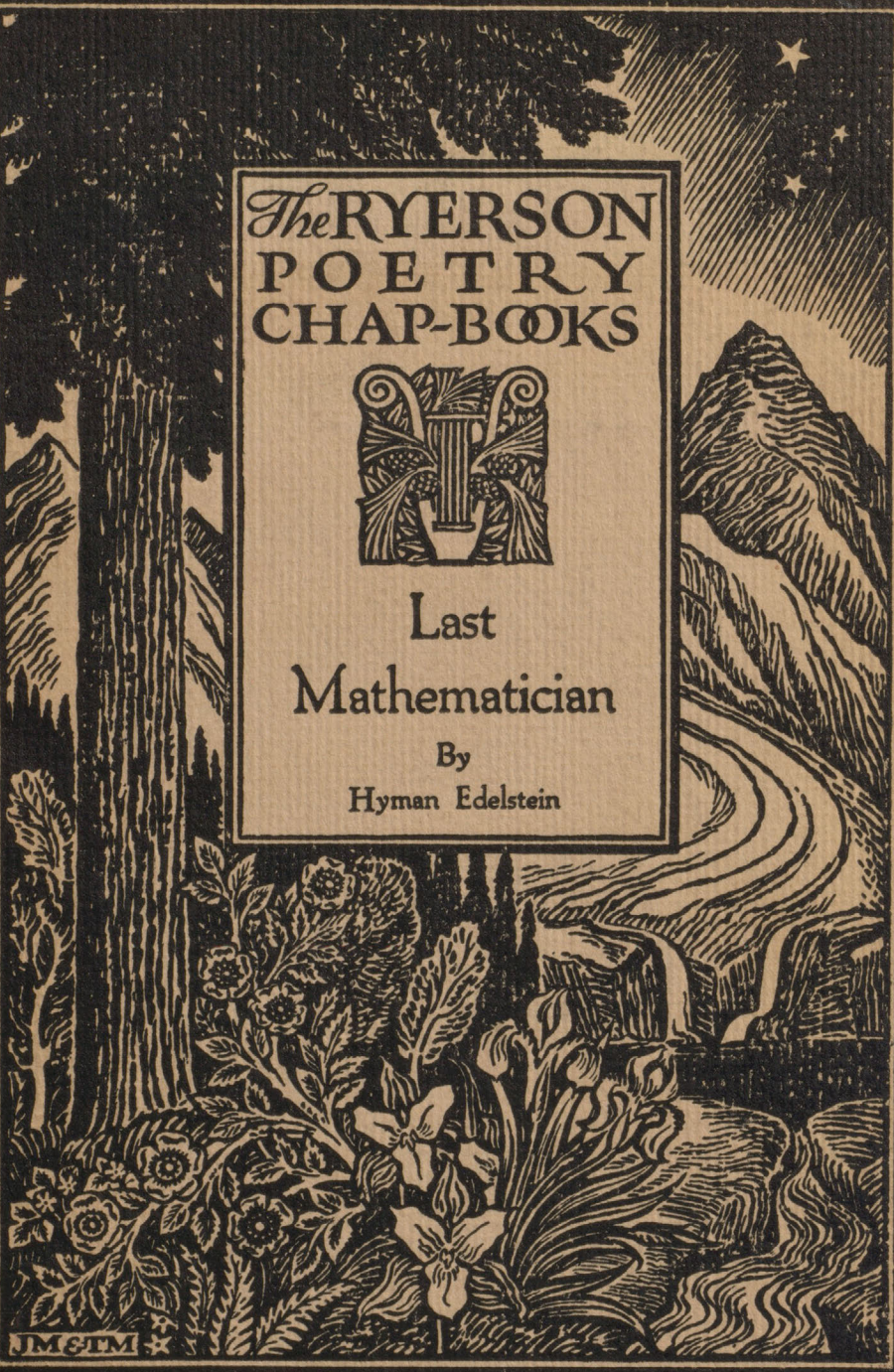
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CHAP-BOOKS



Last
Mathematician

By
Hyman Edelstein



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OF THIS EDITION OF *LAST MATHEMATICIAN*, BY HYMAN EDELSTEIN, TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES ONLY HAVE BEEN PRINTED.

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Born in Dublin, Ireland, Edelstein was educated at the famous Dublin High School and at Dublin University, of which he is a First Rank Classical Honourman and Prizeman. He was First-in-all-Ireland Classical Exhibitioner. He came to Canada in 1912 and settled in Montreal where he has been editor of English-Jewish journals. He has contributed to Jewish periodicals in Canada and the United States and is the author of a number of books including *From Judean Vineyards*, *Canadian Lyrics*, and his previous Ryerson Poetry Chap-Book entitled *Spirit of Israel*. His only children, two sons, were on active service with the R.C.C.S.

The Ryerson Poetry
Chapbooks

Last Mathematician

by Hyman Edelstein



LAST MATHEMATICIAN

(Any Poet)

He mightn't have had wherewith to buy
A bottle of ink or a new nib for his pen:
It didn't matter to one who trod
The aery vasts of God . . .
With dauntless step stalking the blackest night
He'd plunge his pen into the ink of space
To flood with every drop and galvanize
Earth's dark alilt with aeons of light:
And, as Poet, always the Ultimate Mathematician,
Penetrate through to That Original Mind;
Read readily the parabola of the heavens
By no "maximum" or "minimum" confined;
Espy its axis of symmetry—the Milky Way:
And so interpret for us the graph of the universe
Plotted with stars . . .

LAST PHILOSOPHER'S SONG

(Reply to Aldous Huxley's "First Philosopher's Song," which ends:

. . . "Mind, issued from the monkey's womb,
Is still umbilical to earth,
Earth its home and earth its tomb.")

I question not the analysis
Which man's "descent" from ape divined;
But what sublime catalysis
The dead dust alchemized to mind?

The mind that nimbly, as you say,
Can traverse universal heights
And depths: heaven, hell, sans sun by day,
By night sans moon or stars for lights.

And from what meteoric throes
Of comets caudate with edged fire
First the inanimate earth arose
To exude Life, the ape our sire?

And the First Man—child of simian birth—
Whom did he mimic to climb so far
Above his fellows? . . . Answer, Earth!
O Earth—umbilical to a Star!

PALIMPSEST

God 'graves His cryptic script with inexorable pen
His ink the intermixt mortar-blood of cities and men
Deep across earth's breast
Dateless palimpsest
Of man His hieroglyph . . . He writes, and a little later thereon
With a little tilt of His hand
Sprinkles and spreads His blotter of sand
And lo! that mound?—that dust-embossed blur?
. . . Is it *Codex Ur?* Or *Codex Babylon?*

SODALES

One midsummer noon
In a country garden, grassless, full of dust,
Of white dust,
A lonely rose, lush gout of blood,
Gushed from the white, dry dust . . .

And it was as if, rising at a banquet of the dead,
Some grisly jester had thrust
His hand through the graveyard crust
Tilting a goblet of blood-wine
To his throat of dust
With—
"Here's to us all!"

NEW WAR ETHICS¹

"Ho, gentlemen, the enemy!"—"Hurrah!"
"Good morning, Fritz!" . . . "Hoch! Guten Morgen, Freund!"
("Now boys, up at 'em!")—"Lovely weather, eh?"
"Der Fruehling'st doch so schoen!" ("Tod zum Feind!")
"What, Dick, you're done?"—"Shrapnel, Fred . . . Good-bye!"
"The bay'net's easy, Hans! Take it, for Dick!"

.

Gentlemen, for ethics' sake, banish the battle-cry!
Only, in God's name, let the bayonet stick!

¹"Rules of war to be discussed."—Newspapers.

SONG OF THE HARLOT

Whore abandoned, lay thy long-numb hand on
Long-dumb harp, yet thrum it with abandon!
Trip and strut about the oblivious city
Thrumming and singing.

Pant nostalgic lays of sapid passion
And with desperate damp eyes, lips ashen,
Long for long ago . . . and one remembering
Even in pity . . .

(Author's Note: Based on a fragment preserved in Isaiah. After prophesying that it shall be with Tyre as in the song of the harlot, the ancient seer cites twelve words from that song. The author of the stanzas here presents his own submission of what the original Song of the Harlot might have been. He introduces a nuance characteristic of ancient Hebrew poetry: ironic assonance. This consists in the juxtaposition or like-sounding or even identical words of opposite or dissimilar sense, to produce the effect of poignant contrast. A variation of the Sapphic metre has been used.)

ON VIEWING A "DEAD" VOLCANO

Does he hold a solidified dead fury
In his Erebus-bosom's keeping?
Or only the banked fires of his dreams—
This blind man sleeping?

THE ARCH OF TITUS

(With its bas-reliefs of spoils from the Jewish Temple, such as the sacred trumpets and seven-branched candlestick, this, the most magnificent of the three surviving "Arches of Triumph," stands high on the *Via Sacra* astride the ruins of Rome, facing the Forum on one side and the Colosseum on the other.)

History, maddest "Brutus"¹ of all,
Lays low all Caesars . . . and here that Caesar of nations—
—Here lies Rome, gentlemen! . . .

These holes

[The Colosseum, my lords!]

. . . ah, gaping wounds, poor, poor dumb mouths

That no Antony could even pray for the power

To put a tongue into, such as should move

These stones of Rome

[The Roman Forum, sires!]

. . . aye, even just to rise again

Innocent of other mutiny! But Time brooks not

Even the mutiny of resurrection . . .

So there lies Rome, my lords . . .

—Ah, pardon, Sirs! I had almost forgotten . . .

There are so many memories here . . .

That Arch of Triumph we just skirted past²

It dates from nineteen hundred years ago

When the "Judaei," otherwise called Israel,

Were totally wiped out by Roman arms.

'Tis named in honour of their Destroyer:—TITUS

FLAVIUS SABINUS VESPASIANUS . . . CAESAR . . .

¹*Brutus*: Latin adjective equivalent to our "crazed."

²The guide, author of this book, as a Jew follows his race's tradition of not going under the Arch—that is, through its arcade.

ON WAKING AT SEA

A sunset?—dawn? What throes of heaving sky
Accouched in seas imbrued with cinnabar?
What travail vast of what maternity?
A moment more . . . 'tis born . . . the Evening Star.

PYRAMIDS

(Napoleon to his army in the shadow of the pyramids: "Forty centuries of history look down upon you . . .")

Creaking, lowly bowed with God,
Deep with Prophets' tones sonorous;
Portals sagging as Time their Samson
Strains to pull you down, little "Shool"¹
(Then like him would Time end too!)

Shrunken, sunken "Beth-Tephillah"²
Bent upon your doorpost-crutches
Propped with nails of "Sh'ma Is-ra-el"³
Towering above the ages—
Your four thousand years look down
On the dust of all Napoleons
And the pyramids of all Pharaohs . . .

¹Shool: (Yiddish fr. German) *Synagogue*.

²*Beth-Tephillah*: (Hebrew) *House-of-Prayer*.

³*Sh'ma Is-ra-el*: (Hebrew) *Hear, O Israel* . . . opening words of the Mosaic proclamation of the Unity enclosed in oblong strips of metal (*Mezuzoth*) nailed to the doorposts of orthodox Jewish homes.

NOT THESE—

Not the nails of dull iron through numb hands and feet,
Not the vain crown of thorns upon scatheless brow,
Not the spear of steel in His side—
That wasn't how He died . . .
Not the cross of wood 'mid the thieves beside—
Not these were how He was crucified . . .
But the transverse bar of frowning brows;
The thorns of eyelashes piously aloof; the lance
Of eyes respectably askance;
The nails of clenched teeth, civilly-taut
Lips that ventured not
To shout Hosannahs or spit;
The cruciform Silence, shut doors, shut mouths, shut minds . . .

THE NOOSE

From her head the snow-matted kerchief she unbound:
Snow and her gold hair fell
In cascades of filosele;
Quickly she unwound
The boa from her throat baring
The beaded necklace that dropped flaring
Its golden crucifix against the sheen of her flesh.

Shining inshrined the sacred pendant rests
In the chaste confessio-crypt between the domes of her breasts.

Only one word sufficed . . . something she murmured
About some Jews and Another JEW who died . . .

From a gibbet before me hung The Crucified . . .

TO FATHER B - - - - Y

You left me a gracious and immortal word
(You who "could not do aught but love" the race of your Lord):

And ever I seek it my own harsh brooding to temper:
"They forget all—the All, they who say
 'You took Him away!'
You GAVE Him . . . and that is the All . . .
And all I remember."

ETERNAL CANVAS

(October in the Gatineau Hills near Ottawa)

We are the dilettanti warned of God,
Dream-drunk, harsh-buffeted with blows of His spirit:
Burned, though far from His fire . . . Who may come near it? . . .
Afar, by this holy ground, we stand, unshod.

To-day His searing artistry's abroad
Kindling His annual "Forest Fire" on hills
To lick up scarp, puff embers down the rills,
And raise His oriflamme on every clod.

Ablaze—prophetic of resurgent bloom
Even from its own impending dust—each spray
Retorts His mighty antiphon of "Nay!"
To the sere Ecclesiastes of the breeze,
Returning on Death its own fiat of doom . . .
And forevermore this deathless pyre of trees
Shall shout All is not vanity—save Death!—
Of all dumb dust that loudest vanity!

Afar, by this holy ground, unshod we stand
Before this Forest Fire spread by His brush
Beyond all Autumns: this one Moment fanned
By the death-blasting and consuming breath
Of His consummate Art, to Eternity . . .
And shrivelled is the tongue of Koheleth,
And unconsumed burns on The Burning Bush . . .

KILLINEY

His heart's now filled with things its youth hadn't time for
feeling,
Yet he had dipped in Dublin Bay and seen Killiney:
But youth dips only the skin: its eyes smart briny
Only with sea-spray . . . Youth for tears or kneeling?

Now he can feel it all . . . the Pianist wind fast pounding
The digitals of that sea agloom and shiny
'Twi'xt cloud and sun; and inshore hear Killiney
On the stringed strand its obbligato sounding.

The surf's white violin-bow the muted strand has rounded;
His eyes are tide-left pools with sea-dreams briny;
His heart lies bedded sand below Killiney,
And under Dublin Bay the sand is pounded.

EPITAPH I

At a New York drugstore fountain with precision he compacted
Sandwiches—aye, compounded with stealth a prescription rare;
He had a degree in pharmacy: once he had even acted
On Dublin's Abbey stage—as “sub” for an absent player.

He always wanted to sing, play violin or 'cello,
To act, write poems or stories, even verse in Latin and Greek!
But he never got farther than wanting (quite honourable in any
fellow)—
And, squirting a soda, he'd fan his diploma against my cheek!

He loved the Ancient Classics: would beg me that line of Homer's
Rewhistle for him . . . *para thina poluphloisboio thalasses* . . .
Then silent he'd stand and listen, as hearing the sough of the
combers
Off Scheria's shore where the Rover surprised Nausicaa's lassies.

And forever I shall see him standing so and listening
In a Dublin chemist's shop or a New York druggist's store,
And hear in his sighs the whistling and see in his eyes the
glistening
Of seas that dimple or thunder off an old Homeric shore.

EPITAPH II

He had no chance in earthly time and space
To close himself into the eternal and infinite.
Every skyey haven of dreaming whither he took flight,
Every secret corner he shrank in, every shut minute
Life's battering-ram burst open to hurl him to earth.
For life the Slaver ground him with woe and dearth . . .
His body was meagre, yet no power could squeeze him
Into the widest hall of the vastest mansion:
Bigger than the world, which brooks not such expansion,
And from its own smallness never would release him,
He squeezed himself out of it, flattening to dust within it . . .

A HOMELAND—AND HOMES—FIT FOR HEROES!¹

Recking naught of politics,
Untutored in all knavish tricks
To suspect or gifts or Greeks—
Canada, your word HE took
Nor his own to you forsook,
But in innocent good-faith
Sallied afar to challenge Death
For his homeland—and your homes
That, else, were your own charred tombs!

Show, then, Canada, as home they come
You're fit for such heroes—to call their "Home"!

Insons ipse dolos, tua verba fidemque, Canada,
Accepit credens, Danaos vel dona timere
Indoctus. Procul Ille tamen terraque marique
Arma ferens moriturus iit. Jam reddite, Patres,
Dignam Illi patriam raptosque ex hoste penates.

¹In the first years after the war many Canadian men returning "home" found that "home" hardly fit for heroes. One of such poignant cases was that of the poet's elder son (Captain Nat, a hero of D-Day, who, after nerve-racking experiences in disgusting (and expensive) "rooming houses," piteously advertised in a Toronto paper for a decent home for his harried wife and for his firstborn three year-old son whom he saw for the first time on his return in November, 1945.

THUNDER FROM OLYMPUS¹

They hail you—with outstretched arms of kinship calling
From Thermopylae, from all ravines,
Down to Marathon, unto Salamis of the heroic seas—
The Ancient hail the New Hellenes:
OLYMPUS HAD NO GODS LIKE THESE!

“Thermopylae of the nations! Greece—the Pass
That saved the world!”—This be your title . . . Ye
Who stemmed the neo-Persians of the West,
Remembering Them of Old who barred the East,
By Their immortal dust ye deathless lie
“Obedient to their law!”

KEIMETHA PEITHOMENOI!—

The Law that through dying lips, trumpets of Life,
Thundered
From that Leonidas and those three hundred:

It is not life if freedom cease . . .

It is not death to die for Greece . . .

¹This poem first appeared in the New York Greek daily, *Ethnikos Kerux* (*National Herald*), weekly English supplement, June 13, 1943. I composed it after receiving a letter from my younger son (Cpl. Ray) recording the Canadian army's admiration for its valiant Greek ally (December, 1940).

“Κείμεθα Πειθόμενοι!”

(These two Greek words, “Faithful we lie fallen,” are from the famous inscription by Simonides of Ceos, “Go tell the Spartans, etc.,” which I feel applies equally to the heroes of the modern Thermopylae: Greece in the war with Italy and Germany, 1939-1945. In homage to these “New Hellenes” I have translated into dactylic hexameters lines 9-10 from my “Thunder from Olympus,” as a humble “addendum” to Simonides' tribute:)

Ἕμῖν καὶ στέφανος δόξης ἀμαράντινος οἶος
Τοῖς πάλαι οἷσιν ἀειμνήστοις παρακείμεθε κόνι.

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