

“Yisroel Shtern”

a review of the 1955 volume, *Lider un Eseyen*

by I. Rapoport (pp. 395 ff., *Fayerlekh in Nepl*, Melbourne, 1961)

Translated by Freda Hodge, 2015.

A. Yisroel Shtern the Person

Somewhere in one of his novels or stories, Balzac describes a man who is searching for his lost daughter. To find her he must disguise himself, and he disguises himself as a beggar. His tattered rags stink; he knows they nauseate everyone around him, and they nauseate him as well. But he can bear the contempt that assails him with inner pride, because he knows why he is doing this and who he is. He has a goal in life which, he believes, he can achieve through outward debasement; and he takes this punishment to himself with love.

I had a similar feeling at times when I would see the incredibly dilapidated appearance of Yisroel Shtern. I once expressed my feeling like this: "he cultivates self-neglect".

But what Shtern sought to achieve thereby, I could not tell; I could only feel his similarity in this respect to Balzac's aforementioned hero.

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Once I spoke with a Melbourne couple who knew Yisroel Shtern well, in the period just after the First World War. They told me that in those days Yisroel Shtern was quite open and used to converse with them, and went about in decent clothing, even verging on a dandy!

They didn't want to say much about him, but before they closed the conversation it became clear that the change in him occurred after a tragic love experience. (He was to have married in Ostrolenka, his birthplace).

For me this did not clear up the purpose of Yisroel Shtern's cult of outward degradation, but the thought occurred to me that maybe somehow he hid behind this, he had given up on burying himself behind his degradation as behind the walls of a fortress, so that no one should get near him!

Shtern's self-neglect was startling. True, he was poor, very poor (we can ignore the ridiculous rumours at Tlomackie 13 that he was lending money on interest!) But even in great poverty certain things could have been avoided.

Once, for example, I met him in the Warsaw Public Library in a condition that truly tore at the heartstrings: I am not talking here about his Chaplinesque tufts of hair and Chaplinesque clothes so easily explained by lack of money; but his face swollen from toothache was wrapped in a handkerchief which was literally like something picked up out of the dirt. You only had to wash it in cold water to gain an ocean of health, and for this money wasn't needed.

But Yisroel Shtern wandered around the library peering into catalogues, into books, without a trace of self-consciousness ó he was in his element.

Whether or not he pictured himself being watched from all sides, with his black handkerchief, his Chaplinesque shoes and so forth, is difficult to say. One thing is certain: if he was aware, he ignored it with pride, like Balzac's character, who knew what his rags were for.

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When Yisroel Shtern gave his lecture on Peretz at Tlomackie 13 (óCrowns on the Head of Yiddish Criticismö, a slightly pompous title; but for all his fine qualities, Yisroel Shtern did lean a little to pomposity), he made a tremendous impression on the listeners. (The lecture was published by Tlomackie 13 later, in their *Warsaw Zamlbukh*). I was so delighted that I wrote an enthusiastic letter, Don Quixotish though it was, to which he replied verbally. Many times in the course of my literary "career" as a Yiddish writer, I have been puzzled how scribblers in *Haynt* and *Moment* could earn 80 or 100 zloty for an article, while a writer of Shtern's quality had to boast that he never wrote for five zloty ó he never took less than í 15! I could never understand how a literature that supported so many good-for-nothings could compel Yisroel Shtern to live like a beggar.

And I did see how he lived.

Once Yisroel Shtern asked me if he could come over to my place and borrow some books. We arranged that he would come in the evening.

He selected several books, including a thick volume of Franz Werfel's collected poems. After that we talked. During our conversation, several times I had the feeling that he wanted to say something but didn't.

When he decided to leave I saw him to the door. On the way we had to pass through the room where my two-year-old son was sleeping and we didn't switch on a light; and there Yisroel Shtern remained standing a minute, to blurt out in a rush, encouraged by the darkness, what he probably had wanted to say several times in the well-lit room, and had been unable to find the courage to do so: "perhaps you can lend me five zloty?"

I really was ashamed to give him the five zloty (ashamed not for myself, but for others, for Yiddish literature) and it was not only good for Shtern that this took place in a dark room! It was easier for both of us, for him to ask and for me to give.

The time came when I needed Werfel's poems. And because I had not come across Shtern for quite a while (it was, it turns out, during one of his "disappearances"), I decided to enquire where he lived and to go and retrieve the book. I don't remember where he lived then exactly, but I think it was in Muranowski Place, close to Mila Stí

I came inside a grubby ground floor kitchen and asked whether Yisroel Shtern lived there. Hearing that he did, I waited to be shown the way to his room. Finally I was told to wait in the

kitchen as he was coming back soon, and an old Jew, pointing to a bed in a corner of the kitchen, told me "this is where he lives! "

In a corner of a dirty kitchen! I started to look more closely, and near the bed on the floor I saw a pile of books, and among them also Werfel's volume of poetry.

Yisroel Shtern entered from the courtyard, murmured something to me and started washing his hands. Then he went to the table where there lay half a loaf of black bread, a container of salt and some radishes. He took a piece of bread, dipped it in the salt and started eating.

So this was Yisroel Shtern's abode, and this his breakfast. And because of this he had to borrow five zloty from a pauper like me!

In his essay "Bread and Poetry", he writes of a kitchen in which three persons live "without running water or a toilet" and reading this I recognised Yisroel Shtern and his "apartment". (See Yisroel Shtern's *Poems and Essays*, 1955). Shtern argued that there was poetry in that kitchen, describing Sime-Leyel's booklets. But there was more poetry in *this* kitchen's sub-tenant, Yisroel Shtern. In this kitchen Yisroel Shtern ate dried bread and created real poetry.

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He was a strange person, Yisroel Shtern. He was always going about lost in thought, while from his pockets protruded soiled and creased notebooks covered with pencilled notes that looked like hieroglyphics. Sometimes it seemed to me that his thoughts, in which he was always immersed, wrote *themselves* into his notebooks.

Whenever he came to Tlomackie 13 he would seat himself away on one side and immerse himself in his notebooks, from which superb essays would be born.

On one occasion I was present when Yisroel Shtern brought an essay in to the *Vokhnshrift*. The essay was in the form of a dialogue between A and B. The editor looked at the manuscript and saw that the dialogue did not open with A but with B; so he asked Shtern a natural question: why does the dialogue begin with B? I heard Shtern reply "there would be nothing original about A opening the dialogue" (see p. 235, *Dialogue about his Majesty Literary Trash*).

Hearing this I wondered why Shtern, whose essays are bursting with original thoughts expressed in an original way, needed such superficial originality? What made it so essential to him?

But strange in everything, Shtern was also strange in this: a person who had trampled on every poetic form could not resist the temptation of originality at its most superficial and opening a dialogue in this left-footed way with person B!

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It is noteworthy that Yisroel Shtern did not produce a single book in his lifetime. It's true that in our day you needed pockets and elbows both, to get a book out; nevertheless I am certain that

Yisroel Shtern could have brought out a book from time to time, had he wanted. Why didn't he want to? The couple who I mentioned before gave me a clue to the answer.

They told me that in 1924 a book of his poems was going to be published by Londinski in Warsaw. Some time later, my informant asked Shtern why the book hadn't appeared. Shtern gestured in dismissal, saying "important poems!" Another time he told this person "poems are private to me, for my personal enjoyment."

From this two things are evident:

1. Yisroel Shtern was not one of those writers easily pleased by their creations. He was striving for something more, preparing himself like Jews once did for the Day of Atonement; and
2. Yisroel Shtern lived through his writing of poems and of essays, and this process was continuous in him without a break and swallowed him up completely. The effort required to produce a book he instead invested in creating, whether in himself or on paper.

B. Yisroel Shtern the poet

He was a remarkable person, Yisroel Shtern. So it is no wonder that as a poet too, he was remarkable.

He was hard to understand as a person, and as a poet too he was rather hard to understand. But strangely, it is precisely the impenetrability of his poetry that makes Shtern more understandable as a person: Yisroel Shtern was not of *this* world.

And the same applies to his poetry.

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It is the deep meaning of Shtern's poetry that accounts for the obscurity of his strange images.

The first poem in this book is called "Do I Have a Hidden Door?" and this refers to the hidden door which leads one in to his poems; that is, to the most intimate world of Yisroel Shtern the person. (ed.: in the translation of Arnie Goldman oö) -

*Let my song be concealed; locked away
In a place that is holy and still.
I don't beckon or call you to me
And if I do let you inside
I still keep a door out of sight
So my song stays concealed, locked away.*

Shternø's poetry is not rabbinically authorised ó but for seekers who are open to spirituality the secret door is opened. It is no exaggeration to say that this poem is Shternø's finest and final truth, his declaration of faith ó every word is like a key to the hidden door to his poetry:

*I sing not for glory nor gold
One goes to God on his own.
I don't want to be the gold ring
My heart set, like a precious stone
on someone's swollen finger.*

Yisroel Shternø's poetry was a path towards God. And this holy path led him through hospitals filled with the afflicted, *Springtime in the Hospital*, a symbol of humansøfinal suffering, and to orphans (*A Little Orphan Laughs* and *A Little Orphan Sings* ó wonderful poems!), and to the pathos of life, of everyday holy ones (like *Ephraim Goldbrukh*) – and everything that Shternø sings of this path to God is like a "meritorious prayerö, to be whispered so that it is barely audible.

To hear the prayer in Shternø's poetry you need a pretty good sense of hearing.

But if you hear it, often your sins die away and you find yourself almost on the frontier of another worldí there, where poetry is linked closely with religion.

I have already written many times about the sisterhood of religion and poetry, but we have not grasped at all that this is a *problem* for poetry lovers while it is the *reality* for the creators of poetry.

This particular problem has not even been raised ó it has been set aside, like everything that is important. And I was beginning to think I had imagined it. But then I find in Henri Bremond's book *Prayer and Poetry* this: "for me the fundamental problem consists of describing the relationship of religion to literatureö.

We find this deep inner link, an organic one, in Shternø's poetry, which arises from the same ancient root from which poetry and religion once divided. Shternø's poetry is religious **not** because the poet believes in God, seeks him and longs for him; his poetry is religious because it is the most authentic poetry – that primordial poetry of the time before poetry separated from religion.

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Just as one can open a safe using word and letter combinations, the poet combines words to uncover previously ignored feelings and alter the person's spirit – to arouse feelings and insights of which they had never dreamed before. These emotions, moods and insights are always purer and more refined, on a higher plane, than everyday feelings. One begins to examine the revealed spirit in depth, one becomes what is called more human or religious, with the most genuine spirituality, which like Job's does not let the person rest, when he looks through poetry upon the world.

Can you see an impoverished child in the same way, after reading Yisroel Shtern's two lines:

*Is a child less of a child
When his mother is a poor washerwoman?*

These lines will haunt you and not allow you to rest, they will demand from you, for the poor child, that portion of childhood which his mother's poverty took from him.

These lines emanate from the same source as the constant admonitions of the Prophets about widows and orphans; the poet transforms a social problem into a poetic-religious one, just as in ancient times, when the poet, that is, the spiritual person, approached the same matter.

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I am accustomed to being captivated and spellbound by poems before I know what has happened. And when this happens, I know I have encountered genuine poetry.

*The clouds mingle and file by without sound.
Quiet and holy the day begins
like an old book opening, sweet and awesome.
The sun comes out like a beautiful thought.
The streets attend and are cleansed.*

And the reader attends as well and is cleansed; he is transported to a higher plane of life, and listens and attends. Whether he is able to clothe what he hears in articulated thoughts or not, the magic bolt of poetry has in any case been secured to his spirit, transforming his grey weekday existence into celebratory Days of Awe.

The lines quoted were taken from Shtern's (unfortunately incomplete) epic poem *Ephraim Goldbrukh* – a pearl necklace of the highest quality, of immaculate purity. (*Ed.*: translated by Jon Levitow).

And it goes without saying that to poetry of such spirit the whole world hearkens, hearing in it earthly music of the spheres, and even Harki the Tailor sews *more chapters of the Psalms than cotton shoulder pieces*. And it is no wonder that Khatskel Kupermintz doesn't understand what has suddenly happened to him ó

his heart, it burns so much ó and like a child he rests his head against the windowpane. and gazes at the market: shadows fall to earth and hug the stones. He stands inside his store, forgets, remembers, wants to cry.

And we read the eight pages of the unfinished epic poem and often we too want to cry, for Yisroel Shtern's poetry raises us to so high a beauty that evokes tears, like looking into the face of the suní

And quotations are really beside the point. Why quote from *Ephraim Goldbrukh* and not from *Springtime in the Hospital*? And why not from the wonderful *A Little Orphan Laughs* and *A Little Orphan Sings*? And why not from the outstandingly beautiful poem *Bring Me the World*?

So let us leave the matter unfinished, as incomplete as Shtern's work is, and let us say like a prayer: Yisroel Shtern was an extraordinary person because he was an extraordinary poet, who expressed his poetry not just in his verses, but in his way of life as well. The few poems he wrote were the overflow from his lived everyday poetic life.

Walt Whitman's comments about his book *Leaves of Grass*, that whoever touches his book touches a person, can be applied to almost every true poet; but are especially true in the case of Yisroel Shtern's poetry.

C. Yisroel Shtern the Essayist

The World Yiddish Cultural Congress has published *Poems and Essays* by Israel Shtern.

Today I want to say a few words about Yisroel Shtern as an essayist.

The publishers write that the 19 essays in this collection comprised nearly all, or maybe all, that Yisroel Shtern published over a period of 20 years.

How little this is! These 19 articles include essays, reviews and even brief polemical articles; but however small the quantity, it is compensated by the high quality of the majority of them.

His better essays are distinguished by profound content and poetic style. Thus his essay *The White Stain on the Wall* presents pure poetry in interesting ways.

His essays of literary criticism are of a high standard and are poetic as well, for example, his treatment of *Shloyme Malkho*.

His nine pages about Sholem Aleichem, *Before Daybreak and in the Daytime* are especially interesting and original. This article shows that Shtern sees what others do not. And he describes it originally and at the highest level.

And how concisely!

In Israel a very talented and capable Hebrew critic, A. Kriv, reviewed the work of Mendele Mokher Sforim in great detail. He demonstrated that Mendele, in large measure, was a severe critic of Jews. But the quintessence, the kernel of A. Kriv's Mendele critique was stated in passing in Shtern's brief article about Sholem Aleichem written for his twentieth *yortsayt*. Just an aside, it was overlooked not only by A. Kriv but also by other, diligent Yiddish readers.

As Shtern put it (*Poems and Essays*, p169): *õ*are there any likeable Jews in Mendele Mokher Sforim? You can find them if you want to. But you have to really want to, you have to be very eager indeed.ö

These remarks do not render Kriv's critique redundant. In large measure Kriv is correct. But the nucleus of his perspective is already there in Shtern's essay, and shows how profound his vision was.

Or consider Shtern's brief observations about Menachem Mendl:

"í Whenever he encounters a real *shlimazl*, Menachem Mendl takes him for a partner. Menachem Mendl pins a medal on the chest of every good-for-nothing. But believe me gentlemen, this Jew shows more diligence and initiative, and more ambition than ten Stakhanovitesí

Set against these cruel circumstances, despite all his talents he could do no more. The surrounding conditions were unsuited to his capacities, and his pluses ó became minuses. An exotic plant, this Menachem Mendl ó but find a suitable climate for him and you will see how nice and strong he can flourish.ö

Did anyone before Shtern look upon Menachem Mendl in this way? He was the first to point out the over-emphasis of the accepted view of Menachem Mendl. But he did this so casually, in passing, that it made no impression on those around him. His readers passed over his words

without realizing that this was the kernel of a fundamental revision of our view of one of the most popular characters in Yiddish literature.

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In Yisroel Shtern we have lost not only a profound poet, but a brilliant critic as well, who could see more and could see differently from others. I am not referring here only to his great essay on Peretz, *Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism*. Even Shtern's shorter pieces nearly always included kernels of creative criticism, cutting and ironic polemic and charming style ó not to mention original imagery, as in *The White Stain on the Wall*.