

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Religion

College of Arts and Sciences

1989

Psychological Depth in I. L. Peretz' Familiar Scenes: On the 75th Anniversary of His Death

Ken Frieden
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Frieden, Ken, "Psychological Depth in I. L. Peretz' Familiar Scenes: On the 75th Anniversary of His Death" (1989). *Religion*. 56.

<https://surface.syr.edu/rel/56>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

JEWISH BOOK ANNUAL

VOLUME 47
1989-1990
5750

Edited by
JACOB KABAKOFF



JEWISH BOOK COUNCIL
15 East 26 Street, New York, N.Y. 10010

סאַציאלע מאַטיוון זײַנע האָט ער פֿאַרטיידיקט מיט פּאַטאָס, און די אַנט־סאַציאלע פֿאַרקומענישן האָט ער באַקעמפֿט, אָפֿן און מיט סאַרקאַזם.

מענדל דלות קומט צו זײַן חבֿר, דעם גביר ר' עוזר האַפֿנשטיין, כדי ווערן געהאַלפֿן מיט גרן פֿאַר זײַן טאכטער. הגם ביידע זײַנען פֿרומע חסידים, הערט זיך קלאַר אין מענדעלס רייד דער שאַרפֿער סאַציאלער פּראָטעסט: "וואָס ווילסטו פֿון מײַן לעבן האבן" — טענהט מענדל, ליגנדיק אויפֿן גבירס סאַפֿע. "איך האָב כּוח צו אײַערע שטיינערנע גאַסן, צו אײַערע טרעפֿן איך זאָל אויף דער עלטער קלינגן הינטער טירן? גיי דו. גיב אליין. מײַן דאגה: אַז איך האָב געהאַט האָב איך געגעבן".

וועבער ליבע; די פֿרומע קאַץ; אין פּאַסט־וואָגן; די לִבֿנה דערציילט; כאַנטשע שוויג; דער נדבֿן; דרייַ נייטאַרינס. דאָס זײַנען נאָר א טייל דערציילונגען, אין וועלכע פּרץ ברענגט ארויס אָפֿענע, שאַרפֿע סאַציאלע פּראָטעסטן, אין זין פֿון זײַן פּראָקלאַמירונג:

מײַן ניט די וועלט איז אַ בערזע באַשאַפֿן.
דער שטאַרקער זאָל האַנדלען מיט מידע און שוואַכע,
אַ מײַן ניט לית דין ולית דיין!

ער האָט געשטרעבט צו אַ וועלט פֿון יושר און גערעכטיקייט. אָבער אויך מורא געהאַט, אַז עס קען קומען אַזאַ צײַט ווען "איר וועט געבן דעם אַרעמאָן עסן, ווי אַן אָקס וואָס שטייט פֿאַר א פֿולע קאַרעטע, אָבער איר וועט אונטערהאַקן די מענטשלעכע פֿליגל". און פּרץ האָט געגאַרט צו פֿליגל, צום פֿלי, צו ברענגן די מענטשהייט העכער, שענער. אין אַ רעדע האָט ער געזאָגט:

"מיר באַצירן מיטן נאָמען פּערזענלעכקייט דעם וואָס באַזיצט ניט נאָר אַ שטאַרקן ווילן און אַ פֿלאַמענדיקן פֿאַרלאַנג, נאָר אויך אַ מאַראַלישע הויך און אינטעלעקטועלע קראַפֿט".

די באַצירונג וואָלט האַרמאָנירט ווי אַ טייל פֿון אַן עפּיגראַף אויף דעם אוהל פֿון דערציילער, פּאַעט און פּערזענלעכקייט י"ל פּרץ.

KEN FRIEDEN

Psychological Depth in I. L. Peretz' Familiar Scenes

On the 75th Anniversary of His Death

A CENTURY AGO, in 1890, I.L. Peretz inaugurated a new phase in Yiddish fiction with his book of stories entitled *Familiar Scenes* (*Bekante bilder*).¹ While he had already published the remarkable poem "Monish" two years before, these narrative works represented an even more radical departure from current norms and a turning-point in his career. Until his death twenty-five years later, Peretz continued to explore the consequences of the psychological revolution in his early stories.

Familiar Scenes contains three extraordinary short texts: "The Messenger" ("Der meshulekh"), "What is 'Soul'?" ("Vos heyst 'neshome?"), and "The Mad Talmudist" ("Der meshugener batlen"). The first conveys an old man's experience of traveling through a snowstorm; the second contains a narrator's autobiographical and metaphysical reflections; and the third enters the mind of an imbalanced Yeshiva student. The first and last texts share thematic and stylistic characteristics. Thematically, they deal with desperate situations and death, and they employ the literary form now called internal monologue to depict human beings in conditions of extremity. "The Messenger" and "The Mad Talmudist" are decisive expressions of the development toward psychological complexity in modern Yiddish fiction.

Peretz' accomplishment in *Bekante bilder* is hardly imaginable without its major prototype by Mendele Mokher Sforim, an allegorical novel called *The Nag* (*Di klyatshe*). Peretz read Mendele's

1. Leon Peretz, *Bekante bilder*, ed. I. Dinesohn (Warsaw, 1890); I. L. Peretz, *Bekante bilder: serfiroiren gevoren*, 2d ed. by I. Dinesohn (Warsaw, 1894).

novel, which was first published in 1873, in a Polish translation that appeared in 1886.² Mendele's novel tells the story of "mad" Isrolik; or rather, it employs the first-person form to have Isrolik tell his own tale. Unlike the other boys in his town who succumb to the flood of arranged marriages, Isrolik resolves to remain single and enter the university. He then prepares for the entrance examinations, only to find himself baffled by his studies of history and literature. The latter has especially deleterious effects, when he cannot check the fantasies that Slavic lore inspires in him. Isrolik, the would-be enlightener, also discovers his inability to reach the Jewish masses he hopes to educate. He experiences a series of hallucinations concerning a talking horse that comes to symbolize the afflicted Jewish people. Mendele's interest is more with the allegorical level than with the psychology of his flighty narrator, yet Peretz was able to draw from Mendele's use of the first-person form.

"The Messenger" portrays a relatively balanced character in an external crisis. The old man is carrying money and a contract through a blizzard, and trying to ignore a painful sensation in his chest. The story follows his thoughts, memories, and fantasies as he trudges through the snow. While sitting to rest he drifts into a dreamy state and ultimately freezes to death. Alluding to this story, the second edition of *Familiar Scenes* (1894) bore the sensationalistic subtitle: *Frozen! (Ferfroiren gevoren!)*.

VARIED STYLE

In "The Messenger," Peretz experiments with a range of internal monologue techniques, combined with occasional third-person descriptions. The story opens: "He walks, and the wind chases at his clothes and white beard."³ Peretz employs narrative omniscience to follow the thoughts of the old man, who worries from the outset whether he will be able to complete his mission. A sharp pain stabs him again and again in the chest, "but he

2. See *Briv un redes fun I. L. Peretz*, ed. Nachman Meisel (New York: YKUF, 1944), pp. 141n, and 148-49.

3. I. L. Peretz, "The Messenger," in *Ale verk I. L. Peretz*, vol. 2 (New York: CYCO, 1947), p. 30. All translations are my own; "The Messenger" is henceforth cited as "M" by page alone. A full English translation is contained in I. L. Peretz, *Bontche the Silent*, trans. A. S. Rappoport (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1927), pp. 37-48.

does not want to admit it" (M 30). The narrator even informs the reader of what the character tries to hide from himself.

Most of this story is devoted to a sequence of increasingly remote fantasies. First the messenger imagines what he would buy if he had money. Then he recalls his army days as a recruited soldier under Tsar Nicholas I (M 32). There follows a long recollection of his marriage to the sharp-tongued Shprintze, who died many years earlier (M 33-36). Finally, after his weak heart compels him to sit and rest in the snow, he imagines entering a warm, friendly household. Dream takes the place of reality, offering the messenger an imaginative escape from the snowstorm just as he is on the verge of death. Where Mendele uses first-person narrative in an allegory of the Jewish condition, Peretz employs the internal monologue technique to represent the psychology of an unfortunate individual.

We need not dwell on the second of the stories, "What is 'Soul'?" The narrator of this text recalls a sequence of contemplations on the soul and the afterlife, from the time of his childhood to maturity. While this is a significant forerunner to Peretz' renowned hasidic tales, it suffers from an absence of plot. Peretz has not yet mastered the nuanced tone and suspense of his later works, in which first-person narrative enables him to subtly attack superstitious customs and beliefs. As a transitional piece, "What is 'Soul'?" is an instructive failure, but not one that requires extensive comment.

In "The Mad Talmudist," Peretz more closely emulates Mendele's persona of a mad youth. Like Mendele in *The Nag*, Peretz deals with an eccentric character who suffers from the discrepancy between his readings and his life. But whereas Mendele uses satire, irony, and allegory to convey a social message, Peretz turns inward to probe the consciousness of his protagonist. Mendele raises issues of education and social progress; in contrast, Peretz concentrates on the repressed desire of his Talmudist.

Whereas *The Nag* purports to be a first-person narrative by Isrolik the Madman, edited by Mendele, Peretz chooses the more innovative style of internal monologue, which diminishes the apparent distance between the narrator and his story. With the exception of several short third-person descriptions, the narrative consists of the mad Talmudist's represented thoughts.

This internalized narrative technique allows for a detailed portrait of an abnormal or imbalanced mind.

INNER CONFLICT

"The Mad Talmudist" opens with a third-person description: "He ran back and forth by day, alone in the *bes-hamedresh*, and suddenly stood still."⁴ The Talmudist begins by questioning his identity. Since he is alone, he addresses himself to God: "Master of the Universe, who am I?" (MT 18). Based on what others say about him, he refers to himself as a Talmudist, a madman, an orphan, possibly a thinker, and a thirty-year-old Yeshiva boy who eats only five days a week (MT 18-19). Psychologists today might perceive him as having a personality disorder, an identity conflict, or a split self. From his standpoint, however, as a reader of the Bible and Talmud, he concludes that a dybbuk—an evil spirit—must have entered him. He notices the internal division when he is tempted to steal a cake; part of him says "yes" and the other part warns "no" (MT 21). In the language of the Talmud, he concludes that he is like a room in which the good spirit (*yetsar tov*) and the evil spirit (*yetsar hore*) dwell. These spirits are also inclinations or drives, and modern psychology might associate this doubling with the conflict between rational consciousness and unconscious forces.

Although the first part of the story merely shows the Talmudist's internal confusion, the subsequent two parts suggest its cause. The "dybbuk" that has entered him is in fact Teibele, the wife of a local merchant. In other words, his "evil impulse" is repressed sexual desire. "I often dream of her," the Talmudist thinks, and "she sometimes begs me, at night while sleeping, to help her" (MT 24). He fantasizes that she will ask him to defend her against her brutal husband, and that he will kill the offender (MT 25). Yet he is incapable of carrying out this fantasy, and can only continue to suffer from his internal conflict.

The Talmudist figures his condition metaphorically: a stran-

ger thinks within him, like a bird inside a cage. On one level, this image represents the soul that is trapped inside the body. More specifically, however, the bird is a little dove, in Yiddish a *teibele* (MT 23), which is also the name of the woman he loves. She, or his desire for her, is trapped inside his more rational self. Because his reason has only partial control, he is called mad.

These early tales are unlike the later hasidic stories for which Peretz is best known, because they contain little satire or irony. Peretz does not describe the messenger and Talmudist in order to criticize them, but rather to recreate their particular states of consciousness. This distinguishes him sharply from Mendele Mokher Sforim, who first and foremost directs his portrayals toward the pedantic goals of the Enlightenment. Whereas Mendele sought to satirize and render obsolete the superstitious *shtetl* world, young Peretz did not yet aim at social ends.

HIS LETTERS

Peretz' earliest letters to Sholem Aleichem provide evidence of his aesthetic commitments. When Peretz first learned of Sholem Aleichem's plan to publish Yiddish literature, he confused his name—Sholem Rabinovitsh—with that of Mendele Mokher Sforim—Sholem Abramovitsh. Hence Peretz writes to Sholem Aleichem as if he were addressing Mendele Mokher Sforim, and wonders whether the established author will appreciate his work. Since he knows Mendele's *Travels of Benjamin the Third* and *The Nag* from Polish translations, he has ample reason to doubt whether the author of these novels will accept his own stories. Peretz mentions four differences in their writing:

First, I am certain that my poems and articles will not be pleasing to you from the standpoint... of form: our everyday speech and yours are different... in ours there are more expressions from the German language.

Second, I know the work of my lord: his will and striving (as far as I have been able to understand) is to write for the public... but I write for myself, for my own pleasure; and if I sometimes remember the reader, he is from a higher class in society...

Third, there is a great difference between the objects them-

4. I. L. Peretz, "The Mad Talmudist," in *Ale verk fun I. L. Peretz*, vol. 2 (New York: CYCO, 1947), p. 18. All translations are my own; "The Mad Talmudist" is henceforth cited as "MT" by page alone. A complete English translation is contained in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), pp. 234-42.

selves. You dress up foreign, naked thoughts from an external world, and the main thing is—from the real world, while I, who write for my own pleasure and in accordance with my mood, when I am holding the quill, I draw simultaneously from different worlds.

And fourth, because writing itself is different here than in your parts, and it will be difficult for you to read... I write as one speaks among us, and swallow syllables that one swallows here while speaking.⁵

The second and third points are particularly significant. Peretz aptly describes Mendele's *Benjamin the Third* and *The Nag* when he comments that Mendele writes "for the public," and Peretz sets himself apart from this didactic, Enlightenment attitude. Because, as he comments, "I write for myself . . . in accordance with my mood," Peretz replaces social criticism and allegory by individual psychology and internal monologue techniques. Furthermore, the early Peretz is less concerned to portray social ills than to deal with "different worlds" suggested by the poetic imagination.

IDEOLOGICAL AIMS

Despite his claim to write only for his own pleasure, in the letters to Sholem Aleichem, Peretz frequently mentions social goals. For example, he emphasizes the importance of expanding the horizons of the Yiddish language, and wishes to promote books on psychology and history.⁶ Moreover, he discusses the issues of nationalism, assimilation, and the role of women.⁷ Hence the letters to Sholem Aleichem anticipate Peretz' later movement toward socially critical depictions of ḥasidic life, while at the same time they mark his goal of inventing more individualized characters who show psychological depth.

A seminal critic of Yiddish literature, Shmuel Nizer, confirms the significance of the emphasis Peretz placed on the individual consciousness. If Mendele and Sholem Aleichem deal with the "soul of the people," Peretz probes his own mind.⁸ In contrast

5. Translated from letter 74 in *Briev un redes fun I. L. Peretz*, ed. Nachman Meisel (New York: YKUF, 1944), pp. 138-39.

6. *Ibid.*, letters 75-76, pp. 144-45.

7. *Ibid.*, letter 76, pp. 146-48.

8. S. Nizer, *Dertseyers un romanists*, vol. 1 (New York: CYCO, 1946), pp. 163-64.

to Mendele's style, which "derives from the folk-tradition," Peretz' style "comes from him alone."⁹ This may be something of an exaggeration, since Peretz learned from his precursors who wrote in Polish, Russian, and Yiddish. Yet even when Peretz follows the Enlightenment authors by satirizing ignorance and superstition, he does so in a subtler, more individual way.

One hundred years ago, I. L. Peretz published his first, highly original collection of stories under the deceptive title, *Familiar Scenes*. Some of the scenes may have been familiar, yet the style Peretz employed to depict them was previously unknown in Yiddish. Moreover, Peretz did not subordinate his portrayal of a messenger or mad Talmudist to a single ideological position; instead, he sought to simulate the depths of particular minds in extreme states. While Mendele remained the revered "grandfather," Peretz thus became the father of modern Yiddish literature, preparing the way for modernist authors in Europe, America, and Israel.

When Peretz died in 1915, after an astoundingly prolific career, writers around the world eulogized him. Perhaps the most powerful poem written in his memory was M. L. Halpern's "I. L. Peretz," which affirms his centrality to subsequent Yiddish authors. In answer to the question, "What, then, were you to us?" Halpern responds by comparing Peretz to haunting images of

A last charred log at night
Smouldering on the steppe in a gypsy tribe's camp;
A ship's sail struggling with the wind and sea;
The last tree in an enchanted, mazy wood
Where lightning cut down at the roots
Oak giants, thousands of years old.¹⁰

9. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

10. Translation by Kathryn Hellerstein in the bilingual edition of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's *In New York: A Selection* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982), p. 103.