

The Trilingual
Literature of Polish
Jews from Different
Perspectives

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In Memory of I.L. Peretz

Edited by

Alina Molisak and Shoshana Ronen

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PREFACE

ALINA MOLISAK AND SHOSHANA RONEN

Should Jewish literature, or, better, literature written by Jews, in various languages be considered as one unified phenomenon? A similar question was raised by Dan Miron who asked: “Did a specific and definable brand of Jewish writing exist outside the boundaries of Jewish languages?”¹ Let us look into a specific example: does Bruno Schulz’s prose have more in common with Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) because they wrote in the Polish language, in the Polish land, more or less at the same time, or does he share a deeper affinity with the *oeuvre* of I. L. Peretz,² who grew up in a similar cultural background but decided to use primarily Yiddish and Hebrew for his literary work? The great literary scholar Dov Sadan was the first to consider the multilingualism of Jewish literature, but in the frame of one united Jewish body, and claimed, what is interesting for our purpose here, that in modernity Jewish literature was split into three languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, and non-Jewish languages (vernacular languages), which eventually constructed, a holistic Jewish literature.³ His disciple Chone Shmeruk, the late historian of Yiddish literature, applied this theory to the literature of Polish Jews and wrote about the trilingual culture of Jews in Poland.⁴ Another great scholar Gershon Shaked was aware of the complexity of identities in literature written by Jews, but still, we believe, he held a kind of unifying observation regarding this literature: that beyond the variety there was something in common, or something that conjoined Jewish literatures in European languages. As he indicated, he

¹ Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford, California: Stanford University press, 2010), 8.

² Differences in writing the full name of Peretz are the result of different transliterations versions of his name. (Yiddish: Yitskhok Leybush Peretz. Hebrew: Yitzhak Leib Peretz. English: Isaac Leib Peretz. Polish: Icchok Lejb Peretz. German: Isaac Leib Perez).

³ Dov Sadan, *Al safrutenu: masat mavo* (Jerusalem: Re’uven Mass, 1950).

⁴ Chone Shmeruk, “Hebrew-Yiddish-Polish: A Trilingual Jewish Culture,” in *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, Gutman, et al., eds. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 285-311.

was occupied with the question of how Jews who were spread all over the world, and wrote in diverse languages, preserved and formed the Jewish identity of their texts.⁵ This very question indicated that Shaked believed in a unifying element of these literatures. Dan Miron, however, claimed that one modern Jewish literature does not exist. Moreover, some of the most important modern Jewish works were written in the frame of non-Jewish literature.⁶

Whether the intuition of Shaked is accurate or that of Miron, this volume will expose the reader to the richness of Jewish authors and Jewish literary works in central-eastern Europe up to World War II. This abundance might help the reader to draw his/her own conclusion regarding that question.

In search of a possible answer to those questions this volume offers twenty-seven different essays which cope with these problems from different aspects, but concentrate on the writings of Jewish authors who lived in the Polish lands before World War II.

The book is divided into four parts and each explores various fields of cultural studies. Literature relates to concrete authors and literary works. Culture refers to wider social and cultural phenomena such as art, theater, and religion. History shows that Jewish culture did not exist in a void, but it was a part of a broader historical, cultural, and social context. The whole volume is dedicated to the memory of the great Yiddish and Hebrew author Isaac Leib Peretz, and therefore, the fourth part shows an interesting presence and acceptance of Peretz's works in separate environments and languages: German, Italian, and Romanian. The opening and closing of this volume are two essays, and both present the reader a much broader perspective. That of Dan Miron re-evaluates Peretz's works and situates him in a totally different context than was widely accepted by literary scholars until recently. An intriguing text by Yigal Schwartz closes this book and suggests new categories for analyzing and understanding modern Hebrew literature written in central and eastern Europe.

The opening essay of this volume, and very stimulating to boot, is by Dan Miron, who asks how to understand and to relate to Peretz's literary work today and what was the cultural background of his creativity and thought. Miron shows that in contrast to the common view of literary scholars who placed Peretz at one of the sides of the triangle of Yiddish classics with Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem,

⁵ Gershon Shaked, *Zehut: safruyot yehudiyot bilshonot la'az* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2006), 11.

⁶ Dan Miron, "Safruyot yehudiyot moderniyot – mavo," in *Zman Yehudi Hadash*, vol.3 (Israel: Keter, 2008), 4-6.

Peretz's source of inspiration was the Hebrew poet Yehudah Leib Gordon and the spirit of the late Enlightenment. Moreover, the emergence of Haim Nahman Bialik's poetry was the cause for Peretz's abandonment of Hebrew for solely Yiddish and poetry for prose. Nevertheless, this prose was extremely poetical and lyrical.

Part one, "Literature," contains four texts which analyze authors who wrote mainly in Yiddish; three texts are dedicated to Jewish writers who created in Polish and the fourth to a writer in Hebrew. The first article by Avner Holtzman concentrates on Peretz's collection of Hebrew love poems: *The Harp*, which was published in 1894. This volume raised a passionate debate in the Hebrew literary arena regarding the legitimacy of writing intimate, lyrical love poetry in Hebrew. Holtzman examines the reception of *The Harp* in its time and in the decades after by different Hebrew literary scholars. Holtzman recommends not reading the poems of the collection separately, but to read them as a whole, then it appears, that the collection creates a story starting with passion and hope, going through moments of suffering and lamentation, and ending with defeat and resignation. Holtzman points to some parallels between the atmosphere of the whole volume with Peretz's state of mind in the time he wrote the collection.

For Itzik Manger, as Efrat Gal-Ed writes, Peretz was a "bright figure" and a "luminous beginning" of modern Yiddish literature. Although Manger was critical about Peretz's aesthetics, he also appreciated his heritage. He perceived himself as both a continuation of that literary tradition but also as a revolutionary in this field. Gal-Ed recalls Dov Sadan's claim that both writers had the fusion of folk culture and the individually subjective inner world in common. The article by Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota illustrates the writings of the Yiddish author Lamed Shapiro, who at the beginning of his literary career wrote both in Hebrew and Russian. The article concentrates on Shapiro's story "Smoke" dedicated to Peretz and the intertextual links between this story and Peretz's "A Pinch of Snuff." Hagai Dagan recalls the demon figure in Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "The Last Demon." Demons, in fact, represent the pre-modern Jews (there are no modern Jews in Singer's world, claims Dagan), and like the Jews they are doomed to obliteration. In "The Last Demon" Dagan argues that Singer presents the destruction of the traditional world including its demon as the deed of modern man. Therefore, the real demonic figures in the modern world are human beings and not demons. So, the story can be read as a tribute to the eastern European Jewish world that has been lost. Vered Ariel-Nahari describes the Hebrew poetry of Haim Lenski in light of Russian literary symbolism. The author shows that the reception of Lenski's poetry was

enthusiastic both by the conservative Bialik school and the modernist school of Avraham Shlonski and Nathan Alterman, therefore, his poetry was between tradition and avant-garde or, in fact, both traditional and avant-garde. Andrzej Zieniewicz analyzes the presence of both tradition and avant-garde in Bruno Schulz's prose. He shows that on the one hand, avant-garde, especially in the *Treatise of Mannequins*, identifies the artist as a demiurge, and the work of fiction as a masquerade. On the other hand, tradition, as Zieniewicz claims, is rooted in both the atmosphere of the end of the *shtetl* and the spiritual biography of the Jewish artist. Alina Molisak deals with Bolesław Leśmian's poem "Elijah," and compares his understanding of this figure with the concept of the prophet in Judaism, just to discover that Leśmian's perception is beyond the traditional Jewish one, it is much more universal. However, Molisak finds similarities between Leśmian's Elijah and Abraham Joshua Heschel's conception of the prophets. In both there is a direct dialogue between the prophet and God. Birgit Krehl portrays the works of the Polish-Jewish author Julian Tuwim. Her thesis is that Tuwim expresses the traditional anti-modern Jewish attitude towards life and also rejects the modern Jewish nationalism in its expression in Zionism. Krehl asserts that Tuwim's Jewish identity is driven mainly from the occurrence of the Shoah.

The second part on culture begins with an essay by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec. She illustrates the function of Modernism in Poland and various models of modern Polish-Jewish literature. She points to two models of Polish-Jewish literature: *littérature engagée* and popular literature. She states that the nineteenth century engaged literature was tendentious and assimilatory. The critical trend began at the turn of the twentieth century with Zionist narrations which were concentrated on the future and rejection of European culture. The modernization of the Jews was an important element in Polish-Jewish literature. For Stanisław Obirek, the intellectual biography of Julian Klaczko symbolizes not religious but cultural conversion. This conversion had a price, at the beginning it had to be involved with an exclusivist and romantic version of Polishness. Klaczko, however, overcame this tendency in a latter period of his creative life and gave expression to his truly Renaissance personality. Zuzanna Kołodziejska-Smagala copes with a similar subject. She points to the movement of integrationists in Warsaw for whom literature was a very important tool of activity and influence. Polish Jewish literature then made use of a variety of genres. What is interesting, she shows that many literary texts were written by women. Joanna Lisek analyzes an essay by Peretz about the "women question." She claims that Peretz's voice is radical and progressive in that matter. He calls for a change in the status

and the attitude towards women and suggests that he might be called a feminist. Shoshana Ronen brings back the very interesting figure of Yehoshua Ozjasz Thon who wrote in four languages. Each language served as a tool for different target. In German he wrote philosophy, in Yiddish he wrote mostly journalism for reaching the Jewish masses, and in Polish to reach the Jewish Intelligentsia. He used Hebrew as a tool to create and enrich the national literature. Zahava Caspi presents the different cultural and aesthetic outlooks that shaped *Night at the Old Market* by Peretz. She makes a comparison between the production of Habima's *Dybbuk*, and the production of *Night at the Old Market* by GOSET and points to its influence on Israeli theater and Hanoch Levin. The production of GOSET had mechanistic-grotesque and carnivalesque style. The sources for this style Caspi finds in Peretz's play. Sharon Bar Kochva deals with literary pseudonyms which were popular in the Yiddish literary circles and she finds the sources in different languages, Jewish and non-Jewish, and in various cultures. Bar Kochva claims that in many cases pseudonyms were utilized to form and represent the authors imagined identity, in some cases their literary *personae*. Aminadav Dykman deals with the import of Shakespeare to European culture and especially to Hebrew culture. Dykman concentrates on the Hebrew translation of *Hamlet* by Haim-Yehiel Bornstein published in the center of Hebrew printing then, namely in Warsaw. Natalia Krynicka writes about Peretz's contacts with Polish literature. In his memoir, he stresses that at the beginning he read mostly in Polish, but in his later texts he asserted that Yiddish language and literature are what created a stable Jewish national identity in Poland. It was a part of his Yiddishist ideology and the rejection of assimilation. It was also important because for him Poland was a multi-national state in which every ethnic group cherished its national culture. Krynicka concludes that "for Peretz, Polish literature had no privileged status and the contacts with it should be based on the principle of reciprocity and exchange, not imitation." Renata Piątkowska portrays Peretz's presence in visual popular art like postcards, press publications, and illustrated books. Peretz was a symbol of the engaged writer with his expressive face "with energetic lips and marvelous eyes."

The third part on history begins with the essay of Nathan Cohen who describes Warsaw as a center of Hebrew and Yiddish printing from the second half of the nineteenth century. Cohen illustrates the main figures in the arena of the Jewish book market in the city who made it an important and vivid center of Hebrew letters literature and production. The person of I. L. Peretz and his *Di yudishe bibliotek* was highly significant for the activity of this center. Later, another important publishing endeavor of

Peretz was *I. L. Peretz's Oysgaben*. In this frame, he published his Yiddish and Hebrew works, but also those of other writers. Cohen shows how important Peretz's activity in the publishing field was for different kinds of literary ventures in Warsaw at that time. Ela Bauer examines the belief in the power of literature to educate the masses and the many efforts made by the Jewish elite in Eastern Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, the age of the "intelligent mob," to produce literature in different languages, including Hebrew and Yiddish. Bauer concentrates on the activity of the publisher and writer Ben-Avigdor, and Peretz. While Ben-Avigdor believed that popular literature should be written in Hebrew, Peretz believed that it should be written in the language of the Jewish masses, namely, in Yiddish. Ben-Avigdor established the penny book series. Peretz, at that time, became interested in Jewish folklore, and established his organ *Di yudishe bibliotek*. Adi Mahalel concentrates on Peretz's efforts to create, as he calls it, a radical literature in Hebrew, by the end of the nineteenth century, when he was already a distinguished Yiddish author. Mahalel examines to what extent socialist writings were present in Hebrew literature and points to some noticeable works in that category. Some of Peretz's stories from his collection *The Arrow* are discussed meticulously. Mahalel prefers the political-radical reading of these stories which grasps in them a tension between a new prophetic message and the existing state order. In contrast to Hebrew literature of that time, Peretz's Hebrew prose was non-Zionist, non-maskilic, and folkish. In his Hebrew stories like "The Mute" he used Yiddishisms in order to express in Hebrew, the talk of Jewish lower class. Ruth Adler portrays two places and three persons. Two centers of Hebrew and Yiddish literature: Odessa and Warsaw, and the three giants of Yiddish literature: Mendele Moykher Sforim, I. L. Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem. Unlike the other two, Peretz belonged to the center in Warsaw. Adler portrays the geopolitical background of Peretz and presents him as a Polish patriot although quite aware of Polish antisemitism. Adler also illustrates the importance of Peretz's literary Salon at his home, where as a great mentor he encouraged and fostered young Hebrew and Yiddish writers.

The fourth part begins with Peter Lehnardt who exemplifies the reception of Peretz's literary work in its German translation in German-Jewish culture before World War II. The first translations of some of Peretz's works were published in German-Jewish newspapers in 1901 for the occasion of Peretz's 25 years of literary activity. It was a part of what Lehnardt calls "a Modernist renaissance ideology—to build modern Judaism from eastern/oriental sources too." Of particular note is that most of the translations were made from Peretz's Yiddish versions because, as

Lehnardt claims, Yiddish style was closer to “popular reading habits in German.” Lehnardt argues that the rereading of Peretz’s literary works in German draws the attention to their polyphonic nature capable of representing a multidimensional Jewish culture. By the end of his contribution to this volume, Lehnardt discovers a common thread between Peretz and Shemu’el Yosef Agnon. Laura Quercioli Mincer portrays the Italian translations of Peretz work. The peculiarity of the target reader of these works, namely, the Jewish-Italian reader, lies in the fact that on the one hand, it was a tiny market since Jews were a diminutive minority in Italy acculturated deeply in the Italian culture, and on the other hand, had little linkage with Eastern European Yiddish culture. The article provides historical and linguistic information concerning the Italian translations of Peretz. Very little Yiddish literature was translated into Romanian. There were only numerous translations of Sholem Aleichem and of the of Nobel Prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer available. Therefore, as Camelia Crăciun asserts, the works of Peretz are largely unknown to the Romanian reader. His poetry and plays were ignored although they were showed on stage in Yiddish and were received enthusiastically. Therefore, Crăciun concentrates on the reception of Peretz’s prose in Romania, which was translated and published as early as 1911. Although some of Peretz stories were published in Romania during and after the communist regime the climax of Peretz’s presence in Romania was before World War II when Jews there, as Crăciun claims, promoted “Yiddish classics as a cultural mission for identity preservation . . . in a period of massive acculturation.”

Yigal Schwartz’s text, not accidentally, closes this volume. In his challenging and courageous article Schwartz suggests an original panoramic outlook, from bird’s eye view upon the historiography of modern Hebrew literature and offers a new category for analyzing this literature through a geocultural point of view, based on mental-stylistic criteria. Schwartz claims that Hebrew literature written in Europe since the mid-nineteenth century is divided into two models. The first, developed in the Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia which Schwartz calls “literature of the mouth and the ear” and the second model was developed in central Europe, and he names it “literature of the eye.” While “literature of the mouth and the ear” is characterized by being dialogical, ideological, collective, and national, that “of the eye” is reflective and distant, private and universal. Both can be found in the Hebrew literature written in Israel however, the style of “the mouth and the ear” prevailed while the literature “of the eye” had been marginalized.

It can be said that the Hebrew literature written by Polish Jews, encompasses both models according to Schwartz, while the literature

written in Congress Poland was the one of “the mouth and the ear,” the one in Galicia was that “of the eye,” therefore, none of these corpora was alien to the literature of Polish Jews.

This book would not be at all possible if not for the magnificent collaboration of all contributors whose works are included here. We are also much obliged to the University of Warsaw, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, and Tel Aviv University. Their support made this endeavor possible.

INSTEAD OF A PROLOGUE

I. L. PERETZ AS THE POET OF THE JEWISH AGE OF SENSIBILITY: ON THE CENTURY OF HIS DEATH 1915-2015

DAN MIRON

When I. L. Peretz passed away on April 5, 1915, a century ago, he was the cultural hero of the Yiddish speaking intelligentsia the world over and the unchallenged leader of the so-called “new” Yiddish literature. As a bilingual writer, he also held an esteemed position as a Hebraist, one of the chief innovators in the field of modern Hebrew fiction. The question begs itself: At this juncture, long after the aforementioned intelligentsia tragically disappeared, and in the face of the fundamental changes Hebrew literature underwent as it morphed into an Israeli one, where do Peretz and his writing stand? By this I ask not which if any part of Peretz’s creative legacy can still appeal to contemporary readers. Rather I ask how can we, from our current vantage point, understand the ideological and poetic pre-suppositions which informed Peretz’s artistic practice? How can we relate to these pre-suppositions and to the fictional world which was based upon them?

In order to fully answer this question one needs to re-read and re-evaluate Peretz’s entire output, a formidable task one can hardly hope to tackle in a single essay. Let us therefore limit ourselves here to the partial and preliminary task, that of pondering a set of smaller questions: from what intellectual and poetic birthplace did Peretz arrive at the world he created in his writings? What was the conceptual and artistic equipment he brought along from his beginnings, and to what purpose did he apply this equipment?

Traditional Peretz scholarship seemed to have answered these questions clearly enough: Intellectually, Peretz emerged from the Jewish version of the European Humanistic Enlightenment. True, in the early 1880s he realized, together with many other followers of the Haskalah,

that its plan for modernizing Judaism by bridging over the gap between the Jewish community and its non-Jewish host society through acculturation, and thus achieve emancipation for the Jews, failed due to the adamant persistence and cyclical re-emergence of endemic anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, he, like others, never gave up on the ideal of “Bildung,” a term which covered both education and knowledge in the limited sense of the terms and a more comprehensive “formation” of a new Jewish way of life, informed by rationalism, pragmatism, and humanistic attitudes. Similarly, like others, Peretz worked hard in order to enlarge the scope and deepen the historical consciousness of the Jewish Enlightenment, enriching it with Jewish national values and radicalizing its call for social justice. Nevertheless, he never budged from the central tenets of “Bildung,” even as he presented them clothed with folkloristic and pseudo-Hassidic garbs.

Artistically, Peretz is supposed to have continued, innovatively, the great mimetic tradition of nineteenth century Yiddish prose fiction, of depicting traditional eastern European Jewish life from the vantage point of European humanist modernity. Like the earlier prominent writers of nineteenth century Yiddish prose fiction, he purportedly was, therefore, primarily a mimetic poet, a writer of prose-fiction who focused on the *Shtetl* civilization in the final phases of its development and disruption. This view of Peretz was asserted through the formula of the “Dray klassiker”: Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz, according to which Peretz’s fictional world formed the last link in a great artistic “golden chain”; a link that both continued the chain, and at the same time, infused it with a basic novelty, because in Peretz’s depiction *Shtetl* society it was said to have presented not in generalities and typologies prescribed by satire, but rather as a community comprised of fully individualized persons.

It seems to me, that both these answers should be re-examined, and that once they are their limitations would emerge, which would allow for the correction of errors as well as for a re-contextualization of what is still solid and valuable in them. Starting with the view of Peretz being firmly grounded in the traditions of the Jewish Enlightenment, in spite of its being essentially correct, it is too abstract and vague. It calls for clarification and concretization. The Enlightenment, as thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer showed, was far from being of one piece. Rather it was a conglomerate comprised of ideas and intellectual discoveries, which sharing in some common denominators, were also very divergent and in some cases mutually exclusive. This certainly holds true also for the Jewish Enlightenment, which flourished in different times and regions and

within the context of different national cultures. Thus although all the exponents of modern Jewish culture had roots deeply struck in the ground of the Haskalah, they did not necessarily hail from the same brand of it. This partly explained not only the vast differences between those of them with Western backgrounds and those who were active in eastern Europe, but also the differences that separated the eastern Europeans from one another, intellectuals such as Peretz Smolenskin, Sholem Yankev Abramovitch, Ahad Ha-Am, Simon Dubnov, Haim Zhitlovsky, David Frishman, and Micha Josef Berdyczewski. Hence the need to ask specifically in what domain or brand of the Haskalah each one of them come of age. This, of course, holds true for I. L. Peretz as well.

As for the understanding of Peretz's art as a new link in the chain of the mimetic representation of the *Shtetl* civilization, it is by far less impervious to questioning through to a critical re-examination. As prevalent and dominant as this idea is, not much of it can survive a close examination.

"The dray klassiker" formula was, perhaps, necessary in its day as an ideological safety belt for an intelligentsia in search for a gentrified intellectual and artistic tradition, which would justify their demand of the status of a national literature being granted to Yiddish literature—a justification Peretz himself never thought was necessary. This value of the formula has, however, completely eroded, leaving behind it only the accumulated damage the use of the formula inflicted upon the critical understanding and evaluation of the three writers whom it wished to elevate. For an example, it was partially responsible for the totally erroneous view of Sholem Aleichem as a writer who could create "universal" or symbolic "types," such as Tevye, supposedly a representative of Jewish traditional religious "confidence" and social immobility, but who was unable to create fully individualized characters. This reductionist view was necessary for the differentiation between him and Peretz. However, one needs only to read with an open mind any of Sholem Aleichem's dozens of short stories written in the form of a monologue, let alone the Tevye stories, in order to see how fully realized and richly nuanced as full blooded, individualized fictional persons their protagonists were. For four generations critics, basing themselves on the "dray klassiker" formula, simply confused individualism, as a social and cultural phenomenon, with individuation, as an artistic method of representing the serendipitous reality of human existence.

The truth is that the connection between Peretz and his two great predecessors was feeble at best, and actually non-existent. When he was about to make his debut as a Yiddish writer in the balladic *poemat*

“Monish,” Peretz wrote to Sholem Aleichem, in whose *Yidishe folksbiblyotek* the poem would be included: “I know you, Sir, and your aim and inclination” as a writer. It turned out, however, that Peretz mistook his correspondent for the author of “The Travels of Benjamin the Third” (to him known as “The Jewish Don Quixote”) and “The Nag,” the two masterpieces written by Sh. Y. Abramovitsh in the 1870s, which came to his attention because they had been translated into Polish in the early 1880s. To him the difference between the identities of writers hiding behind “folksy” personae or pen names such as Mendele Moykher Sforim and Sholem Aleichem was a matter of little importance. They both “wrote for readers who spoke Jargon and only Jargon,” as he said, presenting himself as a writer “who wrote for himself, at his pleasure,” or for readers who were proficient in “European” languages. Even much later in his career, when in his role of the leader of Yiddish literature, Peretz often concerned himself with its achievements, limitations, and needs, he paid the two other “Klassiker” scant and unenthusiastic *homages*. Actually, he never evinced either a liking for or an understanding of their works. Therefore, it would be by far more justified to examine Peretz’s work in conjunction with that of a contemporary such as Haim Nahman Bialik, whom Peretz admired, than with that of Sholem Aleichem, for one. Bialik’s poetry, it can be shown, touched a live nerve in Peretz’s artistic constitution as neither Abramovitsh nor Sholem Aleichem ever did. He not only translated “In the City of Slaughter” into Yiddish, and also made preparations for translating “The Dead of the Desert” and “The Scroll of Fire,” but also chose Bialik as his consultant as he was gathering momentum toward the writing of his masterpiece, the verse-drama “At Night in the Old Marketplace,” and at the same time he conducted in this drama a dialog with “The Dead of the Desert,” which was as vital as was the better known with Stanislav Wyspiansky’s “The Wedding.”

Peretz never arrived at his mimetic art as either a follower or an opponent of the satirical and humoristic models set in the works of Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem—respectively and separately. The dominant literary figure that loomed large for over his long apprenticeship period, was Yehuda Leib Gordon, the most prominent and representative figure in nineteenth century Hebrew poetry. Gordon’s narrative poems, both the so-called “historical” ones (such as “In the Teeth of Lions” and “In the Depths of the Sea”) and the “topical” or contemporary ones (such as “The Crownlet of the Letter Yod” [an idiom meaning a mere iota], or “The Two Josephs Sons of Simon”) formed, so to speak, the literary lap in which he curled during his literary infancy and on which he cut his poetic teeth. Not only his major works as a budding Hebrew poet in the 1870s,

such as “The Sanctification of the Name” (1875) and “The Life of a Hebrew Poet” (1876), can be shown to have emerged in the shadow of Gordon, but also the cycle of poems which appeared about a decade later under the title “The Melodies of the Age” (1886), which for a while, until all post-Gordonian Hebrew poetry would be eclipsed by the meteoric rise of Bialik—held a prominent position in contemporary Hebrew letters—even that innovative *oeuvre* cannot be truly comprehended when not read within the framework of the ongoing debate during the 1880s about the value and relevance of Gordon’s poetry, a debate, which informed both in the poetic practice and the literary criticism of the time, and which Peretz joined both as a practicing poet and as a literary critic.

Peretz’s role as a poet who lived, like all Hebrew poets of the last third of the nineteenth century, in the shadow of Gordon has been forgotten, or, to put it more bluntly, swept under the rug, by all and sundry, starting with Peretz himself, who in his *My Memoires* failed to mention Gordon’s name and dismissed his own first book of poems, the one which included “The Life of a Hebrew Poet,” as a book that “makes me blush” when remembered. But *My Memoires*, written late in the author’s life and majestically issued, so to speak, from the throne of the flourishing Yiddish establishment of the years which preceded World War I, was not to be trusted as an authentic historical or biographical chronicle. It was meant to buttress the author’s position as the mentor of current Yiddishism, and of course, the Yiddishist readers who consumed it had no interest in tracing the roots of their hero’s life-work in the by then forgotten pre-Bialikian Hebrew poetry of the late nineteenth century. Even Yiddishist scholars who dedicated to Peretz’s life and work, comprehensive monographs (such as Shmuel Niger’s truly learned *I. L. Peretz—Tsu zayn hundertsten geboyrntog*, published in Buenos Aires in 1952) treated this phase in the development of the writer as a mere pre-history, where one looked primarily for precedents and antecedents: folkloristic motifs and socialistic attitudes which would lately be properly developed.

Actually, our scholarly perspective should be diametrically upturned: instead of looking at the author’s early work from the perspective of his late, mature one, the latter should be examined from the vantage point of the former. In other words, instead of asking what of the mature thematic and ideology had been hinted at in the author’s early work, the critic and the scholar should enquire how the challenge, which the writer had faced early on in his Hebrew poems was later qualified or enlarged upon in his mature prose fiction and plays. This change of perspective demands, among other things, the realization that Peretz was, throughout his career,

and even in his best works of prose-fiction, primarily a poet, an heir to Y. L. Gordon, exactly as H. N. Bialik was.

2

Y. L. Gordon, the greatest poet of the Hebrew Enlightenment, also challenged some of its fundamental concepts. He made it face fateful questions the answers to which also demanded a radical re-calibration of its neo-classical poetics. These questions started with a reevaluation of the metaphysical significance of historical Jewish existence, and, by inference, of history in general. Was history informed by a divine order, which was also moral and rational, as some of the best exponents of European Enlightenment had maintained? For them the possibility of improving the lot of man through a rational and pragmatic re-conditioning of his personal and social life depended on an understanding both nature and human history as informed by the morality and rationality of a divine presence. Gordon wondered whether this connection between a divine and benevolent order and existential actuality could be seen as empirically valid. In any case, Jewish history with its endless suffering pointed, he believed, in the opposite direction. That suffering seemed devoid of any theological or metaphysical justification. A workable humanism could not, therefore, depend on a view of history as morally meaningful. Rather a call for such humanism had to emerge from a rebellion against the arbitrariness of history. Penina Abu-Sha'am, the protagonist of "In the Depths of the Sea," as she prepared herself for the suicide that was her only refuge from catering to the sexual demands of a tyrant, would not accept her mother's theological consolations and would never regard her self-imposed death as an aimed at sanctifying God's name. Rather she understood it as sanctifying her own human dignity. Poetically, this position, agnostic in its essence, undermined the relationship between an objective observer and the observed subject, a relationship the steadiness of which served as the very basis of Neo-classical aesthetics. If God's "ayin ro'a," seeing eye, could not be morally trusted anymore, the poetic speaker in his turn could not go on pretending to be in touch with objective truth. Thus a truly objective mimesis amounted to a mere illusion. By the same token, if moral dynamism originated in man's humanity rather than in God's divinity, then poetic dynamics emanated from the poet's interiority rather than from the nature of the object the poet described or told about. The basic quality of the poetic gesture, even when it expressed itself in epic terms, was therefore that of lyrical expressionism.

Gordon himself handled the implications of this revolutionary poetic insight with considerable circumspection. He went on focusing in his major works on the object, the protagonists his poems and their fate. At the same time, however, he shifted the center of gravity from the object to the subject. He did that by charging his diction with restrained pathos and razor-sharp sarcasm. He also highly dramatized the plots of his poems through compression, narrative lacunae, and occasional lyrical digressions. The poets who were influenced by him, Peretz among them, while working with his humanistic-agnostic concept of history, could not stop, rhetorically and poetically, where he did. Almost all of them intensified poetic diction through a considerable heightening of the level of pathos and emotional declarations at the expense of mimetic clarity. The “seeing eye,” not allowed anymore to be fixed to a firm theological basis had to become not only moveable but also stormily tossed from one place to another. Often it turned on itself, turning its visual mechanism inside rather than outside. This, done by many poets in a variety of fashions and in the service of a variety of themes, quickly led Hebrew and also Yiddish writing of the late nineteenth century through a period of hyperbolic emotionalism, which slowly etched its way toward a Romanticism that would eventually submerge the declared emotion in metaphorical objective-correlatives. In many cases the trails of hyperbolic emotionalism were carried well into the age of Romanticism and beyond. By and large, the influence of the age of sentimentalism endured throughout the trajectory of European nineteenth century literature, as the writings of some of that literature’s giants, such Victor Hugo, Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoevsky, shows. As for the “new” Jewish literature of that century as well as of the early twentieth century, sentimentalism was one of its staple characteristics. In any case, the poetry written in Hebrew and Yiddish throughout the last third of the nineteenth century was awash with the heightened emotionalism triggered by Gordon’s poetic revolution; a heightened and verbose emotionalism which could not be stabilized and somewhat reined-in before the appearance of Bialik and the establishment of his poetic authority. That was why almost anything in Jewish poetry which had preceded Bialik’s dominance was seen by the turn of the century as dated and presumably irrelevant. Poets had to change their style, switch genre or language, or stop writing.

Peretz too all but gave up on his career as a Hebrew poet (which had occupied him for more than two decades), once he tried in vain to assert his presence in the Hebrew poetry of the 1890s in his small collection of love poems, *HaUgav* (*The Harp*, or *The Lyre*, 1894). Nevertheless, if we wish to correctly understand his work we are not allowed to dismiss or

forget this truncated career and its implications. He was born and raised as a poet in the interim period between Gordon and Bialik, and his lifework, in spite of a number of significant metamorphoses, would remain to the very end imbued with the basic quality of that age of transition.

3

At the very beginning, in the mid-1870s Peretz could be seen as a mere disciple of Gordon whose work as a writer of discursive poems of ideas (such as “The Partnership” or “They Tell Me”) and witty parables *à la* La Fontaine (such as “The Owl and the Moon,” and “The Division of the Sciences”) directly imitated Gordon’s models. Then he went on to “correct” and update Gordon through innovative imitations, as in his already mentioned imitations of Gordon’s historical and contemporary narrative poems. In the “Sanctification of the Name,” he transplanted the plot of “In the Depths of the Sea” from Spain of 1492 (the expulsion of the Jews) to Poland of 1648-9 (the Khmelnsky rebellion). This in itself pointed to a significant development in the historical thinking of the *Maskilim* who had systematically preferred the historical experience of medieval Spanish Jewry, supposedly close to their own “enlightened” version of Judaism, to that of the benighted Ashkenazi, and particularly eastern European equivalent. Now Jewish suffering caused by the Khmelnsky massacres could be as historically respectful as the one which had been caused by the expulsion from Spain and by the horror of the Inquisition, and the lascivious Spanish captain of Gordon’s poem who intended to keep Penina Abu-Sha’am as a sexual slave could be replaced by the Cossack warrior who was struck by the beauty of the Jewish girl in Peretz’s. The basics of Gordon’s plot, however, remained unchanged in the latter’s poem. In both poems, Jewish girls avoided a fate worse than death by drowning themselves before the non-Jewish predators could achieve their goals. Peretz’s poem also started in the Gordon manner (compare the opening description of the sacking by Khmelnsky’s Cossacks of the Polish town with the description of the siege and eventual sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in Gordon’s “In the Lions’ Teeth”) and ended similarly with a pathetic apostrophe—this time not to the God who averted his eyes as the Jewish girl sank to the depths of the sea but rather to the Cossack lover who caught a nap and failed to see her counterpart throwing herself into the river. Both poems reached closure in the description of the waves, which after a short turbulence placidly kept the secrets of the drowned girls’ burial place. Thus, Peretz’s poem amounted to a variation or an imitation (in the non-pejorative sense) of the

“In the Depths of the Sea”; and it was one of many such variations (cf., for instance, Shmu’el Leib Gordon’s “In the Heart of the Sea”). However, the differences between the model and its duplication were also significant. Above all else, the levels of emotionalism and of the pathos were drastically raised in the latter. In it the melodramatic plot was very much condensed. It was actually compressed into a single, highly charged scene, from which all historical and theological commentary had been eliminated. Instead, the atmosphere of fire and bloodshed had been highlighted. The encounter between the Jewish girl and her captor, which in Gordon’s poem had been indirectly and subtly conveyed, was fleshed out in a direct, long dialog between the two. Unlike Penina, Peretz’s protagonist avoided directly questioning God’s providence. Rather she meekly asked for God’s forgiveness for her intention of committing suicide, which in sheer terms of the halachic law was a grave sin. Nevertheless, the poet managed to convey the humanistic contents of the seemingly religious act of self-sacrifice exactly as he would later do in some of his folkloristic tales such as “Three Presents,” where the Jewish girl, in order to protect her integrity, immolates herself in a manner of which the halachic norm would not have approved. All in all, the distance between Gordon’s model and its emotionally-heightened imitation remained small enough.

That was not the case in the following, by far more innovative, imitation attempted in “The Life of a Hebrew Poet.” Whereas the long poem as a whole was in technique, style, and form clearly modeled after Gordon’s poetic novellas (themselves written in the romantic tradition of that sub-genre particularly as exemplified in the works of Byron and Pushkin), and the young protagonist was not far removed from the classical young *Maskil* protagonist of poems such as “Two Josephs the Sons of Simon,” the difference between the model, as set by Gordon, and its reprocessed Peretz version was very significant. Actually, in “The Life of a Hebrew Poet” the long narrative poem written as a rhyming social novel was replaced by a long narrative poem written as a rhyming lyrical autobiography. Whereas the former focused on objective circumstances such as the obdurate rabbinical procedure which devastated an aguna’s quest for happiness and marital security (an “aguna” was a Jewish woman barred from being divorced and allowed to remarry by the disappearance of a husband to whom she remained “anchored” for life) or the criminal shenanigans of the Jewish Kahal-leaders, who sold the identity of the young *Maskil* and thus caused his being exiled to Siberia, the latter focused on the internal turmoil and social isolation of a young man who chose to dedicate his life to the writing of poetry. The difference went even beyond this. What mainly interested Peretz were not only the social

and cultural circumstances which inevitably darkened the life of a Hebrew poet, but mainly the very quality and prospects of a life defined by the poetic mission or rather compulsion *per-se*.

Peretz pondered the question which would occupy him in the future more than once: what made one a poet? How did poetry differ from all other forms of linguistic communication? In his critical essay on Y. L. Gordon, Peretz asked, was Gordon a poet or a mere linguist? The term linguist meant a person possessing high linguistic skills. Thus, the question concerning Gordon could be generalized as pertaining to the difference between a poem and a mere specimen of elegant and even forceful writing, which nevertheless did not rise to the level of poetry. In the long poem, he wrote in his twenties, Peretz's answers to these questions were unequivocal and quite simplistic: the poet differed from all men due to the stormy emotionalism which possessed him. He was a person tossed and torn by an affect as potent as a hurricane, which overpowered him body and soul, constantly demanding expression ("just write! Just write!"). This unflagging demand in and of itself amounted to an incurable malady ("I am unable to keep quiet, my life is incurable"). Whereas the poet's actual complaints often resembled the habitual list of social ills gone through by the writers of the Haskalah and what caused his pain was said to be the condition of the people, this condition was not the sole or main source of his poet's malaise. The turmoil the latter constantly experienced was presented in the poem as having an identity of itself, that of a demon hovering above the protagonist, attacking and overpowering him ("this spirit swept me with its wings . . . this shadow always stalks me"). Besides, the need for linguistic self-expression was described here as too powerful, and thus insatiable. No realization of that compulsive urge could equal its impetuosity, and therefore being a poet involved endemic suffering, dissatisfaction, and emotional imbalance. How different this image of the poet was from the one reflected in Gordon's poetry—an image of a person of skill and courage who seeks and finds the points of balance between sensibility and sense, emotion and cognition, pathos and self-irony, the need for self-expression and the ability to control this need and even eliminate it when the poem is seen as unable to actually impact the objective world.

In "The Melodies of the Age," the poet took a few steps further in the direction to which his earlier works had pointed. In fact, he managed here to further poetically reify many of the assumptions of the aesthetics of sensibility. This cycle of twenty-eight poems of various sizes and forms took for its general topic the crisis of the Jewish Enlightenment in the wake of the "Storms in the South" of 1881-1882, i.e., the series of attacks

on Jews triggered throughout the southern regions of the Czarist Empire by the assassination of Czar Alexander II. In this, the cycle hardly stood out of the current poetic trend, which reflected the searing disappointment of the *Maskilim* with both the Czarist authorities' and the Russian intelligentsia's cold or tepid responses to the pogroms. Peretz's cycle of poems was nevertheless very different from most other responses to the crisis due to two of its characteristics: thematically it surprised contemporary readers by focusing in its first sections not on its purported topic, the collapse of the faith that through acculturation the Jews would be accepted by the Russian host society, but rather on the nature of the poet and of poetry in general. Structurally and stylistically it surprised by its intentional lack of order and unity. The cycle was opened with a characterization of the poet as absolutely unstable, controlled by moodiness and atmospheric vicissitudes. The poet was likened here to the quicksilver in the pellucid glass-tube of the barometer, rising and falling due to influences for which he could not be held responsible. Therefore, the poems argued, he was not to be judged by norms of consistency and intellectual reliability. His instability was contradistinguished from the immobility and rigidity of the "the people," who were like "a cliff in the sea," "lifeless, immobile, fixed." Thus, Peretz launched his new opus with a declaration of the poet's right to be at any given moment what he felt rather than in synch with the people he addressed. The poetics of sensibility would never be given a more radical expression or definition in Jewish literature. The poet, nevertheless, was not unrelated or irrelevant to his audience. On the contrary, his subjectivism and emotionalism were exactly what the dried-up and atrophied people needed. Then, since poetry was all about subjectivity and the flux of emotions, it could not be expected to be orderly and object-related. It was not only allowed but actually expected to demonstrate an innate disorderliness. This was fully illustrated by the structure and style of "The Melodies of the Age." The cycle as a whole was devoid of temporal and causal progression. It lacked even the rudiments of a narrative plot, changed without a warning its intended addressees, shifted from discursive commentary to colorful fantasy, from rhetorical odes to Zionism and Socialism to realistic narrative (the speaker falls asleep in a train compartment and as he wakes up he is exposed to the mundane conversation of two provincial Jewish passengers, a Shmerl and a Berl; on this occasion he asks for the forgiveness of his "brothers," fellow Hebrew writers, for being fond of Yiddish, the language used by the Shmerls and the Berls). The style freely fluctuated between the high ornamental diction of the poetry of the Haskalah, to as low and simple diction as contemporary Hebrew would

allow. In short, Peretz made here a conscious effort to incorporate in the poems, their form and style, the principles of changeability and non-sequentiality. These, he ironically commented, perfectly fitted the topic of the collapse of the Haskalah project, for what learning was impervious to unlearning? What knowledge could not be stood on its head?

Peretz approached a consummation of the poetics of sensibility in the four cycles of short love lyrics of which *HaUgav* (The Lyre), his book of 1894, was comprised: “Spots of Brightness,” “Evening and Morning,” “Lamentations,” and “She-Palm.” The little book was famously thrashed by the critic David Frishman who accused the author of plagiarizing Heine’s *Buch der Lieder*. It also had the bad luck of making its appearance against a background recently illuminated by Hebrew’s two poetic meteors, Bialik and Tchernichovsky. Nevertheless, it was not devoid of interest and of a certain intrinsic value emanating from the poet’s strict loyalty to his poetics. As for Heine’s obvious influence, it was written in bold characters on the entire Hebrew-Yiddish poetic scene of the turn of the century, Heine’s model providing great help to Jewish poets in the throes of the transition from the discursive-ideational lyrical poetry of the Haskalah to the musical and imaginative domain of early Romanticism. Peretz’s case was anything but exceptional in this respect. At the same time, however, the essential tonality of *HaUgav* was very different from that of the *Buch der Lieder*. In vain would one seek in the former the light touch of Heine’s poetry of affect, the humor and flights of brilliant sarcasm, which in Heine’s poems counterbalanced all pathetic surpluses. Whereas the German-Jewish master was gently playing with the tenets of the poetics of sentimentalism, embraced but at the same time also gently rejected, Peretz vehemently adopted them. Thus, he raised in *HaUgav* hyperbolic emotionalism to the highest level it could reach.

The book examined love as a mental and emotional labyrinth where the lover was eternally trapped, never achieving the harmony and happiness he sought. At most he would reach a state of exhaustion that might resemble rest, but would momentarily end as the senseless quest would be resumed. The four sections of the book offered a continuity of sorts, which was based not on a causal-temporal progression but rather on the inherent dynamics of the emotional tide—rising, cresting, and then breaking down. In “Spots of Brightness,” the lover-speaker, although in severe pain, still found his position bearable. In “Evening and Morning,” his soul was torn in shreds. Then he sank (in “Lamentations”) into dejection, only to be reduced to sheer exhaustion in “She-Palm,” the tree from which he asked for a bit of a shade in the emotional desert in which he found himself. From the very start the speaker of the poems was honest enough to admit

that, although the pain he experienced had been inflicted by the beloved woman, it was his own personality and behavior that had triggered the emotional tornado which devastated him. He was restless by nature. He should have been born an Arab in the desert, wallowing in the vastness of the wilderness, wildly galloping with the untamed desert horses and soaring together with the desert eagles. These could perhaps have helped him in containing what he himself calls “the storm in my heart.” But how could he do or be all that in the bourgeois salon of the beloved woman to which he dragged himself, in order to savor some “horrible moments of happiness”?

The entire little volume was chock-full of hyperboles, oxymora, and binary oppositions. The verses, purportedly, “trickled from the gashes in the heart,” were formulated by a speaker who “held his own flesh in his teeth.” It was exactly with such poetry in mind that Bialik, in the very same year of *HaUgav*'s publication, expressed his utter impatience. Current Hebrew poetry, he said, was awash with turgid and empty concepts which were so different from the Gordon's clearly etched ones. “A few verses of YALAG would tell us more than thousand current lamentations imbued with fire and blood.” Young Bialik pontificated: poets were allowed “to groan and express longing only to the extent, and in the very same form, that the groan and the longing existed in reality, among the living.” In other words, Bialik demanded that affect in poetry had to be controlled and subsumed by its objective correlatives, whether mimetic or metaphorical. Soon Peretz himself would be ready to swear by the same formula. In his essay “What Was Gordon, a Poet or a Linguist?” he differentiated between the rhetorician who mastered discursive language and the poet, who incorporated his message in living scenes. “The linguist talks, makes speeches, whereas the poet visualizes his ideas in pictures of all kinds.”

Peretz's own poems, including most of those he would still write mainly in Yiddish, could hardly pass the exam based on this differentiation; and that may explain his all but total withdrawal after the publication of *HaUgav* from the arena of Hebrew poetry. The territory, he realized, was fully occupied by the presence of Bialik, who taught his contemporaries how to keep emotionalism alive while strictly controlling it by concrete objective correlatives, original symbolism, and a new musicality, which conveyed emotion even as none of it was overtly expressed in so many words. Yiddish poetry still did not possess a Bialik of its own who could teach it how to do this.

4

But if *HaUgav* amounted to a failure, at least Peretz learned from the mistakes he had made by following the inner logic of emotionalism to its bitter end, and this amounted to his rebirth as a mature artist. He would never renege on the poetics of sensibility, but he would buttress and complement them with the tools of the narrative or dramatic objective correlatives. Although he would not altogether abandon the writing of poetry (in Yiddish), even from continuing the mood of *HaUgav* in its Yiddish sequel. The “*Romanzzero*,” he turned his best energies to prose fiction, and then to drama written in both prose and verse. However, the prose he now wrote, in which heightened emotionalism was tempered by mimetic realism, was the direct if upgraded continuation of his earlier work as a Hebrew poet.

This could be best seen in the sequel of prose vignettes, “*Bilder fun a provints rayze*” (Sketches from a Journey in the Provinces; in its Hebrew version “*Tsiyurei masa*,” Drawings from a Journey), which was published in 1891, and was rightly regarded as the author’s real debut as a writer of prose fiction. This brilliant sequel of anecdotes and short stories, strung together on the connecting line of the narrator’s mission as a statistician sent out from Warsaw for the purpose of collecting materials which would disprove the allegation that Jews in the villages and small towns accumulated riches by exploiting the Polish peasant, amounted actually to direct prose equivalent to and continuation of the emotionally turbulent Hebrew poetic cycles published a few years earlier: “*The Melodies of the Age*” and its sequel, “*HaIr haketana*” (The Small Town, actually: The *Shtetl*). Scenes from these cycles—such as that of Berl and Shmerl overheard conversation in the train compartment in the “*Melodies*,” and particularly the tragic-comedy of the narrator in “*HaIr haketana*,” a tired urban intellectual who having fled to the *Shtetl*, hoping to find there rest, harmony, and the lack of alienation, finds instead strife, negligence, ignorance, and above all else, dire poverty—were simply lifted from the poems and implanted in the *Bilder*. What’s more important is the basic cultural and social attitude the *Bilder* shared with the Hebrew poetic cycles, which was that of the well-meaning but somewhat distant urban philanthropist, leaving his own protected space in order to confer his goodness upon suffering “brethren,” who were less educated and less equipped than he was to face up to the difficulties inherent in the modern state of affairs. This benevolent traveler discovered quickly enough that he could do little if anything to ameliorate the conditions under which his “brethren,” “the people,” lived. Not only was he unable, due to