

## Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism<sup>1</sup>

By Yisroel Shtern (1926)

Translated by Jon Levitow (2006)

### 1. The Reader and the Critic

The writer<sup>2</sup> - that person condemned to spend a long life, or in some cases a short one, burning out his nerves and bone marrow drop by drop and grain by grain, feeling the way forward over and over, thinking and rethinking motifs and structures, raw materials and refinements – comes into this world inescapably fated to have to think all the time.

During the act of creation, the writer thinks about how to put material together and dreams of the form his work will finally take.<sup>3</sup> When, with a bit of luck, the work is completed, he must think again, this time about new, external issues. Now he must face characters not of his own making, ones he himself did not dream up, foreign, seemingly incidental ones, who are nevertheless essential.

These characters make themselves right at home. Aware of their necessity, they approach with bold familiarity. They seat themselves right next to the creator and take him by both hands. On one side is the reader, and on the other – the critic.

The writer extends his hands in welcome, but he is well aware of the great difference between his guests. To the reader he will play host on Wednesdays when material concerns abound; while the critic he reserves for the Sabbath, when one can relax, enjoy life, and listen to *zmires*<sup>4</sup>. From the reader he expects to make a living, while to the critic he sends his book free of charge and with a dedication to boot... Together they constitute a new, complete organism, of which the first is the body, the second – the soul.

Is there, however, such an enormous gulf between the two? Is one so far above the other? It's worth giving this some consideration.

With what intellectual equipment do these two approach a book? In my opinion, both bring – cleverness.

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<sup>1</sup> (Trans.) Lit., “Crowns for the Head of Yiddish Criticism,” or we might say “laurels,” but Shtern is undoubtedly thinking in terms of traditional, Jewish imagery. Probably most relevant is a well-known passage from the Talmud, B. Berakhot 17a, where the righteous are pictured in the Other World with “crowns on their heads,” enjoying the “radiance of the Shekhina.” Additionally, in the Kabbalah, the highest spiritual level or “sefira” is referred to as the “Crown” -- but the motif in a Kabbalistic sense doesn't seem to be of particular relevance.

<sup>2</sup> (Ed.) *Dichter/ dichtung* - In general *dichter* has been translated as “writer” here – creative writing only - literature - is intended. Critical writing is not included by this expression. While in its narrower and more common sense *dichter* = poet, in this essay and others Shtern follows German usage in referring to creative writing both poetry and prose; and his examples are drawn from fiction.

<sup>3</sup> (Trans.) For the sake of concision I've followed Shtern in using masculine pronouns for impersonal expressions.

<sup>4</sup> (Ed.) Sabbath songs. Readers of the essay may wonder why Shtern is listening to rather than singing *zmires*.

However, there are two kinds of cleverness in the world. Although neither attains the highest level in the comprehension of values and events, there is nevertheless a big difference between them. The first is crude and primitive, while the second, though still falling far short of the highest, is much more elevated and refined. The difference between them is that the first *thinks itself clever* because it considers no existence but its own. The second *is clever* because it knows one can always become more clever still...

Let me be more precise. One kind of understanding sees only what can be seen at first glance and hears only what can be heard directly. It may be energetic and rich in initiative, but its energy is brutish, its struggle has all the joy of rampaging oxen. Such persons regard themselves as wise in proportion to the success they achieve. They manage to put their worlds into comfortable, satisfying order; they thoroughly enjoy living. Their lives draw entirely from the surface of things, and they give no thought to where things come from or why. Everything functions as an end in itself. For example, money for them has a double value: firstly, because it's *money* and secondly, because it's *their* money. This applies to everything they have.

There is another kind of understanding which doesn't regard objects as disconnected and scattered. It encounters things as nailed and chained together. Even if it can't encompass the whole chain of processes, it seeks the law implicit within things. To such people the hidden meaning of each essence begins to reveal itself, quietly and almost by accident. Moreover, their pleasure in this isn't an end in itself. Their joy isn't that of a dog over meat. It is purer and more refined because along with their enjoyment they succeed in extracting, if not all, at least some of the reasons or results of their enjoyment.

This is not yet the greatest, most penetrating intelligence, which strives to fathom the depths of existence<sup>5</sup>. Rather it is what we generally dub *common sense*. Nevertheless, it's a stage along the way.

Consider the shopkeeper who, after a whole day of haggling, stands at his store window as the market square empties out for the evening and watches the dogs licking up the salt crumbs left behind by the stall-keepers while shadows climb the high, silent walls – when a strange, incomprehensible bitterness at heart befalls him; or the woman who, after gazing indifferently at the butcher as he recited the blessing over her chicken, suddenly, not knowing why, has to close her eyes – and later, proceeding homewards with the slaughtered bird in her apron, sighs – even though on the face of it nothing has happened; or the worker who, suddenly and unexpectedly, while sitting at his machine, where he has spent many long hours and days, without explanation becomes gloomier and more stubborn than ever, for today it's as if an unseen person squeezed the fingers of one of his hands into a fist – while his other hand angrily hurls a roll of cloth to the ground.

Though all of these persons are still naïve beginners as philosophers, they have made a start. Their thinking hasn't reached very far yet, but already they are making out that alphabet in which all situations and incidents figure as symbols. This is the contemplation of the wellsprings and the effects of the components of life that

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<sup>5</sup> (Ed.) *Velt-al*: lit., world-all or Universal-All.

surround us. *Contemplation* but not *comprehension* – their thoughts do not reach their goal.

This last belongs to a third class of understanding, that high level of intelligence which ranges far and wide, omitting nothing from its purview and embracing every question that troubles human consciousness and feeling.

I have gone on about this at such length because in my view our official Yiddish criticism hasn't yet reached this third type of understanding. Our critics (except for Sh. Nizer, whom we'll discuss later) are always stuck at the second kind of wisdom.

Just as in life, the first two levels are played out in creative writing as well. Naturally, this happens on a higher plane and in a purer context; but the scale of gradations is identical. Here the two places are occupied by our readers and our critics.

For, even the better kind of reader isn't obliged to poke around, uncovering the psychic factors which lead to the production of literary values. This is how he acts. He doesn't see the endless, tulle ribbon connecting all artistic discoveries and making them into a unity. What's that to him? He picks up each one separately, divorced from everything else. Every book exists on its own; every writer is different. The reader takes them as they come. He has enough to think about with what's *in* the book; to seek after the *nature* of the book – that's not the reader's job. And just as other "clever" people know one thing alone – how to acquire wealth – so too does the reader swallow one novel after another and play after play. It happens often enough that in a conversation with perfectly intelligent people they'll say to you, beaming, "Oh, lately I've been going through some of Zeromski's works." "Oh, the last few weeks I've read over a couple of Opatoshu's books" – and that "Oh" comes out so expansively and contentedly that you know at once: the "going through" itself, the "reading over", is for them the great reward.

It's the same here as in the world of material things. There, the *nouveau riche* have their double source of joy – it's *money*, and it's *their* money. Here the pleasure is doubled as well. The reader thinks: firstly, it's *literature*, and secondly, I've absorbed these literary works into *me*. Why go back and forth about the author when the thing itself has already been handed to them? The writer fades into the background. The leading role is taken by the person that the reader has held close to his heart, the hero of the book.

Whenever I hear female readers – even very accomplished female readers – speaking rapturously about a female literary character, I have no doubt at all that I'm right. It becomes clear that these persons, though they do greatly esteem writers, see "Mary" as a hundred times more important than Sholem Ash...Naturally, if they come upon David Bergelson in the street, they'll watch how he goes, noticing which shop window he stops at and how he settles himself into a droshky. As soon as the driver strikes the horse to leave, however, Bergelson is gone. He no longer exists. "Mirele"<sup>6</sup> on the other hand? That's a very different matter. People will spend months, years, dreaming about "After Everyone Else", thinking and calculating about it as if

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<sup>6</sup>(Ed) heroine of *Nokh Alemen*, "After Everyone Else" (1913) –very successful and highly regarded early novel of David Bergelson (1884 – 1952).

unwillingly. Like a needle a fantasy courses through the blood: how would it really be if you were the wife of young Zaidenovski and had that kind of father-in-law... and a couple of lovers as well, quiet as twilight, painfully discreet, and so fatally sincere!

The author, on the other hand, comes to mind in exceptional circumstances only: with death, or a centenary, or if a friend says she knows him “personally”. Most of the time the readers simply live with the characters given to them.

The creator himself? His own reasons and actions, scope and construction, brilliance and defeat, will and imagination, ways and by-ways, techniques and reserves, all these belong to the second, higher kind of cleverness – that of the critic.

Criticism doesn't rest content with absorbing into itself more and more literature. Nor does it take its pleasures strewn about or in isolation. It stokes the forge, to hammer out the barrel hoops which hold in and hold together. Dramatic events and characters don't exist on their own – each is made a piece of an imagined whole. Whatever a critic reads becomes transformed into something that inspires, that moves him. You could call this *literature-sense*, as opposed to the *common sense* previously discussed. Critics are those sensitive souls who can't pass by anything with indifference, even if ultimately it eludes them; even if their hands are too weak to excavate all the lustrous nuggets from the goldmine of art.

The difference between reader and critic resembles that between two people who both give money to a poor person they come across in the street. Both have done the same thing; in this case, a good thing (at least, they both thought so at the time). However, the first one acted from the thought that one is obliged to give the poor money. Immediately afterwards he jumps on a tram, takes out his weekly planner to check a telephone number – and has forgotten the whole thing. (Though the next day, and the next, he'll give again – and always in the same way.) The second person in contrast experiences a crisis of conscience because of the encounter. While neither is likely to arrive at any profound conclusions about human destiny or social injustice, something nevertheless distinguishes them. Criticism has been harnessed to thought.

Yes, criticism thinks, but does its thinking ever arrive at anything substantial, concentrated, or ground-breaking? Do its underpinnings have anything of the quietly-enduring, always-healthy earth about them? Above it, is there the zest of unfailing sunrises? These matters we'll consider in the next section.

## 2. The Critic and the Writer

The critic is many times more cultured and sensitive than the common reader. He can keep his distance. He can follow fictional plots and characters and grasp their significance. Everything that he sees adds to his awareness of the writer – prior to, during and after the artistic work. Yet, how often does it occur that his critical impressions and concepts come to serve as stones, sticks and clay, to meld, cohere and take shape as a magnificent temple – where writers and other creators can enter and find genuine relief and rest from their constant, strenuous, martyred blood-and-marrow activity? Does our criticism have that polished mirror in which a writer can observe himself, either in his youthful milky smoothness – or in careworn, wrinkled decrepitude? .... Doesn't our critic's pen veer off the page sooner than touch upon

the non-material but all-important spiritual aspect of things – so hard to see at first glance, but so deeply suffered by the writer?

I am by no means one of those who can never forgive criticism because a critic once stepped on his toes. Nor am I with those who dismiss criticism out of hand and regard all critics as harmful, superfluous beings – like the demons God made just before the Sabbath, at the end of the Creation<sup>7</sup>... No, criticism should and must exist, and I certainly don't intend to deny that our official wisdom has achieved some results; sadly though, we have to face the fact that the results have been meagre - as a result of the meagre means employed.

Criticism doesn't try very hard, nor does it struggle earnestly or with a readiness for self-sacrifice against those aspects harmful to our writing that persist all around us. So much less does it go before us to bring back news of what is yet to be faced, of what will be. If thanks to criticism's efforts something undesirable was eliminated – almost always a light wind could have blown it over. On the other hand, has it ever successfully torn out anything wrongly implanted in us, which did us no good despite its deep roots?

On the contrary – take a look. Since its emergence Yiddish literature has been through numerous stages – but can you show me the hand of our expert in its development? No – always he has come last, after everything has already been done. Everything earned belongs to the accounts of the writers alone:

The caricatures of Rabbis and of Chassidim popularized by Enlightenment literature were not wiped away by criticism but only by Peretz.

Shomer<sup>8</sup> wasn't done away with by criticism but by Sholem Aleichem.

The declaration of new forms and modern directions wasn't made by criticism, despite its pretence to European culture, but by the young writers themselves.

Certainly, as we leaf through the pages of one critic or another we find them saying something, formulating something, correcting, marking off limits. Their "literature sense" tells them not to let a scene, a character or landscape, hypnotize or carry them away – that these are merely signs of something larger and more universal. Moreover, unlike the common reader, the critic not only takes pleasure in the poetry but commits spiritual energy to taking stock of the poet as well.

Does any of this help the poet though? Does he sense in his knowledgeable colleague someone intimate or close? Does he feel that here is someone prepared to put himself at risk in order to accompany him down the entire road of his creation, along the

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<sup>7</sup> (Trans.) As related in Pirkey Avot 5:6, Geneis Rabbah 7:5, and elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> (Ed.) - pen-name of Nokhem-Meir Shaykevitsch ((1849 – 1905), brilliant writer of entertaining *shund* – what Australian author Clive James calls "sludge fiction" but more often is simply dubbed trash. A sympathetic account of Shomer is given by Dovid Katz, pp. 209 – 212, where he deals with the famous attack on Shomer by Sholem Aleichem that Shtern refers to here. "Words on Fire – the unfinished story of Yiddish", Basic Books, 2004. Shtern felt strongly about *shund*. See on website e.g., his 1927 essay "Undzer lezerin – oder, Shomer hot gevunen" as well as, in English, the report of Shtern's lecture by Itzhak Kahn in "About Shtern".

incredibly hazardous and difficult way which stretches across so many pitted and stony paths? Does the poet detect in him a person who sizzles like himself in the infernos of glowing, sleepless nights, who also spends restless but inspired days far from home? Does the creator see in the expert a person striding towards him barefoot, after traveling a great distance – knowing that the place where the poet will soon stop will be holy...?

Yes, all this could have been the case. .. had our criticism, instead of getting stuck with literary cleverness, gone ahead to artistic intelligence. It could have been so, if the role of criticism in the whole process were not merely a middleclass, mechanical reaction, a weak reflex.

It would have been so if the understanding of criticism was more than the beginning of thought which becomes helpless halfway to its goal. It would have been so if criticism consisted of that higher consciousness which searches and digs, seeks and loses itself, struggles, breaks into rooms which have been closed and blocked up – and lifts itself up and over what already exists to carry the author into an ecstatic whirlwind, leading him around and showing him how much his own wings contributed to the painful, resounding struggle; as well as how many other mighty storms exist of which, ultimately, this author is no more than a smaller or greater part.

Yes, that's how it would have been if the critic didn't read like a Jew on the High Holidays - bent over his prayerbook, merely uttering a dutiful "Amen" (except when cross with the Kantor who reads the prayer!), his prayershawl over his head - heaven forbid he should see the priests raise their fingers to bless him as well as hear them!

So it would have been had the critic gone along willingly, suffered willingly, and truly believed that the world needs blessing. If only with every artful cry of "May God Bless You" from the priests, he could hear the loveliest but most awful warning: that the whole crowd of artists will keep on crying, praying and singing until their grievous tortured dream has been fulfilled – that everything should be cleansed and beautified, elevated and purified – until everyone is a High Priest, every day is the Day of Atonement, and every piece of ground a Holy of Holies...

If indeed it were so, oh then...

Just as Hamsun's Victoria could realize, at the most tender, saddest moment in her life: "as I write this letter, God reads it over my shoulder" – writers should be able to follow her example and console themselves, saying "Steeped in loneliness, purified by tears, as I write the drama of human existence the critic reads it over my shoulder..."

Then, not only would critics have to value writers, but writers – the most grateful people in the world! – would know how to value their evaluators.

If it were so, oh then...

However, esteemed friends, everything would be different then: the critic's favourite writer would be the one most fed up with mud-slogging and swamp-wading - the one who makes a break and soars upwards, making hundreds and thousands pick up their

heads, making them regard what's happening above them. Then would the experts pass judgment most reliably, clearly, and accurately on those master writers for whom things and actions aren't just the beginnings of hints, but who carry the world in every nerve as symbol.

I hope I won't be misunderstood here. If I have mentioned symbols, it's not to lend support to various extravagances, inventions and intentional deceptions. No, I don't mean to defend all kinds of superhuman magic tricks.

If I speak as I do, it's to say that if the critic were in essence different, he would hold dearest those who have not taken their eyes off the heavy curse and the gigantic confusion in which our days are enmeshed, yet who remain pure, upstanding artists.

Had criticism taken a worthier direction, it would have passed judgment most precisely and profoundly on those writers who, notwithstanding that in their noblest hours they ignored all superficiality and acknowledged no beast-of-burden's-yoke - seeing in every field, street and wall no mere entrance hall but a palace, wherein hidden, clear ambiguities quietly rest, and where one has to question in order to get back an answer from the secret of all the riddles – notwithstanding all of this, they have adapted to artistic necessity. They know that artistic strides are made one at a time, so that finally that point of artistic inwardness is reached where one shudders, standing face to face with the liberated world-spirit, which with the artist's help has shaken off the lime-dust of bright days, and the dark coverings of night...

If criticism had been this serious, this pertinent, it would have devoted its energies entirely to these masters. In this case we also wouldn't have to bear witness to the fact – a fact which tells us something – that the weakest, most anaemic of Bal Makhshoves'<sup>9</sup> works concerns (well, can you guess who?) – Y. L. Peretz..

Now, in the case of Sholem Aleichem, a miracle happened, and along with mastery God endowed him with the power and patience to limit himself, to restrain his steps and shun unnecessary labyrinths. This capacity for staying above ground and avoiding inner psychological complications stood him in good stead. Criticism, which likes everything to come easy, threw itself upon him. It chewed on him, chewed him up, digested him. Although here and there in its embrace of him some empty space is still discernable, it must be admitted that our criticism's best work has been done with Sholem Aleichem.

Not everyone is so lucky. God doesn't treat all artists so tenderly, taking them by their hands and leading them out along easy, direct, laughing, ways. In fact it happens very seldom - and mostly the opposite occurs. Art moves along in fits and starts.

In life, when writers encounter smooth, polished surfaces - for the most part they have been blessed or cursed with a sharp, diamond-sharp perception – pits and wounds soon become apparent in the windowpanes of appearances...

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<sup>9</sup> (Ed.) "Thinker" or lit., "Master of thinking", the pen-name of Yisrael Elyashev, (1873 – 1924), one of modern Yiddish literature's earliest and most respected critics, master of a florid style somewhat like Shtern's.

As for fine witticisms, clever sayings, pleasant jokes – artists more often transform them all into a distant, uncanny murmur of underground waters...

Let's not fool ourselves. The truth is that even all of those who aren't followers of Edgar Poe would have to admit that they too have often had experiences which they could relate exactly as Poe does.

"Listen," said the Devil to me, laying a hand on my head, "the country I'm talking about is a wilderness... and there's no rest there..."

Right, there's no rest there. Those critics who come equipped merely with comfortable cleverness will never comprehend the writer – precisely because to understand a writer one has to enter his country, and there mere cleverness accomplishes nothing, because there demons are, who lay their hands on your head.

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### 3. Y. L. Peretz and Yiddish Criticism

Tell me, I beg you – can you say how many times you've read in an article or heard in a lecture that "our great Peretz hasn't yet been sufficiently appreciated" and that "first there must come along...", and so on, in a similar vein? Good for them, to have spoken truly, but there's a good reason why truth is said to be the seal of God. The same thing happens with truth as with God Himself - though you hear a lot of discussion about both, seldom does the speaker believe in either.

If we consider more closely those who weep and moan over Peretz' poor wounded honor, we have to conclude that they don't even believe what they are saying. Because, really! Hasn't enough been written and said about him? Does he lack for commentators? What could possibly be added? What is there left to say? In their hearts such people actually have no doubt that he has been fully appreciated. "Our Peretz has yet to be etc..." "is a fine piece of flattery, created in order to show love and respect, and uttered with the same sincerity as, "Come over for dinner some time!"<sup>10</sup>

It's a pity that this opinion is held so superficially, with so little conviction, so fashionably! For, the question is actually very important. Does everything that has been said and written about Peretz fulfill the obligations of genuine criticism or not? If Peretz has become so famous as to penetrate every part of the world where the heart of someone with an interest in Yiddish literature beats – is this to the credit of our criticism? Or, isn't it rather because he himself is so rich and suggestive? The senses of the reader are sharpened, willingly or not, and music drifts to him as if from afar, enticing and elevating him, without his being able to trace it or grasp it, one door opening onto another, one space appearing over another, there are labyrinths then

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<sup>10</sup> (Ed.) "*Kumt mit-esn*": lit., share our food; according to Romek Mokotow, this invitation was often heard in Warsaw café-restaurants - and was understood to mean "sit with us while we dine and share (only) the bread that's served". For a hungry writer this was still a worthwhile proposal – but it appears that Shtern would never have accepted the offer!



suddenly open highways, utter darkness<sup>11</sup> and new dawns, depths wrapped in mystery and gracious dances – thus does Peretz appear to the intelligent reader. With every nerve and sinew, the reader perceives this as the land of song, the land where poetry lives. A world of white miracles and blue roofs, where people are thick-skinned and deep-rooted like the houses – and at the same time light and twinkling, tumbling down like stars. There is a swirl of irritants here as well, a nightmare heap of stories.

In such a case, what is the be-all and end-all of criticism? To tackle the work with body and soul and dig out that which lies buried there, in its deepest layers.

What is a great artist anyway? How is such a thing best appreciated? The only measure is the artist's capacity to build a ladder which starts at our sickly feet and stretches upwards, so as to approach ever closer to the primordial, regal head and broad, cloud-covered brow of the Universal. The critic's task isn't merely to stretch out a finger and point "Look how high!" – no one needs him for that. Everyone can already see it for themselves. But in creating, the artist struggled and fought; his blood coursing with tides like an ocean. On ropes of intuitive scaffolding that he braided out of day and night, the artist not only pulled himself upwards to the heights but often had to let himself back down again. Up and down this structure his soul went, like the angels in Jacob's dream, but amidst the wrangling, during the feverish journey, something got lost, got left behind. Who will find and uncover it? And what of the journey itself? The reader, arriving after the screaming of the birth-pangs is all over, reaps the benefits of the process. The job of the critic should be to scramble upwards, level after level, blood boiling and eyes straining, alert for every sign, every trace of a footprint of the eternal wanderer and creator. His job should be to sweep out any light-dust<sup>12</sup> that got stuck in a fold, that still remains dozing on a crooked path or hanging on a spiral staircase – to collect it all and reveal it, to the joy of those who need it, want it, long for it.

The world of the fantastic is chaotic! The expert has his job cut out for him: to classify, to put in order, to put together wing with wing and elephant with elephant, mold with mold, Sabbath with Sabbath, black with black and gold with gold...

If we perceive that a major Yiddish writer is incomplete, if we encounter hesitations in his work, places where we recognize hidden and esoteric elements – the true service of the Yiddish critic is to bring certainty, openness, clarity, clarity.

Well, can you point out a critical work which clears things up and straightens them out, a work in which the author is even half-successful in opening up the mystery that is Peretz? Unfortunately, it appears not – and the average Jew, that good and grateful person who loves and idolizes our wonderful master, somehow feels abandoned. Like a little child all alone, he stretches forth his hands and begs: "You experts, professionals, seers – let me also know something about who this great spirit really is!"

Where is the literate Russian who couldn't immediately answer the question of how Pushkin stands out from his peers? What educated Pole couldn't give you an accurate

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<sup>11</sup> (Ed.) *shtok-khoishekhnikh*, pitch-darkness, is a creation of Shtern's - the common expression is *shtok-fintsternish*.

<sup>12</sup> (Ed.) *shtraln-shtoib*, lit. *rays – dust* is another fine Shtern coinage.

explanation of how Mickiewicz differs from the rest of the Polish poets? What more or less cultured German would have to stammer if asked the nature of Goethe's superiority (and not only with regard to his art), compared to the other wordsmiths of his nation? With us on the other hand? It's remarkable. For almost every one of our writers there are accessible, accepted, commonly agreed upon opinions:

About one we all know: he's a satirist. A second we call "a humorist", a third "the songster of the shtetl", a fourth "the poet of power and eroticism." A fifth is about "the broken-heartedness of the lonely intellectual", a sixth "weeps over the poverty of the common people", a seventh, eighth, ninth... about each, something fixed and precise is said. However, let's try stopping someone with a literary education on the street: "Tell me, esteemed uncle, off the cuff, in just a few words, who is Peretz? "Oh yes, " he'll say, "Well.. but... " And if we let him off easily, and allow more than a few words? He still can't say. No one has taught him the answer.

What has criticism accomplished in this connection? What good is the excuse that it can't be otherwise since the inspiration of the artist ranges over so much territory, because he is so richly-hued, so multi-faceted? Fine, so it should be, but all of that comes from a single source, after all. He's always himself. Whatever we read of him, we become convinced that no other writer would have written it *this* way. Sometimes it's in larger and other times in smaller measure, but always he is laying down a path from pessimism to faith, with his wit and invention and his beautiful cutting edge. Even where his intelligence falls short, and you can't make him out, even at his weakest, as in his volume of lyrical verse, where he turns into a version of Heinrich Heine, even there, pay attention and you'll find his individual mark and personality.

What is his individuality? On what is all this beauty and acuteness based? Where does such a synthesizing nature as that of Peretz get its impulse to continual transformation, down to the smallest changes in theme and form?

The best comment about him that I've had occasion to read is that he was a seeker. Well, that's fine, a seeker, but this word doesn't really tell us much – we remain no wiser than before. The most compelling characters in world literature are actually those whose power stems from their inner contradictions. Dostoyevsky's all-too-human personalities attain wholeness precisely through their brokenness. It's true that his books explore these individuals at enormous length but, in the end, a resolution is achieved; by this time, even readers poles apart in character from them have come to understand them. How foreign to us Jews they seem, these drunken, murderous Gentile heroes of his! Nevertheless, over the course of hundreds of pages, they sneak into us as if through a back alley, and they become our brothers, close, familiar, and "baked-in", until it's as if we are reading one of our own verses: "Seven times the righteous one falls and then rises..."<sup>13</sup> When we come across a woman in these pages who is less than upstanding, we can recall our stories of Tamar and of Rakhav.<sup>14</sup> The bottom line is that we become able to formulate a hugely complicated mental complex

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<sup>13</sup> (Trans.) Proverbs, 24:16.

<sup>14</sup> (Trans.) Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute in order to bear a child with her father-in-law Yehuda in Gen. Ch. 38, and Rakhav is a Canaanite prostitute who helps Joshua's first spies in the Holy Land in Joshua Ch. 2.

in two words. We will say Raskolnikov is a murderer - and a righteous person, and that Sonia Marmeladova - is a holy whore.<sup>15</sup>

If Peretz was a “seeker”, he was a great seeker. Who can reveal him to us? Who can give him to us whole, complete, with a firm hoop girdling his constituent elements? On whom does it fall to create a true, full-blooded image of Peretz’ personality? On whom if not the critic?

Before we take this further, allow me to veer down a side path for a while. A certain departure from the topic will make what we are discussing clearer.

It begins with a question: what is the goal of literature? – “Young man, what are you talking about! To come out with such a question in this day and age! Shush up!” I know that this question will not find favor with many. My fellow writers will probably be the least pleased of all. Even the ones who pretend to social consciousness, who have unburdened themselves, as if from an old water-logged jacket, of that meaningless, foggy formula “art for art’s sake” – even they become aroused, hearing talk about the “goal” of artistic creation. What? Who doesn’t know it already? The only goal of art is to create beauty. “It’s true and certain”.<sup>16</sup> Have patience for another question though: did you know that the number of books appearing in various countries is incredibly large? That from time to time one hears murmurs that there are simply too many books being born into the world?<sup>17</sup> Probably you do know this, since even I do. Especially amongst us Jews, the first commandment – be fruitful and multiply<sup>18</sup> - is nowadays being fulfilled in the area of book production. When Sh. Niger groaned at the burden of “poetry, poetry, poetry” we didn’t like that one bit, and all of us turned up our noses as we passed by, but once we’d had a chance to sleep in and quiet our nerves, we saw that the man knew what he was talking about. He was a little one-sided in his view in just one respect, (as others are too, and not only among our people): the mistake being to throw the whole burden of blame on the poets alone. Prose-writers don’t deserve special treatment, such as you’d give to sensitive only-children. They’re no better than anyone else. On the contrary, if a lyric poet does something poorly, he usually sins for only a half or a whole page or so – but if a prose writer (forgive my coarseness) befouls himself, his sin has been to murder thirty or forty or a hundred bright living pages!

In any event, we don’t need to wish for any increase in quantitative terms. In fact, even if this glut of culture doesn’t of itself sicken us, if we are earnest followers of the laws of aesthetics, it can give no pleasure, and we will leave off rubbing our stomachs at the sight of bookshop displays ever more packed with title pages emblazoned with Yiddish letters. For we know that the whole of our Tanakh<sup>19</sup> takes up just one corner of a shelf in our bookcases; and that the New Testament is tiny, and

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<sup>15</sup> (Ed.) Dostoyevsky’s holy couple were clearly “baked in” for Shtern himself – see his discussion of them too (and my note) in his essay *Bread and Poetry* (Eng).

<sup>16</sup> (Trans.) Quoted from daily prayerbook.

<sup>17</sup> (Ed) cf. the Yiddish literary critic Joshua Rappaport, (Bialystok 1895 – Melbourne 1971) “The Printed Word”, p.785-7 of *Great Yiddish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, J Leftwich (1969, 1987, Jason Aronson) “Printing has turned out to be a calamity for the human spirit”... “the larger the number of books, the less influence they have on people’s lives.. the living spring of wisdom and knowledge is blocked.”

<sup>18</sup> (Trans.) Genesis 1:28.

<sup>19</sup> (Trans.) Or, the Hebrew Bible.

that the Koran costs only one mark<sup>20</sup> in a cheap edition. We will only be able to wave the jewel of our literature over our sore heads like a flag or a sword, or boastfully parade it past our haughty neighbors once our new writing has come to consist of a minimum number of volumes and a maximum quantity of “Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, none of us expects that in our time or in that of our grandchildren a new Ezekiel or Amos will appear; but we believe that’s how we must walk, whether weary or fresh, if we really want to get somewhere.

Here’s how I look at it. Our holy writings are as far away from modern literature as heaven from earth. At first glance the distance seems so great that it’s not even possible to formulate their opposition to each other. Upon closer examination, however, I think we can pinpoint the difference. In my opinion, it’s that *the holy writings have to do with commonalities, while literature even in the best case deals with particular instances, with fragments.*

True, “Crime and Punishment” has a lot of pages, but altogether they produce a single fruit, a single scene, which after we’ve read it runs wild through our blood like a rabid dog. It’s a scene we can sum up in a few words: in a wretched apartment, by the light of a tallow candle, the murderer and the prostitute come together reading scripture.

Scripture, however, can swallow a hundred Dostoyevskys. A writer, no matter how gigantic, is only as weak or as strong as a writer. He sees, but he sees only an instance, a piece torn out of the entirety of Nature.

Nature in her full scope is vast in her beauty and beautiful in her limitlessness. Everything that she includes moves away from us so we can take delight in every step we take closer to her. We want to take the knowledge of her into ourselves. We protest that it’s difficult: she is too vast, too various, but the truth is otherwise. She is in no way as scattered or dispersed as she appears at first blush. Precisely because she’s so rich, there’s no question of her being spread too thinly – her abundance scarcely leaves room for one thing next to another. Everything is connected, essence alongside essence. One phenomenon depends on the next like a lock in a door - and the key is in our hearts.

The world shrinks or opens up like the goblet of a flower, depending on whether we hold our eyes downcast or walk with arms outstretched and cries of jubilation. Our sin is a millstone, which never rests from grinding the grain and pouring out our punishment... a fat rat that jumps out onto the stone knees of a town, onto the tin heads of the houses, and we sometimes catch a glimpse of it in the eyes of others, when they ask us politely, in a friendly way “Brother, how are you?”

Our goodness on the other hand is an opera glass that lessens the distance between us and the outside world. Someone has cut away the estrangement with scissors. We feel a caress like a breath of air fanning our temples. The harsh, big-city night is no longer so menacing. The tram that is snaking its way from one street to the next doesn’t bother us at all; for before Adam sinned, the snake walked on four legs and did no one any harm. Even when the postman brings an unexpected letter, no fear occurs to us

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<sup>20</sup> (Ed.) Zloty were not re-introduced by the new Polish state until 1924.

<sup>21</sup> (Trans.) Heb: Ruakh-haKodesh.

that bad news may have fallen into the crisp, smooth envelope like a fly into a glass of tea. What could possibly trouble us when our name is joyfully intertwined with every living creature and inanimate object, like a finely-wrought monogram?

Nature in herself is beautiful and, like every beauty, she awaits her admirers. She awaits people of refinement. Each day she cries with every particle of her being: “Woe unto those who rot in their ugliness, who don’t want to partake of my splendour, who can’t be uplifted and so must fall, and with whom I too fall since they refuse to sustain me. For, through their eyes I live!”<sup>22</sup>

As we draw closer to the universal aspect of existence, our joy is compounded. First there is the delight in the relatedness of thousands and millions of neighbors. Secondly, through this closeness we become aware how little we previously divined of their vastness and infinitude. Now for the first time we grasp how unfathomable their mystery is – but we don’t on this account despair. We aren’t left standing like beggars at the door of this maze. Along with this great secret we realize something else: that I can’t even fathom myself, or you - yourself, or he – himself. Loving everything, we can no longer hate ourselves; instead we bring love and piety to the holy image that’s within all of us, feeling only sorrow for those who think they can hate us.<sup>23</sup>

Creation is mighty, shattering because ungraspable, and as we contemplate it, we shudder violently in a way that shakes us free from our restlessness and triviality – onto a new earth, where everything is whole, trustworthy and simple. The newness amazes us – and in a state of wonder, no one is ever angry or venomous. We are surrounded by suddenness, and every suddenness is a wonder. Every wonder raises us up and makes us more and more human because of its mystery. After all, we too are points of connection between the elements of fate. Whom should we resent or blame? If we ourselves are everything – and everything bows to us, asking for compassion, no less than we bow and ask the same? We aren’t angry, just the opposite. We’re alone no longer. We can hear the footsteps of others on our path. We’re exactly where everyone else is. We’re grateful because we are the measure of all things.

A cigarette butt is no greater than us and a sunset no lesser than us. Yesterday something happened. A messenger came to you with a visiting-card: a woman of your acquaintance writes to you:

My good and bad one, my good and bad one!  
I absolutely must see you.  
For an hour, a half-hour, five minutes.  
I don’t know.  
But my world (underlined) is on a marble tabletop  
In the candystore at the end of \*\* street.

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<sup>22</sup> Lit. Shtern says here, “Each day a voice goes forth from her inner reaches,...,” echoing the Rabbinical motif in which a “Bat Kol” or Heavenly Voice “goes forth” to deliver a message, for example, Pirkey Avot 6:2: “Each day a voice goes forth from Mt. Khoreb and proclaims, ‘Woe to those who have neglected the Torah!’”

<sup>23</sup> (Trans.) The word translated as “image” here is Hebrew “tselem,” as in Gen. 1:27: “B’tselem Elokim bara oto” – “He created him in the image of G-d.” The concept plays an important role in Kabbalistic as well as Rabbinical literature.

Yours more than my own... (signed).

That happened at twelve. At three o'clock, the sky drew a threatening cloak over itself, and the earth covered itself with a pelting rain. On the horizon there was such a boom, and before your home such a fire sprang up, it was as if God wanted to yell a fiery tale into your ear.

Two events in the one day! You shut the door and windows on both, but it doesn't matter. They both will remain inscribed in your memory and engraved somewhere on a cloud – and neither our memory nor the cloud will get any sleep tonight. Purified by suffering, both will complain before the One Who knows all thoughts, and tremble before the Creator of all doubts, all forms of isolation, all ecstasies, all disappointments, all anxieties. His reply will be more enigmatic than the mystery we asked about; and it won't make things any easier for us, won't help us, but we'll become more refined and greater through it, great enough to stop wanting things to be easier. It will make us rich enough to stop dragging ourselves around with sacks over our shoulders, packed with beggarly cleverness and slyness, tricks and deceptions, as if with yesterday's potatoes and dry breadcrusts. We won't satisfy our hunger that way. Nor will we uncover or discover anything essential about ourselves.

What, then, do we need to discover? What should we be opening ourselves up to? Are we any different from the night, locked down with seven locks? Have you ever unbarred the door of a human tear? Have you ever cut a smile in two and seen how it looks from the inside? Is the clock on your table, that's counting the hours, any more or less alive or dead than the hours themselves? As it ticks so resoundingly, is the clock any smarter or sillier than our blood? We want to be unhappy enough to rejoice in the path we walk in the world, as in one mystery among many.

If someone told me that person A or person B, whom I thought of as a good friend, was actually my enemy, I would accept it with the same simple-hearted shock and sad wonderment as if a porcelain saucer had fallen from my hand and shattered on the floor.

We marvel; but the nature of marvels is not to weigh down but simply by occurring to raise up and awaken, clear the eyes, generate self-respect. When we break free from the narrow confines<sup>24</sup> of the body, which is set up like a fencepost at a border crossing, and stride across to the other side, where the kingdom of the cosmos begins, we breathe more easily. A great expanse opens before us. We can scarcely see which is more expansive, the horizon or our own wills. Nothing constricts us: we are the atmosphere enveloping everything. Nothing can escape us or push us away. Nor can we flee from anything, though we envelop it all. Every syllable and every voice comes to expression only through moving and shaking us. Every call, every cry, every awakening, every voice speaks not just about itself but also tells us something about ourselves.

A clap of thunder, the skitter of a mouse, the shouts of peasants at a fair, the echoing rush of a fountain, the bird by a window, the hammering of the caretaker in the

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<sup>24</sup> (Trans.) – Lit. four cubits, about six feet. This area represents a kind of minimum personal space in Rabbinical literature.

synagogue in the morning, the thud of a book that's fallen from the top of the closet, the bickering of our elderly neighbours over a washbasin, the street in *I Pagliacci*, the Jew with a sack over his shoulder calling "For sale! For sale!," the sound of splashing as a woman washes the slender tower of her ivory neck – all these sounds merge and flow together in one call, one mighty peal, one shofar blast which announces and proclaims "the Jubilee has come! Let the drowsy awaken! Let those who sold themselves into slavery be redeemed! Everyone must be freed from their wormlike isolation, their disgust, their rottenness, trashiness, and swinishness-before-trashiness. For this day slavery ends. Everything belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to Me, the Deliverer, the Liberator, to Me – God."

At the midpoint of Nature's space, we hear each echo and see each shape differently.

A tree, a cat, a wagon in the street, a rainbow, the signs on the stores that speak in colorful phrases as if they were Heinrich Heine, the young man whom I've run into for two weeks now, sitting alone on the same bench in the Saxon Gardens, whose eyes are as deeply in love with some riddle as if they were Rabbi Ibn Ezra, a ship that moves on the river so contentedly, so pleasantly and comfortably, balancing, wobbling, and wondering if it's a good idea or not to return to dry land, a troop of summertime promenaders whose white shirts whiten the earth, a flock of doves which blacken the sky, a woman who stands in an unfamiliar passageway, waiting a long time for the doctor because her husband's at home in bed with too much acid in his stomach, the peasant woman with a basket of flowers in the theater square, waiting anxiously until a couple will approach, and he will ask her if she wants a narcissus or a lily, the walls of your room, which have seen so much but remain silent, your child who fears you just as you fear him... not for nothing do all these faces wink in invitation at the expansive moods of the days and the closed hearts of the nights, no, not for nothing do they beckon us. Their glances make fiery allusions; they are symbols, signs of a great – of the greatest – plan. Here something is to be built. Everything on the earth will become a ladder, reaching up to Heaven.

Who will build the ladder? Who will raise us to mystical heights? Who will teach us to hear the sounds around us and see the things around us? Who if not the writer?

The writer catches by the ears and casts far away not just the worries that we trade away for small change but our daily needs as well. In their place he shows us brightness and darkness, things dissolved and resolved in succession, outside of us and around us, telling us who you and I aren't when we're merely you or I, but who we can become, that is: colorful and endless, if only the conviction would soak into our blood that there is no other domain in the world but the infinite, richly-colored domain held by all in common.<sup>25</sup>

Thanks to genuine works of literature we have become aware that we and thousands of others are the finest edge of a feather, on the wing of that mysterious bird the

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<sup>25</sup> (Trans.) "Domain held by all in common" is a translation of Hebrew, "HaReshut HaRabim," often translated, "the public domain," or lit., "the domain of the many." This is one of the four "reshuyot" or domains defined by the Rabbis which enter into religious law in a number of ways, most prominently in the prohibition against carrying anything into or out of the "Reshut HaYakhid" or "private domain" or through the "public domain" on the Shabbat.

Universal All<sup>26</sup>. And experiencing this, we don't want to be alone, to be orphaned – we long for our origin, strain towards our source.

Here we return by an indirect route to the question of the purpose of literature. This has nothing to do with the argument about ethics or aesthetics in literature – absolutely not! It has to do with intrinsic and strictly artistic values. It's about our being able to absorb sounds in their complete, inner purity, to take in sights in their full and most penetrating clarity. In such a case, however, it would be impossible for us not to become ourselves more clear – more pure, more true, more complete. Thus, only in art of the first order does a purpose and a goal arise – a goal, that is, apart from the will of the author and even contrary to the writer's intentions.

After reading a genuine work of art, we always come away with the desire to connect with that primal power which alone can yoke our breakthrough to the millions of broken pieces of other, unfamiliar destinies. They too strain, whether consciously or not, to find completion in this same original power.

*Our religious writings come from Nature herself. She is replete with God – hence the yearning for humanity in them. Secular poetry is written by people who want to come closer to Nature, which is why such a yearning for God is there.*

This is why, after pleasure in art – art simultaneously in the most basic and most awesome sense of the word, we overflow with the desire to reach the end of all depths, the door of ultimate righteousness. If sleep is a 60<sup>th</sup> part of death, then dreaming is a 60<sup>th</sup> part of living; and if reality is one 60<sup>th</sup> of the devil, then poetry is one 60<sup>th</sup> of holiness.<sup>27</sup>

How does the artist accomplish this? How are we made so desirous of omnipotence, so spiritually contemplative?

Here too we must consider the distinction made earlier. The means used by secular creators are contrary to those used by religious literature. The latter goes from the general to the particular. The talk is always of wholeness: “Praise God from the Heavens, praise Him in the heights! Let every angel praise Him, let every host praise Him!”<sup>28</sup>, “May His Glory fill the entire world”<sup>29</sup>, “Awake, North, and come, South...”<sup>30</sup>, “From where the sun rises to where it sets, may His Name be praised...”<sup>31</sup>. The limitations of human nature have no place here. Mortality moves off to a corner and shrivels up. As if you wanted to teach someone to swim and suddenly threw him into the water – we find ourselves all at once in the middle of an ocean, and we've no choice but to make a covenant with the bluest of distances, the most resounding abysses. All pettiness fades into oblivion. Wounds heal, not by consolation but rather through fearsomeness. “Praise God, you on earth, you fish and

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<sup>26</sup> (Ed.) Velt-al.

<sup>27</sup> (Trans.) The idea that sleep is 1/60 of death appears in the Talmud, B. Berakhot 57b. In addition, 1/60 represents the fraction at which a food becomes “bitul” or annulled within a larger quantity of another food for purposes of “kashrut.”

<sup>28</sup> (Trans.)- Ps. 148: 1,2.

<sup>29</sup> (Trans.) – Ps. 72: 20.

<sup>30</sup> (Trans.) – Song 4:16.

<sup>31</sup> (Trans.) – Ps. 113:3.



you depths, fire and hail, snow, smoke, and storm winds!”<sup>32</sup> This is Nature in riotous rampage, an elemental super-power. Who knows? Maybe for every nation literature is, by contrast, an attempt to approach humanity more caressingly and intimately than this, in a word, with what is more familiar and less threatening. Whatever its content, a story speaks to us in our own divided, disconnected, fragmentary language.

Literature catches the essence of an individual and follows him over great distances, over smooth roads and rough, leading him through dusks and dawns, observing his struggles and his moments of calm; his sorrow when he suffers harm, his pain when he can't afford to lose; and the radiance, the redemption, that silvered slice of time which overtakes his spirit like a burst of laughter at a cut cheek or a dove on the roof in the summer. Through everything that's less and more important, literature accompanies the unique essence. Until suddenly, what do we see: the person has turned from a path-follower into a path-finder. He is a message board between roads, a sign, an example, a symbol of the all-inclusive Nature from which he has been plucked. We look at him and think: an ear of corn, sprouted, nurtured by dew and light, and ripened – but an ear of corn, no more – and we remember the whole field and long chains of blessed, fruit-laden fields. Teaching us to see, the artist places individual examples before us, and though we are grateful for the instruction, we don't rest content with what is shown us. From now on we see everything and everyone through different eyes.

Picture a mother teaching her child to walk. She uses no more than half the area of the room – but it would be sad indeed if the child could never go beyond that little space. The mother has to remind herself that the child's feet will have the free, wide-open endless earth beneath them. Every creative work is nothing other than an incitement to us to consider every body and every encounter as a work of art.

How we would have seen Warsaw otherwise I don't know; but today, in the light of Shakespeare, we look at the fast runners and the slow strollers in the streets of Bielanska, Marszalkowska and New World as so many dark and lightsuited, yellow-leathered, white-and-skincolored sock-wearing tragedies and comedies.

Or, picture meeting a stranger or an acquaintance who strides through the empty space of the world so heavily, replies to us so seriously, and never laughs even when it's holiday time for everyone else; and it seems the street is not for them; the tram is not for them...as if the screaming of monkeys on a distant island is inscribed in their marrow. You imagine a knife eventually plunging into their hardened silences and, as if a barrel has been uncorked, strong wine pouring forth...and a cry of “Sunshine! Give me sunshine!” We fall into contemplation: hmm, where did we come across this kind of thing before? ... It wasn't very clear,...and it's a good thing we didn't fully grasp it at the time so we could work out the rest for ourselves, but a pointer had been given, a hint in the right direction, in the work of a certain writer named Henrik Ibsen.

Not every master walks the same road. One is uneasy, wincing, in purgatory, while another may be just the opposite; but all great artists enslave us, forcing us to heed them and do as they say: *always and everywhere* to seek out that light which they

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<sup>32</sup> (Trans.) – Ps. 148: 7, 8.

kindled in this particular, discrete case. Of course, the warmth and radiance of the light is different everywhere.

Maeterlink's dramas let the cat out of the bag, that there is nothing so menacing about our supposedly dangerous homeless. There's a refrain about the cursedness of days that are uproarious for too long. There are cheap notions according to which life should be lived as if at the full moon every day, or that we should sorrowfully regret that "silence" too is a word and so creates a little commotion of its own.

Reading through Peretz, we become aware of something remarkable, namely that the soul isn't always present in the body. Sometimes it's the other way around. Sometimes the body, realizing what he is, despairs, hunches over, and stretches out his hands in misery. The soul comes along and hugs him, covering him and wrapping herself around him, like the firm parchment of the Torah scroll embraces the chosenness of the Jewish people. Does this impression come from a multitude of arguments? No. Peretz abhors excess, above all else. It comes in seemingly trivial details, short sketches, stories the more powerful for their brevity, carefully selected characters. A student of Kabbalah for example – does he eat?<sup>33</sup> Who would think to ask such a thing? There's no buffet in the clubhouse of souls. Even the desire to eat is a sin. If appetite is directed here, it can't be applied there; and if lust exists, it must be directed elsewhere: namely, with every ounce of flesh and every drop of blood – where the longing resides – to be free of desire; so that no movement, not the slightest scrape, should disturb the service of the singing, white-dove-murmuring of the soul.

In the hours when the body crumbles, expires and disappears, the sadness is not so great. The great suffering occurs when the soul has to reveal itself. At this supreme moment, resounding joy and mortal danger share the breast of the young Kabbalist like the snake and child in the vision of Isaiah.<sup>34</sup> Why? Because regret comes into play when what has been brought forth to expression *should not have been able* to be expressed. This joy *expressed* entails terrible suffering, which has its expression as well. The corporeal and the spiritual: they move forward and lock horns, each asserting how essential he is. They meet over the student – but he made his choice long ago and – the body falls.

What are these bodily and spiritual aspects? Aren't they the familiar antagonists of separation and commonality? Our body, pushed away into a corner, forced into confinement, is bounded; while our spirit shades itself in every wood, finds its reflection in all waters, dances in every storm. When we come to the point that the soul begins to dominate, we encounter the edge of the curtain that conceals the richness of creation, the cluster of infinities. This is what Peretz is seeking.

Not novelty of form, not excellence of style, not distinctiveness of theme, not grounds to defend Hassidism, not a new apotheosis of Kabbalah – these all follow automatically, but they are only stages gone through to ascend towards that Existence which is believed, testifying about Itself, saying "I am the entire world. Everything made is due to Me." If you will, esteemed friends, and only if you will, this is art, and the beginning of something more than art.

<sup>33</sup> (Ed.) see Peretz' famous story *Cabbalists*.

<sup>34</sup> (Trans.) Is. 11:8: "The infant shall play by the hole of the serpent..." I have added the words "in the vision of Isaiah" to Shtern's text.

Great writers – keeping in mind that they are normal, established artists – drag their models over sand, sawdust, and mud. It takes a long time before they reach fresh air, ripeness, and redolence.

It's worth noting the truth that, precisely in the case of the most encompassing, monumental masters, our enjoyment would be much greater if someone could save us from so much fine literature and read the weak beginnings and flat sections of their books for us. There are so many examples we do not have to look far – let us seize upon the best-known and most powerful.

If we didn't know who had written them, wouldn't we in fact fall asleep during the first scores of pages of "Youth", "The Devils", "The Brothers Karamazov"? Is "War and Peace" not stuffed with dry exposition and excessive rhetoric? In "Pillars of Society", "League of Youth", or "Ghosts", is there any lack of scenes that could easily have come from a far inferior pen? It couldn't be otherwise.

In the course of a long journey obstacles arise, large and small, and the traveler has to cope with the dust. Sometimes one suffers from thirst. One might even advance the theory that to any great truth, expressed without hurry or haste and not in one breath, a good deal of artificiality and superficiality is bound to adhere. This is probably the idea behind the familiar phrase "poetry cannot exist without lies".

The writer wants to refine inadequacies and elevate trivialities, to make significant the isolated detail. Being human himself, he shares with humanity his own essential human pathos. He lacks the merciful cruelty the Tanakh exhibits: "The Lord of Hosts revealed Himself in my ears, saying this sin will not be forgiven until you die."<sup>35</sup> The writer is reluctant to waste any detail, but he wants to enliven a figure of clay. What happens then?

Picture a cold, mute, hardened piece of timber. You can make it move and live if you want, but through this enrichment it will become something less than it was. Set it alight, and it will become full of life and motion, but it will also be consumed and turn to charcoal. You could leave it in one piece and bring it to life by decorating it with gold and silver, but even then it loses something of itself. The metal will shine, but the timber covered will no longer be visible. In fact, if you love the thing so much that you want to preserve it in its original state, you will have to resort to artificial means. You could, for example, hold the fire away from it so the timber catches fire and then goes out, but even then something will be lost as the white bark turns black. You could, in the case of the ornamentation, use filament to hang pieces of silver on the wood. Then it won't be covered entirely, but so what? It won't help. Parts of the wood will inevitably lie in shadows.

Writers want to keep a character at a distance, leaving him under his own authority. At the same time their compassion for mere flesh and blood puts them at pains to lift it up and out of its flesh-and-blood nature through art. They longingly aspire to put each essence in the middle point of the world, whilst trembling lest they touch and spoil its original essence. For precisely this reason they often remain dissatisfied. For

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<sup>35</sup> (Trans.) Is.22:14.

sooner or later they have to face the inevitable dissonance, so they often make compromises. What's worse is that, going more deeply, it becomes clear that their human-ness, their fluttering over their own species, their sympathy ultimately accomplishes nothing. Finishing a novel, you don't recognize the character you started out with. The hero of every novel is completely different at the end than at the beginning. Either he has disintegrated, like a seed that was planted in the hope it would become fresh and strong; or a fire has been lit over him, it has become light all around but pieces of him have burned away; or the writer has overhung his hero with beads and stones, and our eyes have been blinded by the ornaments, the flesh beneath being forgotten. Certainly, if the body is preserved in its corporeality, the work proves shallow. For the work to be responsible and serious, the flesh has to be cut with knives – either covered in a straightjacket, or veiled by a ceremonial curtain.<sup>36</sup>

How long must this go on for? How much dragging through clay and grass does it take? And all for what? In order to finally grab the old truth by the horns: “a person doesn't live by bread alone”<sup>37</sup> ...

If today we have to tip out so many buckets of dirty water<sup>38</sup> to distil one cup of purity, wouldn't it be better at once simply to turn on the tap and let enthusiasm gush from every side so that all impurity falls away, and we emerge cleansed, holy to the deepest core?<sup>39</sup>

Peretz wants his once-upon-a-times to be instantaneous. Take it slowly? Wait? That's fine if you can. What if you “can't wait a minute longer?” If the love won't permit you to torture human lips with single drops? Then as the song has it, you have to “take the goblet in the right hand and pronounce a blessing over the entire land.” Whereas the characters of most writers have to pass through the Seven Circles of Hell in order to be purified, Peretz begins at once with...“the Eighth Circle!” Writers will spend years schematizing and putting together the skeleton of the work, then more years fleshing out the body. After this the body has to be covered by skin. In the end for the first time...- yes, that very end is the beginning – and it is also the title of Peretz' story “What is the Soul?”

Certainly we mortals come from dust, our foundation lies in the earth,<sup>40</sup> but when one sees that the roof is on fire, it's not the time to ask for an accounting of how many

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<sup>36</sup> (Ed.) *Peroikhes*, the curtain of the ark of the synagogue – where the Torah scrolls are kept.

<sup>37</sup> (Trans.) Deuteronomy 8:3.

<sup>38</sup> (Ed.) *pomiye*, lit., water already used for washing by the head of the household, now used by others in the family.

<sup>39</sup> (Trans.) The ratio Shtern gives here is actually “shivah kabin” or seven “kabs” of “pomyes” to one “rivi'it” or “quarter measure” of purity. These measures do not appear together in the Mishna to my knowledge. A “kab” is about a quart, and a “revi'it” is about three fluid ounces. Interestingly, the specific quantity of “shivah kabin” appears in the Mishnaic Tractate of “Keylim” or “Vessels,” Ch. 24, traditionally read by mourners, in Mishna 17 (a shepherd's goatskin must hold seven “kabs” in order to be large enough to contract the tum'ah or ritual impurity of “midras,” or “treading-contact,” applicable only to vessels on which one sits, sleeps, leans, or steps). A “revi'it” on the other hand represents a minimum liquid amount in a number of contexts in Jewish law, most notably, the amount required for ritual hand washing and the amount over which one must say a blessing before drinking. It corresponds to the solid “kezayit” or “olive's bulk” below, pg. 24, Note 52.

<sup>40</sup> (Trans.) This phrase echoes a number of verses in the “Tanakh” but most particularly the “Unetaneh Tokef” section of the “Musaf” service in the High Holiday “Makhzor:” “The foundation of humanity is from dust, and its end is in dust.” See also below pg. 21, note 45.

bricks have been used in the house or what the blueprint looks like. When this question – what is the soul? – takes hold of us, tears open the doors, and rushes around within us, entering every corner of every little room of our inner life, then the blinds<sup>41</sup> are lifted. We become more free than before. Our alienation from the Infinite is lessened, and the concept of *lowliness* remains merely as a concept, existing only for those who deeply accept that the law of hardship is law. For them there exists as a matter of course another law, “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth”<sup>42</sup>. How much opposition do they encounter who want to transform baseness into nobility? It isn’t so easy to bow and scrape, to have compassion and even love and benevolence for the one who once befriended the Snake. How difficult is quietude, imperturbability, making the lump of flesh something good, raising it up! Not to mention how very difficult if one wants to make of it something better, “If not Higher.”<sup>43</sup>

Just look how rapidly Peretz is able to vault over every obstacle and immediately breathe beauty directly into the reader. There’s no question of accepting a mere extract. On the contrary, he calls upon evil powers. He struggles with himself, bringing together various aspects of evil: intimidation; suspicion; cunning disguise, a kind of hiding of one’s true self which testifies to something other than a thoroughly kosher conscience. Here is the Rabbi, dressed in a peasant’s shaggy coat, in the early morning in an eerie forest, a sharp axe in his hand. We become tense that any moment the decidedly fearful essence will leap out: “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth”. Another minute, and the pronouncement will be confirmed: humankind begins in dust and ends in dust.<sup>44</sup>

Artists of Peretz’s stamp, however, can tear up this evil decree. Breaking the frame, they steal away from the common herd of writers, devoting their efforts to break through to the level of a *Tsadik*<sup>45</sup>: who is always awake and watchful, who annuls what the Holy Blessed One decrees and decrees what the Holy Blessed One shall bring into being. His law is: no hesitations! No more doubts! Everything is a mess, so faith is all; even when the skies threaten impenetrably grey dawns, there is salvation enough. So that the sick world, contorting itself in a sob, may yet like the woman feel an unexpected warmth. So that not only the Nemirover Rebbe, not only the Litvak, but every bird and stone, the muddy streets, the lowering forest, the peasant coat, the sinister axe - all may take comfort that we are in this together. That all may rejoice, for God loves us. That everything may play its part in helping, whilst singing the *Selikhes*<sup>46</sup> melody.

It’s “all for one”, and the “all” is one again. All division vanishes, things separated link together, lowliness and humiliation lead towards the ideal. With the least possible means, art’s final goal has been attained: from a mere instance has come a new, independent, blessed whole.

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<sup>41</sup> (Ed) lit., *Aynfaln di Mekhitzes* “the synagogue curtains fall down”, which separate men from women.

<sup>42</sup> (Trans.) Genesis 8:21.

<sup>43</sup> (Ed) The title of Peretz’ famous story. Shtern has followed his own prescription for the literary critic, and readers who love Peretz have now enjoyed profound glosses of two of his greatest stories.

<sup>44</sup> See above, pg. 20, note 41.

<sup>45</sup> (Trans) Righteous One.

<sup>46</sup> (Trans) New Year prayers for forgiveness.

At this point something strikes us. Peretz, the most restless, lively, turbulent, sanguine, and revolutionary of our writers – precisely he is the most religious! For, spirituality in its broadest sense is revolutionary. The true fear of God is like a stormwind, clearing a path, clearing away even ritual laws if they block the freedom of ultimate and absolute religiosity. Sacrifices are part of the law given in the Torah. One entire book of the five is devoted to them. Nevertheless, Isaiah, who wished that sin might be burned out of the hearts of his people and completely consumed, like the burning coal which the angel laid against his, Isaiah's, lips, had contempt for the low-level, exaggerated, metaphorical, ritual purification of animal slaughter. In the play, the pious Rabbi Shlomo knows perfectly well that it's spelled out "Six days shall you work and on the seventh rest"<sup>47</sup>, but the six days are too earth-bound. In their excessive normality they become abnormal. Too much activity, too much being covered with dust, too much physicality sticks to life. Wanting to be natural during the six days, wanting to develop and cultivate nature, a person wanders too far, sows, ploughs, and plants too much, and so becomes unnatural. The six days become grotesque, like six fingers on a hand.

It becomes too much for Rabbi Shlomo. For he, the pure, the perfect, the unalloyed – the glowing metal that by some miracle never dims or cools – wants the world in all its truthfulness and purity and original plenitude. He wants human breasts to be bowed like the curved handles of a pitcher, taking in Nature fresh, streaming from its original source. For thousands of years Jews have read "six days shall you work" as the law prescribes, twice over in Hebrew and once in Aramaic. Based on those letters, Rabbi Akiva probably derived "piles upon piles of laws"<sup>48</sup> just as with so many others. However, a revolutionary breaks and shatters not just rusted but *shining* chains as well, if they constrict breath and freedom. A revolutionary won't, can't tolerate gradually evolving improvement, can't rest content with peaceable hopes – for inconsolable sadness and lamentations surround him. And the need is great, and rescue urgently awaited.<sup>49</sup>

This Rabbi hears clearly the groans coming from every corner. He isn't deafened by the din; for he is a hermit in the crowd, a desert in the midst of human habitation, the night at noon - the concentrated, silent, wide-open, all-hearing ears of the night, in which every sound, every sob is multiplied and synthesized and becomes a part of the Tsadik himself, so that a hundred tiny, tentative and unattained wishes are synthesized into a single great will, one completed, grandly articulated endpoint. In his cry "Let it be Shabbos! Shabbos!" is brought to completion the cry that circulates through the bodies of all of us: the cry, what is the soul?

The cry that the art of every age strives to make resound – yet smothers and suffocates instead so that we only hear a sigh, as of someone gravely ill under a pile of pillows.

Sometimes, when art wants to be freed at once and completely unfettered and unfenced, she becomes embittered and tears stick in her throat. Wanting to let out a sob she begins kicking off the bed sheets, uncovering her wounds and her frail, asymmetrical nakedness. Then instead of being refreshed by Nature and becoming

<sup>47</sup> (Trans.) Exodus 35:2. The play in question is "Di Goldene Kayt" by Peretz.

<sup>48</sup> (Trans.) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menakhot 29b.

<sup>49</sup> (Trans.) Probably intended to echo the words of Rabbi Tarfon from "Pirkey Avot" 2: 15: "(The day is short, the work is much, the workman are lazy,) the reward is great, and the Master is pressing."

mysterious and magical, human and Godly through her, such art becomes naturalistic: wanton and bloody as the slaughterhouse, often decadent as a pasha.

These writers are not without merit. They too are impatient with scatteredness and want to hurry along the process of ingathering, to find commonality as quickly as possible. Their early work often evokes interest, by virtue of its extreme and uncompromising nature, but their victory cannot last long. Naturalism is too draconian and makes one feel constricted: everything material is necessarily limited.

Peretz was once one of these. Already then he longed for all-embracing, categorical wholeness, for the ideal, for intimacy with Truth. So he was in writing “The Shtrayml”, which contrasted two children: the one coming from the synagogue courtyard and the posts of the wedding canopy; the other born in the open air, under the sky in a green meadow. Here too there’s a desire for the expansive and less constrictive, but the methods, conventional and thick-skinned, are those of average art.

“Bontshe the Silent” could do very well without the trivial sociological significance which has been ascribed to it. It would be much more correct to see in it the inclination to restrained, quiet innocence and untouched, unblemished simplicity; impracticality as naïve, as lacking in cleverness as a tree, content lifelong with its few roots beneath and piece of sky above. The impracticality of a creature so devoid of cunning that it has no opinions to offer, as uncomplicated as the field, which even in the fiercest heat and dryness when there’s not a single drop of rain, never picks itself up or runs off to the sea or to a river to gulp down a drink but always, always remains in its place. The impracticality of the stars which never move, always keeping their places no matter how many clouds are covering them. So does Bontshe the Silent remain in his place.

Who is this soul? A human? An animal? A vegetable? A stone? Who knows? A fragment of Nature, a ray from the original Source – that he certainly is, but materiality figures large in the conception of this story as well.

Peretz had to change the direction of his creativity radically, to achieve his final and decisive triumph. All of his digging and searching out and choosing, his creating of theme after theme, were aimed at one thing alone: without sidetracks, detours, or accidents to approach as swiftly and unrestrainedly as possible the essence of our destinies, the original purity, the heart of beauty: the horizon’s downfall where beginning and end embrace, their lips touching - and they tell each other stories, so many stories! Which nevertheless are all one and the same, because they have been raised up with the Ineffable who is One, because they all long for the original Nature, which is One.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> “Ineffable” is a translation of Heb: “Keveyokhal,” lit. “as if it were possible.” This expression is used to emphasize the metaphorical nature of statements about God, often when one attributes to Him human emotions. So one might say for example, “God Himself laments – keveyokhal – over the sufferings of Israel.” Originally a sentence adverb, it became a reference to God in its own right – so one might say, “Der Keveyokhal...zol ophitn” – “May the Ineffable One prevent it,” or the like, using “Keveyokhal” (with the appropriate article) as the subject or object of the sentence.

Just as in the course of a year, day after day peels away and vanishes to bring us closer and closer to Yom Kippur, the holiest day; so Peretz set about slicing off one olive's bulk<sup>51</sup> after another and skinned away all corporeality piece by piece, until finally, in *At Night in the Old Marketplace*<sup>52</sup>, he could bring to bear the greatest subtlety and sincerity, the Other World with its painful insight, the angels and their lonely obedience – souls alone, nothing but souls.

I've searched my conscience enough to be able to vouch for the fact that this undertaking isn't an easy one. It's no wonder that I haven't exhausted the topic. My concern merely has been to set down a few stones, to mark out the way that our critics need to take if they want to be less chaotic than they have until now, regarding the problem: Peretz.

Had criticism followed the direction outlined here, its approach to our great genius would have been different altogether. Critical work has to fit with the writer's own inclinations. Just as the latter draws out a single instance from the inclusive totality of appearances, attends to it, elevates and strengthens it, multiplies it – so critics do the same, selecting a single representative artist from the whole composite of creative natures. Certainly, both are devoting their beliefs, their futures, their energy and effort, their love and their lives – to those individuals offering the most profitable material for exploration, restoration and construction.

That should have been sufficient reason for us to expect the light shed by our criticism to make Peretz clearer, more powerful and more refined. Had criticism followed the direction outlined here, something further would have come to pass. Criticism would have been obliged to acknowledge how inappropriate standard artistic evaluation is here. For here we have something more.

For, while it goes without saying that his work is much less, a thousand percent less potent and less surprising; less original in its treatment, less awesome and less persuasive - Peretz is nevertheless in the age-old Jewish line that comes down from the Tanakh: without overmuch attention to details, but full attention to the whole; vaulting over the body to approach spirituality directly. So it's senseless to approach Peretz with arguments and counterarguments as to what is and isn't artistic here. Where Peretz succeeds, every line is well crafted, every phrase perfectly articulated, every page a completed pyramid!

If critics had approached him in this way, there is another important thing they would have told us about Peretz, and they would have been right: that he found a Jewish style suited to modern content. Mendele Moikher Sforim was crowned as "founder of a style", and to a certain degree that is true; but what he created was but a cliched art-style. Whereas Peretz is the creator of a vaulting, corporeality-erasing ancient-Jewish version for the new art – with the result that it begins to become something more than, something higher than art.

Yes, our critics could have said a lot, a great deal, to us. They will do so still, but only when they have stopped operating with "literature-sense" alone. Certainly criticism

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<sup>51</sup> (Trans.) The "kezayit" or "olive's bulk" is a Rabbinical minimum solid quantity in many areas of Jewish law. The corresponding minimum liquid measure is a "revi'it," as above, Note 40, pg. 20.

<sup>52</sup> (Ed) Title of famous late play of Peretz



depends on awareness and many levels of intelligence, but what's needed, as our old folk used to say is "not intelligence alone, but intelligence fed on nectar."