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The Father of Modern Yiddish Literature

I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Yiddish 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, formerly the most prestigious position — the Atran Chair for Yiddish at Columbia University — was held by 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 Yiddish 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 "The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism" and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's "Zahkor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory."

Professor Wisse sets out to correct persistent misconceptions concerning Peretz's work. For example, there have often been sentimental readings of "Bontshe shvayg" ("Bontshe the Silent") 1894. To counter them, she illustrates a "tension between the radical and the conservative impulses." Professor Wisse points out the original political thrust of this story, while she also explains that subsequent events affecting the Yiddish readership gradually turned a pitiable character into a "suffering saint, a holy fool, the Jewish martyr."

In other words, the history of the story's reception has mirrored Jewish experiences during the past century.

The most egregious misreadings of Peretz's work pertain to his Chasidic stories, and their popularity in Israel during the early years of statehood attested to this misunderstanding. As was the case for "Bontshe shvayg," the Chasidic stories were generally read as uncritical retellings of folktales. Post-Holocaust readers of the Hebrew editions demanded moral support, inspiration and imaginative journeys to the vanished world. Hence Peretz's critical and satiric tonalities were subordinated to nostalgic intonations. The potential for such a wide range of interpretations results from the inherent ambiguity of Peretz's texts and the implicit ambivalences of their author.

Peretz was "a troubled soul, with too much on his mind," and he suffered from "the many contradictory elements in his nature." According to some accounts, his disposition made it impossible for him to write a novel, and indeed his greatest strength as a writer lies in short stories such as "Kabbalists," "The Teachings of the Chasidim," and "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 title Sholem Aleichem used for his two volumes of The Yidish Folksbibliotek). Thereby, they exchanged some nasty correspondence, in part mediated by Yankev Dinezon, in which each expressed his dissatisfaction and hinted that the other 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 reinterpretung 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.

Mr. Frieden is an associate professor at Emory University.