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The Father of Modern Yiddish Literature

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I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture
By Ruth R. Wisse
University of Washington Press
128pp., $20.

The I.L. Peretz Reader.
Edited by Ruth R. Wisse.
Schocken, 381 pp., $16.

By KEN FRIEDEN

As Professor Ruth Wisse remarks at the start of her most recent book, "There has not been a new English study of Peretz in 30 years." During the past two years she has remedied this neglect by providing both a monograph on Peretz and an extensive collection of his writings.

Ms. Wisse was recently appointed to the first endowed chair in Yiddish literature. Although there are several professors of Yiddish at American universities, the Atran Chair for Yiddish at Columbia University — had been scholars working in linguistics. The appointment of Professor Wisse at Harvard augurs well for the future of Yiddish literary studies.

"I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture" originated in 1988 as Professor Wisse's contribution to the Samuel & Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies at the University of Washington. Previous works that have received acclaim in the same series are Robert Alter's "Realism" and "Arum Peretzn," "Between Two Peaks." Like his early poem "Monish," they are characterized by their "compressed shorthand style that never stops to explain or to amplify; the unfinished sentence, trailing the three dots that became known as the Peretz trademark; the tantalizing mixture of old and new that makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar.

In many respects these characteristics ally him with the European modernist movement, and consequently he has been called "the father" of modernist Yiddish writing — at a great distance from "grandfather" Mendele (S.Y. Abramovitch) and "grandson" Sholem Aleichem (Rabinovitch).

The relationship between Peretz and Sholem Aleichem has been the subject of much discussion. Peretz felt that he had been wronged when Sholem Aleichem edited his first Yiddish poem, "Monish." Professor Wisse dutifully notes that the latter was insane. In this connection Professor Wisse cites an important unpublished letter (from Mordecai Spector to Y.H. Ravnitski, dated May 1, 1900): "Since Peretz spent time in prison he's become quite mad. Before, as you know, he was already well on his way, but since his imprisonment, he wants to play the martyr, though he was no more guilty than you or I."

In any event, the relations between Peretz and Sholem Aleichem were always strained, and it is certain that a measure of competitiveness hindered free exchange. Moreover they were geographically remote, with Peretz living most of his mature life in Warsaw (1889-1916) and Sholem Aleichem spending his most productive years in Kiev (1887-90, 1895-1905). Professor Wisse observes that differences in their literary tastes made true understanding impossible. On one occasion in Warsaw, Peretz refused to participate in a literary evening if the organizers insisted on reading a story by Sholem Aleichem. The literary elite of Warsaw remained skeptical in the face of Sholom Aleichem's great popularity among Yiddish readers.

Professor Wisse adeptly combines literary commentary with biographical and cultural materials, as in her previous book on the New York poets Mani Leyb and Moyshe Leyb Halpern. In the case of I.L. Peretz, given overwhelming evidence of his problematic personality, some readers might object that the portrait is too uniformly flattering. Peretz's cousin Rosa Laks-Peretz shattered the saintly aura around him with her memoir "Arum Peretzn," which presents intimate details never conveyed by his literary acquaintances. We should approach such recollections with caution, but they are necessary to moderate the otherwise one-sided biographical accounts of Peretz.

Professor Wisse has made a valuable contribution by interpreting Peretz's literary output in its cultural, political, and historical framework. In addition, she has edited the fullest and most reliable collection of his stories ever published in English translation. "The I.L. Peretz Reader" will become a standard point of reference for Americans studying Peretz in English.

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