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WEAVING THE REVOLUTION: I.L. PERETZ THE SOCIAL PROTEST WRITER

Adi Mahalel

Abstract: *This article analyzes works written by the Yiddish and Hebrew writer Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915) during the 1890s in order to argue that during those years, Peretz functioned as a literary agent of the Jewish working class in Eastern Europe, an ethnic-class faction that was represented politically by the emerging Jewish Socialist Bund. Peretz’s vital connection to the nascent Bund, which would in later years become the biggest Jewish-Marxist party in Eastern Europe, is especially notable in his Yiddish journal Di yontef bletlekh not only for its content but also for the ways that it revolutionized the means of artistic production. By calling attention to the radical context and aim of these texts, this article refutes the long-standing convention in Peretz scholarship that his interest in new literary styles—specifically his shift to neo-romantic Hasidic stories from his earlier social-realistic and naturalistic writings—coincided with a rejection of revolutionary politics. Instead, the article argues that this shift reflected Peretz’s ongoing search for new ways of expressing his radicalism.*

Introduction

According to Antonio Gramsci, every exploited social group must develop its own cadre of intellectuals who help shape the group’s culture according to its own interests, rather than according to the interests of the bourgeoisie.¹ These “organic

¹ Alon Altaras, “Ha’iim shel Antonio Gramsci: hakdama,” in Antonio Gramsci, *Al hahegemonya* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009), 35.

intellectuals” articulate class perceptions and aspirations for the group in its own language. Naturally, the very idea of politically committed intellectuals who align themselves with the underprivileged predates Gramsci. Numerous examples can attest to this fact, from poets Janet Hamilton and John Clare to French advocates of social justice Victor Hugo and Emile Zola; such a list could include many active in the cultural-political world of Eastern European Jewry like Morris Winchevsky and others. This article focuses on the Yiddish and Hebrew writer Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), who did not come from the Jewish working class, but consciously bound himself to it, thus becoming a critical source for Jewish proletarian culture.²

In this article I will show how Peretz aimed in his writing, from 1893 onward, to establish himself as an intellectual committed to the interests of the Jewish working class. As a cultural producer, he joined the ranks of the nascent Jewish Labor Bund, which would in later years become the biggest Jewish-Marxist party in Eastern Europe. By offering close readings of Peretz’s work from this period, most of which is in Yiddish, and by examining his Yiddish journal *Di yontef bletlekh* and the ways it revolutionized the means of artistic production, I seek to recast the way political activism is understood in scholarly evaluations of Peretz’s work. This study employs a partially chronological, partially thematic scheme, following Peretz’s radicalism at its inception and then through the various ways in which it was synchronically expressed.

The same year that Peretz was starting to publish his radical work, 1893, was also the year when the Jewish social-democratic *intelligenti* (active in Lithuania since the late 1880s) went from working in small elite workers’ groups to agitating on a mass scale, “appealing to the workers on the basis of their immediate material needs.”³ Following the work of Yoav Peled, which examines the emergence of the Bund using analytical tools borrowed from political-economy and sociological discourse,⁴ I argue that Peretz played an instrumental role in helping the Bund develop a Jewish, culturally unified ethno-consciousness.

In his examination of the formation of the Bund and the rise of an “ethno-class consciousness” amongst Jewish workers in the Russian Pale of Settlement, Peled places the Bund’s usage of [Jewish] “ethnicity” as a symptom of a split labor market. In a split labor market, the concept of “ethnicity” is used both by the hegemonic group as an argument to ensure their dominance within the society, and by the minority group as an organizational tool in their struggle for equality.⁵ While later Bund historians shed light on many other aspects of the Bund’s history and ideology, it is Peled’s focus on the ethno-class consciousness which provides a particularly powerful lens through which to explore the ways in which Peretz’s work during these years participates in redefining ethnicity in radical terms.

Peretz’s “radical years,” as they were called, became known as such through a rich tradition of Peretz-critique that emphasized his socialist work and his deep

² Ibid, 59-60.

³ Yoav Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale: the Political Economy of Jewish Workers’ Nationalism in late Imperial Russia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 1.

⁴ There are of course other scholars who presented various theories regarding the emergence of the Bund. The traditional view based its reasoning on the socioeconomic realities of Jews, while Jonathan Frankel emphasized the role of politics. For a recent brief survey see David Slucki, *The International Jewish Labor Bund after 1945: Toward a Global History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 4-6.

⁵ Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 9.

affection for the socialist cause and the struggles of working class Jews in the 1890s. This critical tradition, along with perceptions of the “Jewish left” in general, have been revised since the mid twentieth century by criticism and scholarship that has deemphasized Peretz’s connection to the Jewish labor movement and the movement’s overall contribution to Yiddish culture.⁶ Many critics and scholars, led most prominently by Chone Shmeruk, present Peretz as an ardent *anti*-revolutionary constantly in a state of doubt and despair, resistant to any fixed political ideal, and never fully committed to the socialist cause.⁷ Ruth Wisse claims that Peretz was passively used by socialists for their own purposes,⁸ rather than being an alert and willing participant engaged in a process of mutual inspiration.

This article argues that Peretz’s cultural production during the years 1893-1899 was instrumental in creating an ethno-class consciousness amongst Jewish workers, up to the formation of the Bund in 1897 and beyond. Through readings of Peretz’s writing from this period, this article refutes the long-standing convention in Peretz scholarship that his interest in new literary styles—specifically his shift to neo-romantic Hasidic stories away from his earlier social-realistic and naturalistic writings—coincided with a rejection of revolutionary politics. Instead, I argue that this stylistic shift reflected Peretz’s ongoing search for new ways of expressing his radicalism.

Radical Beginnings

I. L. Peretz was first known as a Hebrew poet. He began publishing poems in Hebrew journals in the 1870s. Though he wrote a number of poems in Polish, they were never published. He began to publish Hebrew prose in the mid 1880s, and he finally turned to Yiddish prose and poetry in the years 1888-1892, his first years living in Warsaw. Though awareness of social-class issues and some proto-socialist tendencies do appear in his early writings and personal correspondence, he was not known to have actively associated with Jewish labor groups at that time. During those early years in Warsaw, he was influenced by the Warsaw Positivist movement, and he worked for Jan Bloch (1836–1902), a major Jewish plutocrat.⁹

The first major textual representation of Peretz’s radicalism can be found in his Yiddish short story “Bontshe shvayg” (“Bontshe the Silent,” 1894). The story was first published in an American newspaper, *Arbeter tsaytung* (Workers’ Paper) and only later in Eastern Europe. Such a progression for a Yiddish text from the “new world” back to the “old world” was not an uncommon phenomenon given that the

⁶ For an example of a work that deemphasizes the Bund’s contribution to the rise of modern Yiddish culture, see David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 48-61.

⁷ See Chone Shmeruk, *Peretses yiesh-vizye: interpretatsye fun Y. L. Peretses Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* (Peretz’s Vision of Despair: Interpretation of I. L., Peretz’s Night at the Old Market) (Yiddish) (New York: Yivo, 1971). A contemporary scholar who continues Shmeruk’s line of Peretz-interpretation is Marc Caplan, see Marc Caplan, “The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz’s *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 14, no. 1 (Fall 2007).

⁸ See Ruth Wisse, *Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1991).

⁹ More about the Positivist milieu in Warsaw can be found in: Jacob Shatzky, “Perets-shtudies,” *YIVO-bleter* 28 (1946): 40-80.

Yiddish press was forbidden under tsarist rule until the early twentieth century. In Eastern Europe it was published in *Literatur un lebn*, one of Peretz's almanacs of that period.¹⁰

"Bontshe shvayg" deals with the perpetually downtrodden yet silent and passive character of Bontshe, who dies and goes to heaven, where he is received with great honor for the first time in his existence. The dramatic action unfolds in the heavenly courts, where Bontshe's sorrowful life is judged favorably by the angels and he is ultimately granted his every wish as a reward. But Bontshe famously responds that all he really wants is to receive every morning "a heyse bulke mit frisher puter," a hot roll with fresh butter.¹¹

This story has frequently been misread. For instance, Zionist leader Berl Katznelson viewed Bontshe as "the epitome of the small town Jewish poor and the Jewish apprentice,"¹² whereas the modern urban experience is key to "Bontshe shvayg." One of the keys to the story is that a cold and hungry Bontshe was driven from his small town to the big city in search of work:

. . . in a deceiving, wet spring night, he arrived in the big city, entering as a drop of water into the sea and although he spent that same night in prison . . . he was silent, he didn't ask why, or for what. He went out and looked for the hardest work! But he was silent!

Harder than the work itself was to find it—he was silent!

[. . .]

Splashed from another's mud, being spat upon from other's mouths, chased from sidewalks with his heavy load down in the streets between carriages, carts, and tramways, looking death in the eyes every minute—he was silent! (*Ale verk*, vol. 2, 417).

ערשט אין אַ שווינדלדיקער, נאַסער פֿרילינג־נאַכט, איז ער אַרײַן אין אַ גרויסער שטאָט אַרײַנגעקומען, ער איז אַרײַן ווי אַ טראָפּן אין אַ ים און דאָך האָט ער די אייגענע נאַכט אין אַרעסט פֿאַרבראַכט. . . ער האָט געשוויגן, נישט געפֿרעגט פֿאַרוואָס, פֿאַר ווען? ער איז אַרויס און די שווערסטע אַרבעט געזוכט! נאָר ער האָט געשוויגן!
שווערער פֿאַר דער אַרבעט איז געווען זי צו געפֿינען – ער האָט געשוויגן! . . .
באַשפּריצט פֿון פֿרעמדער בלאַטע, באַשפּיגן פֿון פֿרעמדע מיילער, געיאָגט פֿון טראָטואַרן מיט דער שווערסטער לאַסט אַראָפּ אין גאַסן צווישן דראַשקעס, קאַרעטן און טראַמווײַס, קוקנדיק יעדע מינוט דעם טױט אין די אויגן אַרײַן – האָט ער געשוויגן!

The scene Peretz depicts here is firmly located in the modern experience of urbanization and proletarianization, a setting that is quite different from the view of modernity found in his earlier major Yiddish prose text *Bilder fun a provints rayze*. There, he referred to the alleged promise held out to small-town Jews that if they

¹⁰ A slightly revised version of the story, probably edited by Peretz himself, came out in his collected works in 1901. For an elaborate comparison between the two versions see: Bruce E. Zuckerman, *Job the Silent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 233-236, note 201. Stories published in the Yiddish press (especially in the Yiddish socialist press) often debuted in the US even if originally written in Eastern Europe, appearing in publications such as the journal *Tsukunft* and the newspaper *Forverts* (founded in 1892 and 1897 respectively). Passages cited are from: Y. L. Peretz, *Ale verk fun Y. L. Perets* [Collected Works], 11 vol. (New York: CYCO, 1947-1948), which is based on the 1901 version. All translations from Yiddish and Hebrew are mine.

¹¹ Peretz, *Ale verk*, vol. 2, 420.

¹² Berl Katznelson, *Hartsaot Berl Katznelson (1928)* (Israel: *Am Oved*, 1990), 35.

would just adapt and become modern, then their situation would fundamentally improve. In “Bontshe,” just wanting to work is insufficient: jobs are scarce, and, for the few who do find work, conditions are grueling and demeaning.

There is no trace in the story of any existing social institution (Jewish or otherwise) that would be able to adequately assist the masses of Bontshes. Instead, the burden of support falls entirely on the shoulders of the suffering individuals themselves. We know that during those early years (1890 through 1897) various socialist Jewish groups were emerging in Eastern Europe, including in Warsaw. The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, known as The Bund, was established in 1897 in Vilna (now Vilnius). Over the years, the Bund adopted a platform that prominently stressed the Jewish-nationalist agenda,¹³ but one that would ultimately lead to a form of class-national politics, not a nationalist-chauvinist agenda. Peretz was also close to Jewish Socialists who were active in the Polish Socialist Party (P. P. S., founded in 1892-3), such as the brother and sister team Julius and Esther Golde. He went to some of their meetings and gave talks there.¹⁴ The P. P. S. also issued its propaganda material in Yiddish, addressing the same readers as the Bund.¹⁵ Peretz presents all of these emerging groups with the challenge of Bontshe.

In “Bontshe shvayg,” Peretz bemoans the passivity of its main character. He ends the story with the Persecuting Angel bursting out in laughter in light of Bontshe's oddly modest request. In order to relate to his semi-traditional readers, Peretz staged his call for a revolt of working class Jews against their oppressors in a familiar Jewish setting, namely the heavenly court, filled with biblical characters and the angels. This setting, which also helped Peretz divert the censors, led some of Peretz's readers and critics to ignore the critical, subversive aspects of the story.

Nakhum Sokolow correctly described the story as reflecting a “general idea but with a local Jewish hue.”¹⁶ Sokolow's interpretation opposes the idea that Peretz had intended Bontshe to be purely a representation of the Jewish People, in which case his tale would become merely a protest against Jewish passivity.¹⁷ But in fact, as Sokolow argues, Peretz himself was dismissive of readers who were sure that Bontshe was an allegory for “the Jewish People.”¹⁸

¹³ Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 31-70.

¹⁴ Pinski writes about one of the earlier meetings between Peretz and P. P. S. and proto-Bund activists in Dovid Pinski, “Dray yor mit Y. L. Perets,” *Di goldene keyt* 10 (1951): 22-24.

¹⁵ Unlike the Bund which sought one Jewish Social Democratic Party for all the Jews in the Pale and was closely aligned with Russia, the P. P. S. was a Polish party that pushed for Polish national independence as a basis for its socialist agenda. For more on the subject see: Joshua D. Zimmerman, *Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Nahum Sokolow, “Le-‘Bontshe shvayg’ yesh ra’ayon klali, aval yesh lo gavan mekomi,” in *Ishim* (Tel Aviv: Stybl, 1935). Quoted from Project Ben Yehudah, http://benyehuda.org/sokolov/yitsxak_perets.html (last viewed on April 22, 2016).

¹⁷ Miron, for example, sees Bontshe as a representation of the Jewish People, and the story itself as “a bitter satire on Jewish passivity.” See Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl: And Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 340.

¹⁸ Jacob Dineson's memoir tells us: “When Peretz published ‘Bontshe Shvayg,’ he received a letter from one of his readers, with warm thanks for the pleasure and by the way, the reader explains, that he soon understood that in ‘Bontshe Shvayg’ Peretz meant the ‘Jewish People,’ which becomes so hunted and tormented—the poor thing . . . Peretz then handed me the letter with the words: ‘That's *litvakes* for you! It's good that I still live and can swear to your *litvak*, that I didn't have in mind the Jewish People, whom I did have in mind, you obviously know.’” (Yankev Dinezon, “Y.L. Peretz Tsum Yortsayt,” [Vilne: Farlag fun Bes. Alef Kletskin, 1916], 19; quoted in: A. Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler*

A. Rozentsvayg adds that the worker-reader understood very well whom Peretz meant: not the Jewish People, but the working people. The censor of Vilnius understood this too, and chose not to permit the story to be published as a separate book, for fear that it would stir revolutionary fervor.¹⁹ But what was it about “Bontshe,” and its radicality, which elicited such strong reactions from the authorities? Why does this allegorical story, that Rozentsvayg claims belongs to the *kampf-genre* (struggle-genre), play such a big role in the development of the working-class Yiddish reader?

In Peretz’s turbulent times, within a radical milieu, to be born silent, live silently, die in silence, and when buried become even more silent, was a much critiqued way of life. The message is thus: in order to resist oppression, Bontshe would need a voice.

Peretz’s story can be adapted into many languages and cultures without diluting its message: oppressed people whose dignity has been shattered must take a good look in the provocative mirror that Peretz laid before them and start to claim their rights. For even the finest lawyer of the heavenly court cannot assist one who remains passive and silent, lacking any consciousness of his condition. In this call for action and activism, I see the launch of Peretz’s radical-socialist period. But his radicalism did not limit itself to realist/naturalist and explicitly socialist fiction such as “Bontshe”; it also manifested itself in his symbolist Hasidic stories, a fact that often confused his interpreters.

The Hasidic Radical

Peretz’s Hasidic stories were often misunderstood and mistaken as reactionary by orthodox Marxist literary critics. Similarly they were often mistakenly viewed by nationalists as simple Jewish folk tales. Both misinterpretations neglect the socialist core at the heart of many of these stories. Peretz’s Hasidic work can be viewed as the attempt to construct a mythological base for the Jewish Labor movement and thereby have an important effect on the radical reader.

Take for example his short story “Mishnat ḥasidim” (“The Teaching of Hasidim”) that was published both in Hebrew (1894) and in Yiddish (“Mishnes khsidim,” 1902). In Hebrew it was published in Peretz’s Hebrew *yontef-bletl – Ha-ḥetz* (The Arrow), his sole attempt at publishing radical material in Hebrew.²⁰ Peretz wrote this story under the pen-name “The Orphan of Nemirov,” an allusion to Nathan (Nosn) Sternhartz (1780-1884). Born in Nemirov, Ukraine, Sternhartz was a close student of the founder of the Breslov Hasidic group, Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) and is credited with having written down the teachings of his Rebbe in

periyod fun Peretses shafn: di yontef bletlekh [Kharkov-Kiev: Melukhe-farlag fun di natsyonale minderhaytn, 1934], 75). Peretz was a Polish Jew, while *litvakes* refers to the characteristics and tendencies of Jews from the “north,” meaning parts of White Russia and Lithuania.

¹⁹ Ibid., and in G. Aronson and J. S. Hertz, eds., *Di geshikhte fun Bund*, vol. 1 (New York: Undzer tsayt farlag, 1960), 95.

²⁰ “Mishnat ḥasidim,” in *Ha-ḥetz: yalkut sifrut*, ed. I.L. Peretz (Warsaw: Shvartsberg, 1894). In Yiddish: “Mishnes khasidim,” *Der yud* 4, no. 19 (1902), 11-14. Nomberg considered this story to be Peretz’s best amongst his Hasidic collection *Khsidish*. He wrote that it is “undoubtedly the prime story of the book.” H. D. Nomberg, *Y. L. Perets* (Buenos Aires: Tsentrale farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1946), 17.

order to make them public.²¹ And indeed in “The Teaching of Hasidim,” Nosn Sternhartz appears as the narrator for a tale that borrows and expands parts of Nachman of Breslov's biography.

“The Teaching of Hasidim” is a monological story that uses as its first-person narrator a simple Hasidic follower of the Rebbe. But, as Shachar Pinsker points out, this narrator unwittingly reveals ironies and uncertainties, and thus complicates what seems at first to be a traditional hagiographic tale.²² The Hasidic narrator tells the story of the Rebbe's daughter's wedding to none other than a “dry” Litvak. The young Hasid (whose own affection towards the Rebbe's daughter is more potent in the early Hebrew version) worries that the Hasidic dynasty is in danger, since no direct Hasidic heir to the Rebbe would be produced from this “mixed” match (between a Hasid and a Litvak).

The language of the Hasid is passionate and enthusiastic when he talks about his Rebbe and his teachings, in contrast to his unbridled negativity towards the Litvak groom. The language of symbols becomes intensified in the later Yiddish version, when the Hasid transmits the Rebbe's teachings, celebrating individuality through the figure of music. The ideals of music and dance are in fact realized during the Rebbe's daughter's wedding. The band plays and the Rebbe stands at the center of the room, chanting and dancing with his feet, swaying with the rest of the guests around him. But the Litvak does not dance, which greatly angers the narrator. Towards the end of Peretz's story, the Hasid is amazed to discover that people begin to gather around the Litvak to hear his *dvar-toyre* (words of Torah), the same way they gathered around the Rebbe while he was dancing and chanting.

In “The Teaching of Hasidim,” writes Nicham Ross, Peretz shows clear symbolist tendencies in his writing; tendencies that would intensify in his later Hasidic stories. The mystical “feet dance” which is a non-verbal, experiential, and symbolic gesture, is preferred by the Hasidic zaddik over the Litvak's intellectual words of Torah. According to this story, the main Hasidic innovation is shifting the focus to emotions or to insights that are impossible to accurately define in words.²³

Classic Marxist literary criticism has traditionally disfavored symbolist writing, instead overwhelmingly preferring realist writing. The use of symbolism was viewed as the writer's inability “to grasp the meaning of that particular reality . . . He resorts to symbols when he cannot solve difficult, sometimes insoluble problems . . .”²⁴ However, this orthodoxy was challenged when Yiddish critics were faced with certain trends in modern Yiddish literature. For instance, when Soviet critic Moyshe Litvakov confronted the discrepancy between Der Nister's “non-communist” symbolist art and his ideological commitment to Communism, Litvakov was forced to acknowledge “that ideologically defective creative methods can bring with them technical improvements, as already shown by Plekhanov [Marxist theoretician],

²¹ Peretz also used the pen name “The orphan from Nemirov” to sign the short story “The Rebbe's Pipe.”

²² Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 299.

²³ Nicham Ross, *Masoret ahuva Vve-snu'a: zehut yehudit modernit ve-ktiva neo-hasidit be-fetah hame'a ha-esrim* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2010), 500.

²⁴ According to Georgi Plekhanov, as quoted in: Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 337.

talking, for example, about Impressionism.”²⁵ Soviet critic Yitskhok Nusinov, who wrote about the influence of Peretz’s symbolist art on *Der Nister*, went even further in contesting the negative attitudes towards modernist forms, viewing such critiques as essentialist and ahistorical.²⁶ Walter Benjamin, writing about the French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire, noted “it is an illusion of vulgar Marxism that one can determine the social function of a material or intellectual product without reference to the circumstances and the bearers of its tradition.”²⁷

This debate surrounding the political function of symbolism also pertains to any discussion of Peretz’s literary choices, which included both realist and symbolist (and other modernist) tendencies, the circumstances of their production, and the kind of historical lessons they provide. What was the basis for Peretz’s aesthetic choices? And how do these choices relate to his ideological wanderings?

Contemporary critics often avoid Marxist readings of Peretz’s Hasidic stories. Regarding “The Teaching of Hasidim,” David Roskies comments on how the faith of the simple Hasid in his Rebbe “becomes for Peretz a Nietzschean search for a leader who can bear the world’s suffering.”²⁸ According to this view, which is compatible with Peretz’s interest in Nietzschean philosophy, the same movement that Peretz and other modern Jewish writers viewed as democratizing Jewish knowledge and life is also a movement that demands a charismatic leader and emphasizes individual redemption. Peretz published the Hebrew version of this story at the height of his radical years. Could it be that Peretz was expressing doubts over socialist ideas even as early as the mid 1890s and instead advocating a focus on the merits of the individual charismatic leader?

The story “The Teaching of Hasidim” does seem anomalous for the work Peretz was publishing at the time. It is hard to detect an obvious radical political sentiment in the text beyond a focus on social tension. However, it can be argued that Peretz chooses here to present the class conflict in scholarly rather than in economic terms, by contrasting the simple, unlearned Jew’s attraction to the “soulful” Jewish practice he finds in Hasidism, to the intellectual elitism and rigid commitment to Jewish law as represented by the Litvak.²⁹

Peretz’s main artistic achievement with “The Teaching of Hasidim” is the introduction of symbolist tendencies into modern Hebrew literature. In addition, this story is a precursor to many of Peretz’s future Hasidic creations, one of his first

²⁵ Moyshe Litvakov, “Di Nister-problem,” in *Af tsvey frontn* (Moscow: Tsentraler Felker-Farlag fun F.S.S.R., 1931), 170. See also Delphine Bechtel, *Der Nister’s Work, 1907-1929: A Study of a Yiddish Symbolist* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1990), 27-34.

²⁶ See Yitshok Nusinov, “Der Nister,” in *Der Nister, Gedakht* (Kiev: Kultur-lige, 1929), i-xviii. In regard to Soviet Yiddish critics’ attitude towards symbolism, including Nusinov, see Bechtel’s essay about *Der Nister*: “Entre tradition juive et modernité révolutionnaire: Le combat de *Der Nister* contre la critique littéraire soviétique,” in *Der Nister, Contes fantastiques et symboliques* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997), 7-58.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* Ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 130.

²⁸ David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 118.

²⁹ Peretz offers a similar bifurcation several years later in his famous Hasidic story “Between Two Mountains.” See Nicham Ross, “I.L. Peretz’s ‘Between Two Mountains’: Neo Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity,” in: *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*. Edited by Sheila E. Jelen, Michael P. Kramer, and L. Scott Lerner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 114-15.

non-satirical stories that was couched in the Hasidic world. That being said, in his neo-Hasidic literature, which is less politically charged than his urban-realist literature, Peretz did not simply abandon radical thinking, as he was accused of doing by progressive literary critics.³⁰ In fact, his use of Hasidic symbolism reflected his search once more for the spirit of revolution. Peretz saw Hasidic literature as the true pioneering work of modern Yiddish literature,³¹ trying in this way to ground his modern-secular project in archaic Jewish symbolism. Karl Marx famously wrote of the reliance of French revolutionaries on ancient Roman symbolism to stir up feelings of heroism in order to glorify their struggles and confirm upon them some higher cultural meaning. “[T]he awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again.”³²

Finding once more "the spirit of revolution" was indeed the task Peretz took upon himself while creating his Hasidic stories. However, the story of Peretz and of Diaspora-Jewish nationalism in general, particularly in its Bundist form, was not one of "limited bourgeois struggle," as Marx said, for it represented the interests of working-class people without aspirations of founding a nation-state. The development of an ethno-class consciousness in Eastern European Jews of the turn of the nineteenth century required some ancient ethnic symbolism for its cultural platform.³³ The Hasidic world, which came out of Eastern-European Jewish life, provided a rich bank of symbols for the proponents of Diaspora Jewish nationalism in Eastern Europe, including the Jewish socialists. As the Jewish labor movement moved from revolutionary internationalism to revolutionary Jewish socialism during the 1890s,³⁴ it drew inspiration from the Hasidic world in order to glorify its own struggle, not to parody that world.³⁵

Now consider the story "Between Two Mountains," which tells the tale of the confrontation between two archetypes of Eastern-European Jewish thought: a *misnaged* (opponent of Hasidism) rabbi (the rabbi of Brisk, or the *Brisker*) and a Hasidic Rebbe (the Rebbe of Biyale, or the *Bialer*). The story ostensibly takes place during the early days of the Hasidic movement. It has no real historical backing,³⁶ but the setting offers a way for Peretz to examine the spirit of the Hasidic revolution, with "Hasidism representing the proletariat."³⁷ As in "The Teachings of Hasidim,"

³⁰ Instances of such criticism are numerous. See for example Moyshe Olgin's quoted in: Ross, "I. L. Peretz's 'Between Two Mountains': Neo Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity," 115; and Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*, 100.

³¹ Peretz in his address to the 1908 Yiddish language conference in Czernowitz. See: I. L. Peretz, *Briv un redes fun Y. L. Perets*, ed. Nachman Mayzel (New York: IKUF, 1944), 371.

³² Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, translated by Saul K. Padover from the German edition of 1869 (Marx/Engels Internet Archive 1995, 1999), 5-6.

³³ See Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 16-30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-70.

³⁵ Take for example the works of S. An-ski, who is best remembered as the author of *The Dybbuk* (a Yiddish symbolist drama set in the Hasidic world), but who also wrote the lyrics for what became the Bund's anthem *Di shvue* (The Oath), both from the beginning of the twentieth century, and many other texts dedicated to the Bund. See Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-Sky* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Ross, "I. L. Peretz's 'Between Two Mountains': Neo Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity," 107-109.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

“Between Two Mountains” uses a simple Hasid as the narrator. The narrator is a teacher in the home of a rich *misnaged*; his patron represents the capital over which the two archetypes and “Jewish cultural capitalists,” (to borrow from Bourdieu) fight to gain control. The rich *misnaged*'s daughter marries the son of the Brisker Rov,³⁸ and the Hasidic narrator calls for the Bialer Rebbe for help when the Brisker's daughter has trouble giving birth. On top of all this, the Bialer Rebbe is a former student of the rigid Brisker Rov; he had left the world of the “Litvish” Yeshiva, which he viewed as dry and disconnected with people's life following a dream he had.

In the introduction to Peretz's Hasidic stories in Hebrew, the Hebrew literary critic Reuven Braynin praised “Between Two Mountains” for its artistic achievement, but criticized Peretz for acting in it as the “the defense attorney of the Hasidic world;” he concluded by stating that: “the artist would have achieved an even higher level if he had not put his head between those two mountains and been affable towards one side while showing an angry face towards the opposite side.”³⁹ Braynin viewed this story as an apology for Hasidism and yet also as Peretz's literary climax. He only criticizes what he sees as Peretz's favoritism towards Hasidism against the *misnagdim*.

Like Braynin, Ken Frieden views this story as “the masterpiece that best illustrates how Peretz recycled tradition in order to innovate.”⁴⁰ But, contrary to Braynin, Frieden attributes the success of the story to the fact that Peretz is balanced and does *not* take any clear side. It is the unreliable narrator, “with his superstitious belief in his Rebbe's powers,” who takes the side of the Bialer Rebbe, not Peretz himself. Even so, according to Frieden, the story is not “anti-Hasidic” and does not take “the perspective of a Hasidic disciple simply in order to undermine his credibility.” And at the same time Peretz does permit “a powerful portrait of the Brisker Rov.”⁴¹ Thus “Between Two Mountains” shows both favoritism towards the Hasidim (proletariat), but also acknowledges the strength of their opponents, the *misnagdim*; similar to the way Marx was simultaneously in awe of and totally rebellious towards the bourgeoisie.⁴²

The story recounts a revolutionary calling of going to the people⁴³ and uses language that alludes to the Biblical commandment which God gave to Abraham: “gey dir dayn veg!” (“lekh lekho!” “Go forth!”). And so, the revolutionary journey of the Hasidic leader begins. Even though the Bialer isn't necessarily talking in class

³⁸ This is according to the late Yiddish version of the story.

³⁹ Reuven Braynin, “Y.L. Perets betor meshorer ha-hasidut,” in I. L. Peretz, *Khasidut* (New-York: Kadima, 1917), v.

⁴⁰ Ken Frieden, “Tradition and Innovation: How Peretz Made Literary History,” in *The Enduring Legacy of Yitzchok Leybush Peretz: Proceedings of A Literary and Cultural Symposium*, edited by Benny Kraut (New York: Center for Jewish Studies CUNY, 2005), 57.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 58.

⁴² “[The bourgeoisie] has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals,” but on the other hand, “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, [the bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.” (Taken from fist chapter of the *Manifesto*, see Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” *Marxists*, accessed September 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>).

⁴³ A Narodnik influence. The Narodniks were left-wing radicals in Russia, active during the second half of the nineteenth century, who were influenced by the anarchist writings of Bakunin. Since the 1870s they embraced of the platform of “going to the people,” and went to preach their ideas amongst the Russian peasantry.

terms when he repeats the term “all of Israel,” he then proceeds to mention only working-class Jews in relation to the broader Jewish public, hence an ethno-class approach. The Rebbe calls for the democratization of the Torah (the scholarly level), which figuratively means a broader application of liberal values of equality, exactly what socialists demand.

What kind of revolutionary vision does the Rebbe offer to counteract the rationalist world he denounces? At the end of the story, the Hasidic leader asks his former teacher, the Bialer Rebbe, to gaze from his porch at the sight of dancing Hasidim. The euphoric vision they share represents the revelation of a utopian alternative to the current reality.

The utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch distinguishes between “dreaming” and “daydreaming.” A dream, in Ernst Bloch's view, is “a journey back into repressed experiences and their associations.” This view corresponds to Peretz's use of the Bialer's dream at the beginning of the story in which the long years that the Bialer spent as a student at the Brisker's Yeshiva appear to him as a suffocating crystal palace, isolated from his imagined concept of society. In contrast, a daydream, in Bloch's terms, is an “unrestricted journey forward, through images of what is not-yet . . . fantasized into life and into the world.”⁴⁴ The Bialer is eager to show the Brisker Rov an image of his not-yet, to show the Brisker what could be the meaning of his *toyre* (his teaching) in practice. Thus the narrator describes what he sees:

[I]n the meadows with the small flames, sects and sects of Hasidim were circling around . . . the silk and even the worsted wool kaftans were glittering like a mirror, the torn ones just as much as the whole ones . . . and the small flames that wrenched themselves between the small weeds threw themselves and leeches into the mirroring holiday garments, and it seemed that they were dancing around every Hasid, with enthusiasm, with love . . .

[. . .]

Every sect was singing its own melody, but in the air all the melodies and all the voices were being mixed up; and to the Rebbe's porch one melody arrived . . . as if everybody was singing one tune. And everybody was singing—the sky was singing, the spheres were singing, and the earth was singing from its very base, and the soul of the world sang—everything was singing! (*Ale verk*, vol 8, 116-7)

און אויף די לאַנקעס מיט די פֿלעמלעך האָבן זיך אַרומגעדרייט כּיתות און כּיתות פֿון חסידים . . . די אַטלעסענע און אַפּילו די לאַסטינגענע קאַפּאַטעס האָבן געבלאַנקט ווי די שפּיגל, די צעריסענע ווי די גאַנצע . . . און די פֿלעמלעך, וואָס האָבן זיך אַרויסגעריסן פֿון צווישן די גרעזלעך, האָבן זיך געכאַפט און געצײעפט אָן די שפּיגלדיקע בגדי־יומ־טובֿ, און עס האָט זיך געדאַכט, אַז זײ טאַנצן אַרום יעדן חסיד, מיט התלהבֿות, מיט ליבשאַפֿט . . .

[. . .]

און יעדע כּיתה האָט זיך געזונגען איר ניגון, נאָר אין דער לופֿט האָבן זיך אַלע ניגונים מיט אַלע קולות אויסגעמישט; און צום רבינס גאַניקל איז געקומען איין זמר, איין ניגון . . . גלייך אַלע

⁴⁴ Quoted in: Ernst Bloch, “Mashma’ut ha-utopya,” in Avraham Yassour and Noga Wolff, eds., *Utopiot—antologia* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2011), 225. On Bloch's complex German-Jewish theological-messianic anarchism and his brand of utopian Marxism, see Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 27-65.

זינגען איין זמר. און אלע זינגען – דער הימל זינגט, די גלגלים זינגען, און די ערד פֿון אונטן
זינגט, און די נשמה פֿון דער וועלט זינגט – אלץ זינגט!

This passage resonates with Bloch's depiction of the daydream as a vision of a better future. It speaks of an "enthusiasm that soars out of love beyond the given means and situation," which Bloch observes, "might create tension in us, trying to fill us full of life, and thus inspire us with an aspiration to move forward."⁴⁵ The Bialer's description also resonates with *Lebensphilosophie* and Vitalism, the nineteenth century theories that emphasize the value of experience over abstract thought, and of the search for the spark that transfers from nature to every individual being. That spark was also interpreted as the soul, "the soul of the world." These non-materialist theories certainly enriched Peretz's expressive art, but they do not undermine the materialist base of Peretz's revolutionary vision. One can detect here a trace of messianism, which is not necessarily incompatible with Marx's materialist conception of history, as Bloch commented, "messianism is the red secret of every revolutionary."⁴⁶

Thus, contrary to Dan Miron's concept of "revolutionary idealism" in relation to Peretz's Hasidic stories,⁴⁷ I argue that there was a materialist (rather than mere idealist) basis in Peretz's Hasidic stories.⁴⁸ Historically, Peretz's "daydreamy" Hasidic stories were misread by both nationalist-conservative and Soviet interpreters. The first group analyzed these stories in a narrow nationalist framework as embodying the soul of the Jewish people and romanticizing Hasidim. Conversely, Rozentsvayg and other Soviet interpreters failed to see the progressive-utopian vision of a harmonious world that Peretz presented. Rozentsvayg viewed this story as "an expression of the fundamental-ideas" of Peretz's creative work and sees in Peretz's view of the united dancing of all Israel, with "the whole kaftans joined together with the torn ones' surrounding the Rebbe's ostensibly democratic personality"—as representing an ideal that "directly countered the ideal of class-war."⁴⁹ To back his claim, Rozentsvayg references the view from the Rebbe's porch; a description that he calls "a typical example of Peretz's reactionary-nationalist subjective-idealist art in this period."⁵⁰ Rozentsvayg fails to see how Peretz uses the Hasidim as a literary device to showcase moral ideals which have little in common with the actual practice of actual Hasidim or with Peretz's view of them.⁵¹ Embodying the secular ideal of the

⁴⁵ Bloch, 226.

⁴⁶ See Warren S., Goldstein, "Messianism and Marxism: Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's dialectical theories of secularization," *Critical Sociology* 27, no. 2 (2001): 246-81.

⁴⁷ Miron used the words "revolutionary idealism" to stress that Peretz's legends and Hasidic stories are the opposite of escapist. "They confront reality with a revolutionary idealism, with a demanding humanist system of norms, which is in essence foreign to the authentic folks-mentality and to the historical reality of Hasidism." Dan Miron, *Der imazh fun shtetl: Dray literarishe shtudyas* (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Peretz, 1981), 113-14.

⁴⁸ Marx famously viewed "idealism" as antithetical to "materialism", and in general condemned humanist non-materialist philosophies. For more see Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*. trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ "Di dozike ideye iz aroysgeshtelt gevorn direkt kegn der ideye fun klasnkampf." Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*, 100.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ An-ski testified in his memoirs how far the real Peretz was removed from the Hasidic world, thus emphasizing its use as a symbol, not as a modern ideology. His view is also shared by Soviet interpreters before Rozentsvayg like Nusinov; see Nusinov, "Der Nister," xi. An-ski wrote that Peretz, "the highest poet of the Hasidic legend, did not like, almost hated, Hasidic Rebbes, seeing most of

intellectual who “speaks truth to power,”⁵² and creates literature that challenges authority, Peretz paints us a picture at the end of “Between Two Mountains,” of a world that is worth fighting for. He tells us that the social struggle for equality, with all the hardships and setbacks that it contains, could eventually lead to the establishment of a new world; a world which overcomes the modern sense of social alienation and instead would be governed by the reign of pure music.

Radical Art-Production

Peretz’s new sense of commitment to the interests of the Jewish working-class was expressed not only in his many essays, works of prose, poetry, and in speaking to working-class audiences, but also, primarily so, through the new ways in which he produced art. This radicalization of the means of production is evident in his Yiddish journal *Yontef bletlekh* (*Holiday Pages*, 1894-96).

In his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer,”⁵³ Walter Benjamin writes about a revolutionary artist’s need to revolutionize the techniques of artistic production. Terry Eagleton explains that Benjamin thought that a revolutionary artist should *not* uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production, but must instead develop and revolutionize those forces. In doing so, the revolutionary artist creates new social relations between artists and audience; he overcomes the contradiction which limits artistic forces potentially available to everyone to the private property of a few. For the revolutionary artist it is not just a question of pushing a revolutionary message through existing media; it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves. The truly revolutionary artist is never concerned with the art-object alone, but also, critically so, with the means of its production.⁵⁴

In the case of the *Bletlekh*, radical artistic content was inseparable from the way in which it was produced. Having become an independent publisher, Peretz was free to produce radical art. While he was not bound to the constraints of an editor or publisher, he was limited by the Tsar’s censors; thus, the progressive content of the journal had to be cloaked in a traditional Jewish garment, as a clever ruse to evade the anti-progressive censorship of the tsarist authorities. Because the government made it impossible for Peretz to issue a daily newspaper (or any other kind of periodical) in Yiddish,⁵⁵ and since any publication with a progressive tone would especially be subjected to censorship, he cleverly settled on an idea that would enable him to bypass these restrictions. His idea was to issue an informal monthly journal

them as con men.” S. An-sky, *Gezamelte shriftn: tsenter band* (Warsaw: An-sky farlag, 1922), 161. Peretz also shows negative feelings towards Hasidim in response to their protests against his story “Shamya giber” that they prevented from being published. In a letter to Dineson, he states that the Hebrew readers are worse than the Yiddish ones, and that the worst among them are the Hasidim, whom he portrays as an old hag who can’t take a joke: “kebogeret zkeyna asher lo . . . takhpots bemaḥatalot,” in I. L. Peretz, *Briv un redes*, compiled by Nakhman Mayzel (Vilne: B. Kletskin, 1929), 71-72.

⁵² See Bruce Robbins, “Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions: On Edward Said’s ‘Voyage In’,” *Social Text*, no. 40 (Fall 1994): 26. The “power” in this story is embodied by the Brisker Rov, who Nomberg considers to be the more impressive character of the two (Nomberg, *Y. L. Perets*, 113-15).

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 2003), 85-104.

⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 57-58.

⁵⁵ Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 21-25.

that would be marketed as a series of short almanacs in honor of the Jewish holidays (like Passover or Purim) or other special Jewish occasions.⁵⁶ As a result, socialist messages were transmitted via a traditional Jewish framework, namely, the supposedly harmless and apolitical Jewish calendar. Thus, originally designed to bypass censorship, Peretz's approach affected the entire format and content of the journal. It made its messages easier to digest for the modernizing Jew who still had one foot in the traditional world. Simultaneously, it intensified the power of the progressive messages by imputing them within the structure of an ancient authority.

Even with the cloak of traditional religion, the radical tone of the *Bletlekh* did not make it easy for Peretz and his main partner in the project, Dovid Pinski (1872-1959), to avoid conflict with the authorities. For example, Pinski's editorial from the first *Bletl* ("Ma-nishtane?," "What Has Changed?") was, in his words, "mutilated" by the censor.⁵⁷ The editorial uses the Passover story of enslavement in order to raise consciousness about the enslaved status of the modern man. He depicts the enslavement as a habit (*gevoynhayt*) that is as powerful as the greatest despot.

Peretz reacted to the censor's interference by adding a short article entitled "Passover is Coming" which serves as an introduction to the *Bletlekh*. The article says a lot about the tone of the *Bletlekh* themselves, but also a lot about Peretz's uncompromising spirit vis-a-vis the authorities. This is the full article:

Passover is approaching, and I entreat you to invite me to the Seder.
I won't cost you much; I don't eat knaidel! Take me!
Don't treat me to bitter herbs;⁵⁸ I was born with them!
Don't tell me to count plagues either! I have forgiven the Egyptians a long time ago. Plainly it's like "beating a dead horse";⁵⁹ because so far no one has become sick from written plagues.
Release me also from "pour out thy wrath" . . . I am still too young, don't poison my blood with revenge . . . I hope for better times and I wouldn't even want to curse an idol worshiper.
I don't even want to say "next year in Jerusalem!" because "people don't become pregnant merely from speaking!"
Meanwhile I only want to wish for you that next year you forget the whole *ma nishtana* with the *avadim hayinu*. . . and—
When you open the door and truly call, not like today in Aramaic: "kol dikhfin yitey ve-yikhol!"—Nobody will come in; and nobody should need to come in!
(*Lekoved peysekh*, 1894; *Ale verk*, vol 8, 103)

עס גייט צו פסח, און איך בעט מיך בײַ אײַך אײַן צום סדר. קײן סך וועל איך אײַך
נישט קאָסטן; קניידלעך עס איך נישט! נעמט מיך אויף!
זײַט מיך אויך נישט מכבד מיט מרור; מיט דעם בין איך געבוירן! הייסט מיך אויך
נישט ציילן קײן „מכות“; איך האָב די מצרים שוין לאַנג מוחל געווען. און עס איז גלאַט

⁵⁶ Shmuel Niger, *Y. L. Perets* (Buenos Aires: Yiddish Cultural Congress, 1952), 229.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁵⁸ Bitter Herbs (*morer*) are eaten at the Passover feast as a reminder of Jewish suffering in ancient Egypt.

⁵⁹ The original idiom that Peretz uses is the Hebrew "brakha le-vatala," meaning literally "an unnecessary blessing."

אַ מין „ברכה לבטלה“; פֿון געשריבענע אָדער געדרוקטע מכות איז נאָך קיינער נישט קראַנק געוואָרן.
באַפֿרייט מיר אויך פֿון „שפּוך חמתך“. . . איך בין נאָך צו יוג, פֿאַרסמט מיר נישט דאָס בלוט מיט נקמה . . . איך האָף אויף בעסערע צייטן און וויל אַפֿילו קיין געצנדינער נישט שעלטן.
איך וויל אַפֿילו נישט זאָגן „לשנה הבאה בירושלים!“ וויל „פֿון זאָגן ווערט מען נישט טראַגן!“
דערוויל וויל איך אייך נאָר ווינטשן, אַז איר זאָלט אויפֿ'ס-יאָר דעם גאַנצן „מה נשתנה“ מיטן „עבֿדים היינו“ פֿאַרגעסן . . . און –
אַז איר וועט עפֿענען די טיר און רופֿן באמת, נישט ווי היינט אויף לבֿן האַרמיס לשון:
„כל דכפֿין ייתי ויכול!“ – זאָל קיינער נישט אַרײַנקומען; עס זאָל קיינער נישט דאַרפֿן אַרײַנקומען!

This is a very rich, highly sarcastic text by Peretz. Full of Passover references, it is another example of Peretz using traditional terms to convey his progressive ideas. For example, Peretz plays here with Hebrew and Yiddish by putting two contrasting expressions side by side: one a very high-toned festive and familiar phrase in Hebrew “next year in Jerusalem!”; and the other expression “people don't become pregnant merely from speaking” which is a common Yiddish expression. The Hebrew expression (*leshono habo birusholaim*) is said on the holiest days in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur and Passover eve. The rhymed Yiddish expression (*fun zogn vert men nisht trogn*) effectively punches the air out of the first expression, underscoring the fact that words alone do not create action. His dismissal of the unfulfilled Zionist aspiration meshes with his critical position regarding the proto-Zionists circles at the time.⁶⁰

Peretz uses the traditional wish that “whoever is hungry would come and eat” (*kol dikhfin yitey ve-yikhhol*), said during the Passover-Seder eve, in order to call for a complete end to human hunger. He calls for an end to fighting between nations by contrasting himself to the Hebrew expression *shfoyk-khamoskho* (pour out thy wrath), which is said at the Passover Seder in order to invoke God's wrath on the enemies of the Jewish People.

Peretz's most astounding parody here is his plea to his readers to “forget,” in direct opposition of the central Passover commandment to remember. Traditionally, Jews are commanded to remember the Passover story and to retell it year after year. Instead, Peretz entreats his readers to forget the common phrases from the Passover Haggada such as the *ma-nishtane* (why is this night different from all other nights), and the *avodim-ho'inu* (we were slaves). As an alternative, he invites them to join the “Bletlekh-seyder.” *Seyder* literally means “order” and thus Peretz is playfully hinting at the realization of a new *social order* of justice and peace.⁶¹

The *Bletlekh* was a radical journal not only in its content but also in its format and price: it was significantly shorter than other literary almanacs of the period. Peretz's *Literatur un lebn*, for example, was over 200 pages, and the second volume

⁶⁰ Peretz's negative regard toward the proto-Zionist circles, and his Hebrew productions of his radical period—including an attempt to create a Hebrew version of the *Bletlekh* with *Ha-hetz*—are relevant topics, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

⁶¹ For an analysis of progressive versions of Passover Haggadas in Yiddish issued by Jewish socialist groups (proto-Bundists and Bundists), see Haya Bar Itzhak, “He'arot lahagadah shel pesah shel 'ha-Bund,' ” *Hulyot* 2 (1994), 255–271. Bar Itzhak cites two Haggadas that were published prior to the *Bletlekh*, in the late 1880's in Vilnius and London.

of his *Yudishe bibliyotek* over 400. During its first year run of ten issues, the average *Bletl* volume ran only sixteen pages.⁶² Because of their shorter length, the *Bletlekh* cost much less than the thick almanacs, just five kopecks an issue, thus rendering them significantly more accessible to the low-income readers it sought to reach. To put this amount in perspective, consider that Peretz's *Literatur un lebn*, which was widely loved and read by socialist circles, cost thirty kopecks, and *Di yudishe bibliyotek* cost one ruble and twenty kopeks a volume.

The decisive factor which made the *Bletlekh* revolutionary was the method of its distribution, which made them accessible to working class Jews. They were distributed by the network of Jargon [Yiddish] Committees. The Jargon Committees were the outcome of meetings between Pinski with Jewish Labor activists in Vilnius in 1894. Together, they constructed a plan to join forces and distribute content through the rising network of Jewish socialist activists in Eastern Europe. Their goal, according to Pinski, was "to immediately take upon themselves the distribution of the *Yontef bletlekh* and all of the other publications of I. L. Peretz."⁶³ In Vilnius, Pinski met with others including the socialist activist and poet A. Lyesin (1872-1938), who would become a major figure in the history of the Yiddish socialist press in America.⁶⁴ Lyesin writes in his memoirs how he was heavily influenced by his meeting with Pinski, who caused him to see in modern Yiddish literature an opportunity to synthesize socialism with nationalism.⁶⁵ Pinski met many other important activists including Moyshe Terman (1872-1917), who led reading groups for workers and later in the decade was involved with Bundist groups in Paris, London, and New York. Terman was also one of the translators of Marx and Engels into Yiddish.⁶⁶ Pinski also worked with Avrom Amsterdam (1872-1899), an important figure among the autodidacts in the Vilnius group of Social Democrats who created the Bund in 1897.⁶⁷ Pinski made connections on his journeys and helped establish more Jargon Committees in places like Minsk, Bialystok, and Vitebsk. Usually, they were warmly received in the Jewish Communities. But sometimes they met resistance. For example, in Moilev, the effort to form a Jargon Committee was shattered by informers from within the Jewish community who reported on the group's activities to the authorities.⁶⁸

Establishing the Jargon Committees significantly strengthened the nationalist wing of Jewish socialists into a critical group that would ultimately develop into the Bund. The Bundist activist A. Litvak (1874-1932), became very active in forming the Jargon Committees. In his memoirs, Litvak notes the first arrival of the *Bletl* in Vilnius and its new method of distribution:

On Passover 1894, the first *Yontef bletl* of Peretz [and] Spektor arrived in Vilnius, entitled "In Honor of Passover." The socialist tendency was barely

⁶² Dovid Pinski, "Geshikhte fun di 'Yontef-bletlekh,'" *Di tsukunft* (May 1945): 322.

⁶³ Pinski, "Geshikhte fun di 'Yontef-bletlekh,'" *Di tsukunft* (June 1945): 386.

⁶⁴ Lyesin became the editor of *Tsukunft*, a pioneering Yiddish socialist journal that was published in New-York. See Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 151-52.

⁶⁵ A. Liessin, *Zikhroynes un bilder* (New York: Tsiko, 1954), 117-19.

⁶⁶ Y. Sh. Hertz, ed., *Doyres bundistn*, vol. 1 (New York, 1956), 225-27.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 258-62. See also Jonathan Frankel, *Crisis, Revolution, and Russian Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 173.

⁶⁸ A. Litvak, *Vos geven* (Vilnius: Vilner farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1925), 97-98.

visible in that *Bletl*. But we noted that this *Bletl* was not distributed as usual through traveling book sellers and book merchants, but by young people, who had nothing to do with the book trade.⁶⁹

Litvak adds that by the second *Bletl*, the socialist character was clear, and when the third *Bletl* arrived for Shavuot, it was awaited as if it were “a dear guest.”⁷⁰ The pioneering efforts of the Jargon Committees, advanced by the works and personality of Peretz and Pinski and especially by the *Yontef bletlekh*, revolutionized the means of artistic production and distribution and laid the foundations for an array of Yiddish oriented progressive Jewish groups.⁷¹

The Yiddish poems by Peretz that appeared in the *Bletlekh* (like “Dray neytorins” [“Three Knitters”]⁷² or “Baym fremdn khupe kleyd: a stsene fun varshever lebn” [“By a Foreign Wedding Dress: A Scene from Life in Warsaw”]⁷³), became very popular songs and were frequently included in anthologies of Yiddish folksongs or workers’ poems.⁷⁴ According to Yosef and Khane Mloteks’ testimony from Łódź, a Polish city then known for its textile industry and for being a stronghold of Jewish socialism: “This poem [“Three Knitters”] quickly became very popular and people started to sing it next to every weaving loom.”⁷⁵

Weaving the Revolution

In the years after “Bontshe shvayg,” Peretz strengthened his relations with Jewish labor activists, as was shown with the *Bletlekh*, and added works to his “radical repertoire” that explicitly dealt with labor activism, such as his short story “Veber-libe: dertseylung in briv” (“Weaver-Love: Story in Letters”). The story was first published in an American Socialist paper, *Ovnt blat*, in 1897 under a pseudonym and only later circulated back to Eastern Europe.⁷⁶ “Weaver-Love” is an epistolary short story written from the viewpoint of a modern working man, a weaver, who sends a series of letters to his older, more traditional future brother-in-law, a simple shoemaker. In his letters, the protagonist lays out his frustrations about his low socioeconomic status. He articulates the plight of workers in general, thus providing a kind of a crash course in labor-capital relations. The weaver complains that poverty

⁶⁹ Ibid., 79. The name Spektor mentioned by Litvak refers to Mordkhe Spektor (1858-1925), a Yiddish writer and publisher who was involved in putting out the *Bletlekh* in its early stages. After only three volumes, he disassociated himself from the *Bletlekh* because it became too radical for his taste (Pinski, *Dray yor mit Y. L. Perets*, 21).

⁷⁰ Litvak, *Vos geven*, 80.

⁷¹ See in this regard Emanuel S. Goldsmith's essay about Peretz's Jewish cultural and political legacy: “A Modern Judaism for the Yiddish World,” in *Enduring Legacy of Yitzchok L. Peretz*, 21-29.

⁷² *Kol khamiro*, 1895; *Ale Verk*, vol 1, 153-54.

⁷³ In the volume entitled “Oyneg Shabes” (The Pleasure of the Sabbath, 1896), and in the following volume “Khamishoser” (Tu Bishvat).

⁷⁴ Yoysef and Khana Mlotek, *Perl fun der yidisher poezye* (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets Farlag, 1974), 70. It was included for example in the collection *Arbeter lider* (Warsaw: Progress, 1906).

⁷⁵ Mlotek, *Perl fun der yidisher poezye*, 541. For a recent work in French on the *Bletlekh*, see Sharon Bar-Kochva, “Les Yontev-bletlekh de YL Peretz. La littérature au service des idées, les idées au service de la langue,” *Yod Revue des études hébraïques et juives* 20 (2015).

⁷⁶ The publication of “Bontshe” had followed a similar course, also due to censorship in Russia. See Shakhne Epshteyn, “Yitskhok Leybush Perets: tsum finf-un-tsvanstikstn yortog nokh zayn toyt,” *Sovyetishe literatur* (October 1940): 108.

hurts the lives of everyday people and expresses anger towards the economic system that created such injustice. His letters discuss his attempts to change the system by forming labor organizations.

Written in a simple Yiddish that the traditional shoemaker would understand, Peretz is effectively communicating socialist ideas to working class readers in a language that resonates with them. The epistolary structure, interwoven with a romantic plot and a great deal of irony, is what makes this text a work of art rather than a simple political pamphlet or essay. Arguably, “Weaver-Love” is Peretz’s most radical literary text. The weaver’s active radicalism represents the opposite of Bontshe’s passive nature and lack of class consciousness.

The story itself took much of its socialist agitation material from the brochure “Kto z czego żyje?” (By What Do We Live?, 1881) by the prominent Polish Socialist Szymon Dickstein (1858-1884). “By What Do We Live?” is considered to be one of the most celebrated Marxist publications to appear before World War I—a kind of a popularized version of Marx’s *Das Kapital*. The Yiddish translation from Polish, *Fun vos eyner lebt?* (1887) appeared in London and was reprinted and disseminated numerous times during the prewar years, particularly by the Bund and the Polish Socialist Party.⁷⁷ The brochure makes the solution to social problems very clear: following Marx’s platform, the answer is: “the entire land” and “all the factories in the entire country should be owned by all the workers, it should be their joint property.”⁷⁸ But how exactly to implement this solution the brochure leaves as an open question to the reader.⁷⁹ It seems that this lack of a specific answer bothered Peretz. And indeed, “Weaver-Love” challenges the ease with which this question—which even the brochure itself considers to be “the most important question” (“di vikhtikste frage”)—is left unanswered.

In taking weavers as a particular example, Peretz was likely influenced by Gerhart Hauptmann’s popular naturalist German play *Die Weber* (1892; 1894 on stage). The play depicted a workers’ revolt based on the historical weavers’ revolt in Schlesien in 1844. Peretz did not adopt Hauptmann’s unique method of creating a drama of “social characters,” in which the whole social-class of working people is represented as one character rather than as individual victims.⁸⁰ Instead, continuing with the approach he took in *Bilder*, Peretz here adopts the individual-protagonist format. Similar to Hauptmann, Peretz also deals in “Weaver-Love” with the less sympathetic and less desirable, sometimes violent aspects of his characters that such social struggles contain, in part because of the woes of the weavers themselves.

“Weaver-Love,” was published the same year that the Bund was officially founded (1897), and in it, I argue, Peretz shows support for the Bund’s ideological line. The specific task of the Bund at its founding was “to lead the struggle for

⁷⁷ Joshua D. Zimmerman, “Dickstein, Szymon,” in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dickstein_Szymon. See also: Epshteyn, “Yitskhok Leybush Perets,” 108.

⁷⁸ “Zoln ale fabrikn in dem gantsn land, zoln zey gehern tsu ale arbeter, zoln zey zayn zeyer gemeynshaftlikher eygentum.” Szymon Dickstein, *Fun vos eyner lebt?* (St. Petersburg: Di velt, 1906), 29-30.

⁷⁹ “With what means should the factories and the land be taken away and how to achieve it?” The writer answers: “That is your business, so you have to think for yourselves . . .” “Mit vos far a mitlen zol men tsunemen di fabrikn un di erd un vi azoy es tsu dergreykhn? Dos iz shoyt ayer gesheft . . .” (Ibid., 34).

⁸⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 97.

equality of civil rights for the Jews,” and to be “an autonomous organization within the future Russian party . . . [that] would have a certain degree of freedom in issues relating specifically to the Jewish proletariat.”⁸¹ The unique platform and identity that the Bund offered to the Eastern European Jewish masses is described in this passage by Yoav Peled:

The bonds of social solidarity . . . tied Jewish workers to neither their class nor to their ethnic group in an unproblematic manner. Their identity, therefore, was that of an *ethnic class fraction* [emphasis mine], connected in both solidarity and conflict to the non-Jewish working class and to the Jewish community at the same time. This complex identity can explain . . . why the Bund, which sought to represent the political consciousness of Jewish workers, was committed both to a class struggle within the peripheral Jewish ethnic group and to a forceful defense of that group's cultural identity vis-à-vis the larger society.⁸²

In “Weaver-Love,” Peretz writes a story about the struggle of Jewish workers against exploitation, in a sense illustrating the Bund’s nascent ideals. Historically, the general strike of Jewish weavers of 1887 is credited as marking the beginning of the Jewish labor movement in the Pale.⁸³ Thus in this story, Peretz transports the reader to those formative days that led eventually to the movement’s actual founding in 1897.

The Yiddish language is mentioned in a story within a story contained in “Weaver-Love” that expresses a great disappointment with the promise of new prosperity that came with capitalist development. This inner-story recounts the destructive invasion of a ‘capitalist sorcerer’ into a pre-modern pious *shtetl*; as the narrator mourns the dissolution of the community, Yiddish figures as a marker of spiritual value:

And nothing exists to save you, no mezuzah on the door, no amulet on the window; no Yiddish word at home! (*Ale Verk*, vol 2, 502)

און עס איז זיך נישטאָ מיט וואָס צו ראַטעווען, קיין מזוזה בײַ דער טיר, קיין שמירהלע אין
פֿענצטער, קיין ייִדיש וואָרט אין שטוב!

By validating the spiritual value of the Yiddish language, through pointing to the absence of the “Yiddish word at home,” Peretz injects a modern language-centered ideology into his imagined traditional Jewish world. In political terms, he has added a nationalist flavor to the emerging anti-capitalist sentiment. Thus, the direction Peretz pursues is not one of a strict internationalist class struggle, but instead, as the Bund advocated, one of struggle for the ethno-class-faction, the Yiddish speaking-working-class.

In fact the term “bund” even appears in “Weaver-Love.” The phrase “to bind a broom” (*tsu bindn a bezim*) repeats itself several times in the story, as in the following example:

⁸¹ Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 49.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸³ Ber Borochov, “The Jubilee of the Jewish Labor Movement (1916),” in *Class Struggle and the Jewish Nation: Selected Essays in Marxist Zionism*, edited by Mitchell Cohen (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1983), 107.

“If every lone weaver is, taken separately, a weak, soft twig, whom the worst contractor wraps, if he wants, around his finger, everybody together could have been a terribly strong broom to sweep away and to throw out something even bigger than the contractor with the garbage; but with what does one *bind* a broom?” [נאָר מיט וואָס בינדט מען דעם בעזעם?] (*Ale verk*, vol2, 510).

The phrase *tsu bindn a bezem* stems from the Italian word *fascio* (literary: a bundle of sticks) which meant in nineteenth century politics “strength through unity” (representing the unity of politics, industry, and labour). The word symbolized the contrast between the fragility of one stick on its own, as opposed to the conjoined strength of a bundle.⁸⁴ And *bezem* also alludes in this case to the new movement’s name: The Bund (literally: bond), and to its socialist, working class ideal of unity. The struggle for *human unity* is apparent in “Weaver-Love” when the story refers to the workers joining together to resist the outsourcing of their labor to a middleman (*der loynketnik*).

The struggle for human unity also reveals itself in the private-realm through the romantic intrigue that is interwoven in the plot concerning the workers’ struggle. For Peretz, the modern-capitalist system fails to deliver human unity or social cohesion: it prevents marriages from being fulfilled, and it only strengthens the animosity between people. This final outcome of the unfulfilled marriage underlines the story’s social content and represents a relatively modern message for its time. Perhaps the weaver believes that he has planted the seeds for the future workers uprising, but that his own seed will not be planted. This ending expresses a sense of optimism that is atypical to naturalist fiction (such as “Bontshe shvayg”), but which is also a well-recognized feature of in Hauptmann’s naturalist play *Die Weber*. Both weaver stories portray people who struggle against oppression and who bear great suffering, but whose souls are not stifled.⁸⁵

Aesthetically, unlike in Hauptmann’s drama, in Peretz’s text the voice of the individual is at the very center of the narration. Almost all of the letters are written by one protagonist. Furthermore, the epistolary genre itself was important in constructing the individual subject. It represents the increasingly sophisticated ways in which fiction represented individual psychology, and the genre is significant in the history of third person narrative.⁸⁶ Peretz’s particular use of this genre in “Weaver-Love” shows that the working class is developing a subjective consciousness of its own, as well as a class consciousness.

The cause of the Jewish weavers serves Peretz in “Weaver-Love” as a literary laboratory for examining the merits of pro-labor Jewish politics which use “Jewishness” as the organizational framework in the struggle for equality. The text shows some ambivalence towards the fight itself, mainly because any fight might involve violence, and also because the fight would exact a dear price from its participants. However, in the last account, Peretz’s text demonstrates sympathy for the moral cause of fighting for the rights of the working class. “I’ve planted a seed

⁸⁴ Both Leftists Socialists and National Socialists (Mussolini’s party) were using the term *fascio* to describe themselves. See Elizabeth Guerra and Janet Farrar, *Stewart Farrar: Writer on a Broomstick* (California: R. J, Stewart Books: 2008), 39-40.

⁸⁵ See John Osborne, *Gerhart Hauptmann and the Naturalist Drama* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 136-37.

⁸⁶ Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

and I am certain that it will grow” (“ikh hob a zomen gevorf’n un ikh bin zikher, az er vet vaks’n”) (*Ale verk*, vol 2, 514), writes the weaver-protagonist towards the end of his last letter, leaving the readers with a sense of optimism.⁸⁷ The struggle for human dignity lies at the heart of “Weaver-Love,” and this struggle is thoroughly desirable even if it fails.

Radical Turns

The idea that Peretz made a radical turn in the 1890s was first and most compactly presented in a book by the soviet literary critic Ayzik Rozentsvayg.⁸⁸ Rozentsvayg was part of a group of Soviet Yiddish scholars, who aligned themselves with the demands of the Stalinist Soviet regime during the early 1930s, and analyzed Peretz according to a “deterministic proletarian scheme.”⁸⁹ Rozentsvayg’s analysis emphasizes the *Bletlekh* and Peretz’s class position. Like many Soviets, Rozentsvayg demands that the artist demonstrate his commitment to social-realism, and he assumes a somewhat mechanical relationship between the work of art, the mode of production, and one’s social class. His view does not take into account the possibility of sincere internal ideological struggle. That said, there were Soviet critics who went against the grain in this regard. For example, the aforementioned Nusinov, when writing about the Symbolism of *Der Nister*, aimed to refute the essentialist claims, which label Symbolism a conservative genre.⁹⁰

Critical thinkers independent of the dominant Soviet doctrine,⁹¹ such as Benjamin and Gramsci, do not demand from an artist any commitment to a certain genre or style of writing. Instead, they present a much more refined and open attitude towards modernist trends in art. In light of such notions, and as I have shown in relation to his Hasidic fiction, I argue that the nature of Peretz’s shift in creative approach and expressive methods at the turn of the twentieth century does not necessarily represent a political shift away from radicalism in his thinking. Rather, his primary shift was one of style, from realism to symbolism and romanticism, inspired by the *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) movement, which succeeded The Positivist movement in Polish intellectual circles from the 1890s.⁹²

⁸⁷ This sense of optimism goes against Rozentsvayg’s interpretation, who sees this story as being full of pessimism and longing “for the good old days.” See Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*, 77-78.

⁸⁸ See Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*.

⁸⁹ See Mikhail Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism, and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 242-46. On the evolution of Soviet Peretz-criticism see Dalia Kaufman, “Y. L. Peretz in der yidish-sovetisher kritik (1925–1948) un di problem fun der literarisher yerushe,” *Di goldene keyt* 77 (1972): 145–59.

⁹⁰ Nusinov wrote that among the Symbolist writers are people of different political tendencies, and he insightfully commented about the historical dynamics of the text’s own reception. “World-literature is aware of reactionary Symbolism and of symbolist works that played a deep revolutionizing role. It knows also of symbolists, whose works played a distinct progressive role when they first appeared, and later, at a different situation, their creation became a reactionary factor.” (Nusinov, “Der Nister,” vi; and see also Bechtel, “Entre tradition juive et modernité révolutionnaire,” 34-37).

⁹¹ For a discussion of the differences between Soviet and non-Soviet (also referred to as “Western”) Marxists, see Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates Since 1917* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 1-10.

⁹² See *Polish Literature from 1864 to 1918: Realism And Young Poland: An Anthology*. Ed. and trans. Michael J. Mikoś (Bloomington: Slavica, 2006).

Nevertheless, during the 1890s (since 1893), a twist did occur in Peretz's writings. Rather than working for Bloch and creating literature that discounts the revolutionary potential of the poor, he invested himself with an unprecedented intensity to writing social-protest literature in various genres and styles. And in later years, while he continued to produce radical work, like his powerful Yiddish poem "Meyn nisht" ("Do Not Think," 1906), he also produced works that openly criticized socialists and socialist ideologies, like his short drama "A mol iz geven a meylekh" ("Once There Was a King," 1907) or his article "Hofenung un shrek" ("Hope and Fear," 1906).

Ruth Wisse writes that in "Hope and Fear" Peretz rejects socialism altogether.⁹³ But in fact, even in this article Peretz writes that his heart is with the socialists. He addresses them saying, "I want, I hope for your victory, but," he continues, "I fear and I tremble by your victory."⁹⁴ Famously, half a century prior to Peretz, the German poet, Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), who was a personal friend of Karl Marx, and who influenced Peretz a great deal, expressed fear in his writings regarding the possibility of full realization of the communist platform in the future:

I made this avowal, that the future belongs to the communists, with apprehension and fear . . . It is with horror and fright that I think of the era when these somber iconoclasts will achieve domination. [. . .] And yet in all honesty I confess that this same communism, so hostile to all my interests and penchants, exercises a charm over my soul I am unable to defend myself against. [. . .] A terrible syllogism bewitches me, and I am unable to refute this premise: "That all men have the right to eat."⁹⁵

Heine called for justice, for the destruction of the old world based on egoism, where one man exploits the other.⁹⁶ The yearning of both Heine and Peretz for a socialism that enhances freedom in the deep sense rather than restricts it, remains unfulfilled. Even with all his doubts regarding the implementation of revolution and the socialist platform that became apparent in his later years, Peretz never doubted the deep moral value of communism. Therefore, rather than view Peretz's texts from the mid-1890s as displaying a constant tension between radical and conservative impulses,⁹⁷ I argue that his work from this period is characterized by affection for the cause of the proletariat and by a strong desire that "the future general granary will feed all the hungry equally."⁹⁸

To argue that Peretz's "uneasy attempt to balance nation and class resisted any fixed political idea,"⁹⁹ mirrors the Soviet criticism of Peretz and of the Bund more generally. This kind of analysis does not take into account the Bund's unique

⁹³ Wisse, *Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 55.

⁹⁴ Peretz, *Ale verk*, vol 8, 226-29.

⁹⁵ Ernst Elster, ed., *Heinrich Heines Samtliche Werke*, vol VI (Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, 1887-1890 [1893]), 572-73. Translation by Mitchell Abidor is taken from *Marxists*, accessed April 27, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/heine/lutece/preface.htm>.

⁹⁶ See Shlomo Barer, "Heine ve-Marx: ma'arekhet hayahasim beyn nevi ha-komunism la-meshorer shehaza et zva'otav," in *Marx ve-'atid ha-tsotsiyalizm*, ed. Uri Zilbersheid (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), 173.

⁹⁷ See Wisse, *Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 37-70.

⁹⁸ I. L. Peretz, "Vos viln mir?" in *Literatur un leben: a zaml-bukh far literatur un gezelschaft* (Warsaw: Funk, 1894).

⁹⁹ Wisse, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 42.

ethnic-class foundations. The ways in which Jewish tradition manifested itself in Bundist circles does not express ambivalence towards internationalist class struggle, but rather recognizes that, in the context of Eastern European working-class Jews, ethnicity and class are inseparable. Throughout the 1890s proto-Bundist circles developed their unique blend of nationalist and socialist ideology, basing their program of “cultural autonomy” on modern Yiddish literature; much of this process relied on Peretz’s body of work and cultural legacy. And despite the fact that Peretz raised doubts in his later years (meaning past the 1890s) over the validity of labor struggle, he never cut ties with Jewish labor circles, the Bund in particular.

Coda

Throughout the 1890s Peretz was actively engaged in stimulating Jewish workers to action through his social-protest literature. He did so passionately up until his arrest in 1899 following a speech he gave at an illegal workers gathering despite knowing that undercover police were in the crowd. In later years, he still produced, though less intensively, valuable socially-oriented literature. In particular, as I have shown, he expressed such themes through the varied and complex use of the Hasidic metaphor.

In 1916, following Peretz’s first *yortsayt* (anniversary of his death), the great Bundist leader, Vladimir Medem, wrote about Peretz and his relations with the Bund:

The great poet gave us the treasures of his rich, warm, stormy heart. And we became richer, and prettier, and bigger. And as our heads rise higher and our awakened hearts pound stronger, “Bontshe’s” crooked, bent back becomes straighter, firmer and more proud. (April 21, 1916)¹⁰⁰

דער גרויסער דיכטער האָט אונדז געגעבן די אוצרות פֿון זײַן רײַכן, הייסן, שטורעמדיקן האַרץ.
און מיר זענען אויך געוואָרן רײַכער און שענער און גרעסער, און אַלץ העכער הויבט זיך אויף
דער קאָפּ, און שטאַרקע שלאָגט דאָס אויפֿגעוואַכטע האַרץ, און דער אויסגעקרוםטער,
אײַנגעבויגענער רוקן פֿונ[ע]ם אַמאָליקן "באָנזשען" ווערט גראַד, פֿעסט און שטאַלץ.

These words by Medem encapsulate much of my own argument: that Peretz helped define the starting point of the workers’ struggle; his vision, expressed through his stories and essays, helped set its goals and envisioned its future. By creating the silent Bontshe as a representative of the many “Bontshes” who were marginalized and discriminated against, Peretz helped the downtrodden gain the courage to fight back. By creating the revolutionary Bialer Rebbe in “Between Two Mountains” (in what Medem termed “the distant past”), Peretz helped the downtrodden Jews dream about a better future that was worth struggling for.

The radical works of Peretz constitute a body of work which reflects artistic, ideological, and political choices. In a significant body of work generated during an intense period of time, Peretz chose to align himself with the needs of working class Jews in Eastern Europe. He went through the inherently tenuous and complex process of becoming an “organic intellectual,” especially in relation to rise of an

¹⁰⁰ Vladimir Medem, “Perets un mir,” in *Valdimir Medem tsum tsuantsikstn yortsayt* (New York: Amerikaner representants fun algemeynem yidishn arbeter-bund in Poyln, 1943), 344-45.

ethno-class consciousness and in concert with the rise of the Bund. Peretz's search for new artistic paths was not inherently contradictory to his radicalism, and in fact, often served to enhance the radical spirit, rather than to subvert it. His search for new aesthetics signified his desire to accompany his revolutionary politics with revolutionary art and a revolutionary means of production.