The Small Talk of I. L. Peretz

by David G. Roskies

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Abstract: This essay outlines a particular literary genealogy within Peretz’s work—the dialogical thread. What stayed with I. L. Peretz and sustained him as a writer was his “fondness for dialogue,” for the marketplace of voices from every station and walk of life, which at the same time opened a crack through which to look into each individual human soul. Among Peretz’s aesthetic, ideological, and pedagogical projects, none was more sustained and sustaining than the dialogical. In the course of fourteen years, from 1888-1902, he shifted from poetry to prose, from inner speech (both spoken and unspoken) to group speech; from the coarse speech of those who labored here on earth to the sublime speech of those who negotiated the heavens; and from the static, entropic bild to the mercurial, carnivalesque, and ever-topical feuilleton. Turning finally to the modern stage, he used multimedia, a huge cast of characters, and the contradictory nature of rhyme to produce a sound chamber of Polish Jewry, a marketplace of fiercely opposing sides and competing eschatologies.

A Visit to “Their Study House”

In the next to last chapter of his memoirs, I. L. Peretz describes how he gained entry to a private library of Polish, German, and French books in his native town of Zamość. That expedition “from the red barracks to the green castle” leading to “the house with the locked library” was both real and symbolic, for unlocking an attic at the top of a “well-lit stairway” meant leaving the confines of the synagogue and study house once and for all, precisely as forewarned in
Proverbs 2:19: “Those who enter will never return” (Y 110-11, E 343). Lining the four walls and “strewn underfoot all over the floor” were a vast collection of books of diverse genres in three languages with translations from several others, such that the boy “in a black cap, wearing a Bismarck coat and boots smeared with white clay” had great difficulty finding his footing. The nature descriptions that they contained, for example, left him cold, “stirred no corresponding images” in him; “the description of limbs and torsos and plants made no impression” (Y 11:112, 113; E 344, 345). Luckily, there was something else that struck a familiar chord. What immediately captured his imagination were the dialogues, “di shtiklekh mit di pasikleh—the passages between the dashes,’ as I called them, where people talked. Each dash seemed to me a crack through which to look into a human soul.” The author summarizes that “this fondness for dialogue, for characterization through speech,” has remained with him throughout his career (Y 11:112, E 344-45). The forbidden library, at first so forbidding, grew familiar and inviting once it took on the semblance of a marketplace, “full of people who had come to the fair, people from every station and walk of life”—so familial and intimate that he made up his own name for it: di shtiklekh mit di pasikleh. Of that exhilarating world of texts, however, the realm he never quite mastered was the art of “rekht a mayse fartseyn, learning to tell a story properly.” Even the stylized folktales and literary fairy tales for which he was best known would prove to be “clumsily constructed” (Y 11:112, E 345). Speech and narrative structure, in short, were impossibly difficult to reconcile. Yet what stayed with him and sustained him as a writer was this fondness for dialogue, for the marketplace of voices, the cacophony of people from every station and walk of life, which at the same time opened a crack through which to look into each individual human soul.

Peretz was the first Yiddish writer to plumb the inner workings of the human soul—a person’s dreams, desires, despair, and approaching death—through dramatized speech and dialogue. He was the first to share his writerly concerns, insightful and sophisticated, with the reader. He was also the first to reveal the crisis of language that lay at the heart of his literary genealogy. For the most formidable challenge posed by the locked library of foreign books were not the descriptions of nature and bodily parts, not the formal demands of the well-made plot, but the secular world itself, a world of disenchantment, a place governed by determinism and materialism, where in lieu of prophets and their rabbinic heirs, modern philosophers, biologists and psychologists held sway. “To whom could I talk about all this?” the narrated I cries out in anguish.

To whom could I pour out my lament for the ruins in my mind and the corpses in my heart? To the people around me? I lacked the very language to speak to them. I couldn’t express these things in Yiddish because I had

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no words for these ideas in Yiddish. I couldn’t even talk about them to myself when I tried. (Y 11:113-14, E 346)

Dialogue may have been the coin of the literary realm, the medium of the marketplace called life and the language of the soul, but what of a soul that was divided against itself? How would the spoken language serve such a soul? Exquisitely trained in the Jewish classics and hermeneutics; fluent in loshn-koydesh (Hebrew-Aramaic), Yiddish, and Polish; capable of deciphering German—none of this prepared the young prodigy for the challenge of articulating new ideas and foreign concepts that had never been expressed in the Jewish vernacular before. Having just emerged from the self-enclosed, all-embracing confines of Synagogue Street, he found his way to “their Study House,” from which there was no going back. Exposure to that dazzling collection of foreign books marked the end not only of childhood, but also of innocence, faith, myth, received wisdom. Suddenly he had “no language” with which to express these thoughts and doubts—even to himself. Not just Yiddish failed him. His whole traditional upbringing; his rigorous training in Jewish law, lore, ethics, and mysticism collapsed with the first whiff of German philosophy and biological science. Henceforth, an unbridgeable chasm lay between the life of the Jew and the life of the modern Jewish artist. Even if that artist went on to write in a Jewish language, whatever he wrote would necessarily be informed by “ruins of his mind and the corpses in his heart.”

Before taking leave of his “misty years of childhood” once and for all, Peretz has one more insight to share about the Jewish artist’s landscape of loss and bereavement. By now Peretz has made it eminently clear that My Memoirs were not meant to provide a mere chronology of his early life, or to tell-all in true confession, or even to fully correlate the Warheit to the Dichtung. Written in 1913-14, the last years of his life, the purpose of his memoirs was to both explicate his theory of literature and to illustrate its praxis; he aimed to lay bare the limits of mimetic realism and the ways in which the modern artist could overcome them. Thus, while some experiences are rendered through psychological vignettes loosely strung together, others through hallucination and dreams as then relived in actual experience, still others, like his entry to the private library, are described in lush and lavish detail, with an overlay of symbolism and myth. What is the library locked away in an attic if not the Tree of Knowledge? What is the loss of innocence if not the banishment from Eden? Just before Book One draws to a close, however, Peretz wraps this all into an overarching theory of primary and secondary experiences. Only the feelings of childhood and youth got locked away “in the treasure-house of homey narratives and images,” he clarifies, while everything he was subsequently to encounter “in cities and towns, on

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highways and byways” he observed with a critical eye (Y 11:117, E 348). That may explain why some of the foreign reading material in the private library—notably, the dialogues and the Napoleonic Code—immediately came alive while other parts were unassimilable. What resonated with his experiences of childhood and youth left a lasting imprint. The rest was mere distraction. “Do we have any access at all,” asks the narrating I in conclusion, “apart from sensual experience, to the unfamiliar world that follows childhood?”

The answer is yes, if one could make the unfamiliar speak as fluently and credibly as the remembered world of childhood and youth. Yes, if one could remain true to the cadences and intonation, the dialects, idiolects, and diglossia of the spoken vernacular, while at the same time introduce the widest possible range of vocabulary, voices, stylistic registers, and moral sensibilities. Yes, if one could mobilize a potentially endless gallery of narrators, from this world and the next, from the animal, natural, and human domains. Yes, if one could conjure up a dense social landscape dotted with ever so many sites of vernacularity. Yes, if out of Yiddish small talk one could build a lasting edifice. Peretz’s “fondness for dialogue,” I submit, is what inspired him to become a writer in the first place and would shape the direction of things to come—the choice of genre, language, sensibility—posing formal challenges each step of the way of how to reconcile speech and literary structure. All this assumed great urgency in the summer of 1888, when, at the age of thirty-six, after being disbarred from practicing law, Leon Perec embarked upon a serious career as a writer in zhargon, i.e., Yiddish.3

**The Ballad: A License to Speak**

In a series of Hebrew letters that he wrote from Zamość to the enterprising publisher and editor, Solomon Rabinovitch in Kiev, Peretz laid out his aesthetic and ideological program.4 Their correspondence began somewhat testily and self-consciously on June 17, 1888. How does one say “from the point of view” in Hebrew, Peretz consulted his colleague, minkudas hare’us or mimlo ho’ayin? The exchange between the two aspiring writers was further complicated by Peretz’s having confused Solomon Rabinovitch (aka Sholem Aleichem) with Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (aka Mendele Moykher-sforim), whose works, he had to admit, he had read only in Polish translation (letter of July 4, 1888). Yiddish literature was a new frontier, just waiting to be conquered by pioneers the likes of him.

There were three prerequisites, from Peretz’s “point of view,” for the institutional establishment of Yiddish literature as a modern literature in the European mode. The first and most pressing concerned the role of dialect in shaping the new literary language. Peretz refused to adopt the Vohlynian (i.e.,

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Southeastern) dialect that was used by Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem in their effort to standardize, and by the Odessa-based Yiddish press in its effort to disseminate, literary Yiddish.\(^5\) While the Vohlyanian dialect was replete with loanwords from Russian, he explained on June 17, 1888, his Yiddish borrowed heavily from German. Peretz insisted on preserving a transcript of Polish Yiddish, with all its regional peculiarities. “I write the way we speak in our parts, and swallow syllables, the same way they are swallowed when one speaks.” So if this new project called literature were to become a vehicle of expression for Jews everywhere, then there would need to be a place at the table for both the Yiddish-Polish and Yiddish-Russian dialects.

The second concerned the addressee. Rather than serve the needs of the masses, Peretz professed to write primarily for his own pleasure, “bishvil atsmi, lehano’osi,” and rather than accept the dictates of literary realism, he felt himself free to draw simultaneously from disparate realms; “lokašt mnikol ha’oylomos yahad” (June 17, 1888). After critics protested that his poetry would be incomprehensible to the average reader, Peretz pushed back with his third principled position: key to creating a new reader for Yiddish was introducing the widest possible range of vocabulary, voices, stylistic registers, and moral sensibilities. If the average reader had trouble understanding, Peretz offered to supply a glossary of new terms and difficult expressions (May 17, 1889). What was the point of adopting Yiddish as one’s literary medium if not to create new concepts, spread new ideas, and inspire a new aesthetic awareness among the Jews of Russia-Poland, rather than trot out the old and familiar? Only by perpetually expanding its expressive vocabulary and formal reach could Yiddish assume a permanent, vital, and autonomous role in the making of a modern Jewish culture.

Peretz’s grandiose publication schemes—for issuing works in zhargon on Jewish history, primers in psychology and sociology—were predicated on his pen pal from Kiev providing the venue and financial backing, which was not what Sholem Aleichem had in mind. The latter’s plan for the Jewish cultural revolution was to launch Di yidische folks-bibliotek (The Jewish Popular Library, 1888), the first Yiddish miscellany dedicated to “Literature, Criticism, and Scholarship,” the better to showcase his own “Jewish” novels and those of his newly-adopted grandfather, Mendele the Book Peddler. After taking certain editorial liberties, Sholem Aleichem also published Peretz’s inaugural poem “Monish,” under the double heading of roman-balade, a ballad in novelistic form, which proved to be a breakthrough of a different kind. “Monish” was proof positive that speech, orality, and dialogue could provide the basis of a new literary language, at once regional and therefore authentic; as well as eclectic, capacious, and therefore cutting-edge.

In adopting the ballad, a form of written-as-or oral performance, Peretz aligned himself with European Romanticism; the ballad, as Michael Wachtel

reminds us, being its “most important poetic discovery.” The ballads of Heinrich Heine, to name but one important influence, occupied a permanent place in Peretz’s bookshelf. For Peretz, the ballad was made to order: a tale of long ago that flirted with elements of the supernatural, was told in a succinct and memorable way, and was above all a spoken narrative, punctuated and animated by dialogue. Yiddish oral lore was rich in ballads and love songs, but their existence was still a well-kept secret. So much the better, for Peretz had no desire to pass himself off as a naive folk-balladeer, any more than he would adopt the voice of an itinerant, erudite Jewish book peddler à la Mendele, or imitate the ebullient, irrepressible, ever-present, extremely talkative Mr. How-Do-You-Do (“Sholem Aleichem”). Let the reader get a whiff of European high culture; if there were something strange and surprising about the sudden shifts in cadence, rhythm, tone, and setting, not to speak of the diction and punctuation, so much the better, for in truth, the new Yiddish orality had come from “their Study House,” from outside the Jewish sphere. Lokaṭi mikol ha’oylomos yabad—positive eclecticism was the surest route to self-renewal. From one version of “Monish” to the next, Peretz played with different foreign-sounding generic labels, whether poemat (from the Polish, ca. 1887), roman-balade (1888), or balade (1892), settling finally on the most accurate, if somewhat cumbersome, tragi-komische balade (1908).

The ability to play fast and loose with different voices, high and low, male and female, human and demonic, and to do so within terse, dramatic settings, was Peretz’s singular achievement. But who should have license to tell the story? Whatever the foreign provenance, Peretz wished at least to begin within the bounds of oral tradition, where the only storyteller who spoke in rhyme was the badkhn, a semiprofessional wedding jester, whose calling card was doggerel and who aimed to please by making the audience both laugh and cry. Within the narrow confines of narrative performance in East European Jewish culture, the badkhn was “the symbolic inversion” of the maggid. And so, the first published version of “Monish” opens with the famous words (Y 1:3):

אר ויבט—מברוקים—

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You’ve heard, could be, that the world is a sea
and the fish, that’s us.
So pike and other big fish
get to swallow all they wish,
as you might guess.\(^{12}\)

Our badkhn, on native ground, uses only masculine rhymes, swallows consonants at the end of every third word, and plays to the habits of the Jewish heart with a parable of the fisherman and the worm. (The fisherman is none other than Samael, he explains, King of the Devils, and the worm is the tiniest of sexual transgressions.) “Ballad” signified modernity. The badkhn signified orality. Together, they brought the mock-heroic ballad into Yiddish literature.

We do not hear, or perhaps, do not need to hear, from the jester again. From now on, each canto features two or more characters, some comical, some serious, speaking in meter of varying length. It is a story driven not by plot (the schematic plot has already been given away); not by character (because the eponymous hero, Monish, belongs to a bygone era and is no match for the kind of seduction he is about to face)—but by voice. The version of “Monish” that Peretz self-published in 1892 is a 644-line poem punctuated throughout by clips of dialogue: a bedroom farce starring Samael and Lilith, a heartfelt conversation between mother-and-son, an internal debate between Monish’s Evil and Good Inclinations (his yeyster-tov and yeytser-hóre), and the briefest of romantic encounters. The dialogue between mother and son at the end of Canto III (lines 408-68) is designed to draw tears from the audience, while playing for laughs is the three-way conversation in Canto II atop Mount Ararat, where once upon a time God (speaking in a low-comic register) swore never again to destroy the world. Samael and Lilith, meanwhile, have taken up residence in the abandoned Ark, where we eavesdrop on their bedroom banter, in Deutschified Yiddish, as befits the nouveaux riches, until they are interrupted by a “trembly demon,” who warns them of imminent danger in a superidiomatic Polish Yiddish replete with Hebraic locutions (Y 1:11):

\begin{quote}
策ד ואכוס טור א גאוי!
ואאו ווועט דער פארשעמען
גאַן פוייל אנא לייט,
און זומען און במען.
\end{quote}

\(^{12}\) My translation.
A prodigy who grows there
will shame and hush
Lithuania, Poland
Bohemia, and Prussia.

Let him mature
Undiminished,
and, Your Majesty, you’re done for—
Finished!

Lost to you
all of Poland and Lithuania,
and say goodbye to the demons,
the whole lot of us.

He’ll pursue us with frightening hate
to the end
and bring the Messiah,
Heaven forfend! 13

Drawing simultaneously from disparate realms, Peretz mimicked various subdialects of Yiddish, playing one off against the other with hilarious results. In “Monish,” he tried to both orchestrate a chorus of male and female, old and young, this-worldly and otherworldly, Jewish and Gentile voices, and to hold them all together with a voiceover that had much to say about the irresistibly

seductive charm of the male and female human voice, whether conscious of its power or not. The balladeer alternated between “showing” and “telling.”

“Monish” was as much a work in progress as Yiddish literature itself, and no one understood this better than Peretz. Having failed to reconcile the badkhin and the balladeer, the didactic, lyric, and satiric voices in this poem, Peretz even interrupted the story just before the seduction scene to directly address his reader with a complaint about the inherent deficiencies of “our Yiddish” to adequately express romantic love and erotic desire (Canto IV, lines 469-520). But there was one thing to be said in praise of Yiddish that could not be said of any other language competing for the hearts and minds of East European Jews: it was the natural vehicle for differentiated Jewish speech and dialogue, in this world and the next, for the marketplace of voices from every station and walk of life. If Peretz did not pursue the new poetic horizons that “Monish” might have opened up, abandoning poetry for the short story, it is because he realized how much more scope there was in prose for di shtiklekh mit di pasiklekh than in verse, where dialect and narrative performance were trumped by meter. Driven by greater literary ambitions, Peretz’s choice of prose was a foregone conclusion.

This is why, once Peretz was ready to strike out on his own, with the publication of Di yidishe bibliotek (The Jewish Library, 1891-95, 1904), a literary and popular-scientific miscellany, he gave pride of place to beletristik, which meant in large measure dramatized speech, whether in the short fiction that he called novelles or in the feuilletons that he signed Der lets fun der redaktsye, The Editorial Prankster. One of his best, which appeared in Volume III, was the autobiographical farce, “Uncle Shakhne and Aunt Yakhne” (Y 2:421-30, E 171-78), subtitled, “an oysgeployderte mayse, nor far dos, an emese mayse, a story that is just foolish babble, but a true story nonetheless.” Through the feuilleton, Peretz kept up a lively and irreverent conversation with his urban and more urbane readers throughout his literary career.

From here, in rapid succession, Peretz’s small talk went in three directions. The first was Bekente bilder (Familiar Sketches, 1890), published with an introduction by Yankev Dinezon, which opened three cracks through which to look into the individual human soul. The second was his detailed, 22-part reportage of a statistical expedition through the Tomaszow Region (Y 2:119-209, E 20-84), which appeared in the second volume of Di yidishe bibliotek (1891). It was the marketplace of voices realized to absolute—and maddening—precision.

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14 Guided by standard editorial practice and New Critical norms, The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse includes the last (and lesser-known) version of “Monish,” from 1908. For the differences, see Turniansky, 216-22.


At roughly the same time, Peretz joined forces with the Hebrew writer and publisher Avraham Leib Shalkovich, aka Ben-Avigdor, to introduce the *tsiur* or *tmunah* into Hebrew fiction, the new Hebrew equivalent of the “sketch,” short, seemingly artless narratives, stories in which nothing of consequence ever happened, in keeping with the entropy, the impoverished reality, of Jewish life. They featured a narrator talking extemporaneously in the closest approximation of natural speech about something that actually happened—natural, insofar as it mimicked the literary language of speech in Russian literature.17 Peretz, in short, had come to appreciate that the representation of vernacular speech was at the cutting edge of literary realism.

**Inner Speech**

For Peretz, homo sapiens was a sentient being. Question was: Could everything a person thought be rendered in speech? Question was: If that speech was Yiddish, how far could one stretch the bounds of the spoken language?

Peretz’s formal breakthrough came in 1890 with *Bekente bilder* (Familiar Sketches), three studies in consciousness. Published by his friend and colleague Jacob Dineson as “a kleyn zhargonish bikhl, a modest Yiddish booklet” that was designed to inaugurate a series of cheap, high-quality publications, the editor urged his readers “tsu lezn mit kavone, zikh tsukukn tsu di verter un tsuleygn harts un moyekh tsu dem gantsn inhalt, to read with serious intent, to pay special attention to the words and to apply both their hearts and minds to the entire content.”18 However “familiar” these scenes might seem at first glance, and however accessible in price, their style, diction, and form were aimed at a higher class of reader. “Der meshugener batlen” (“The Mad Talmudist”), “Der meshulekh” (“The Messenger”) and “Vos heyst neshome?” (“What Is the Soul?”) were marked by sudden shifts in mood and rhythm. Divided souls, they spoke in two voices—a part spoken, part unspoken struggle with erotic desire and the presence of death; Eros and Thanatos in the shtetl.

Homo sapiens as depicted in these sketches is very much a solitary being. Here is Berl Khantshes, the “Mad Talmudist,” sitting all alone in the *besmedresh*; here is Shmarye the Messenger, braving the snow and fierce winds on the last mission of his life; and here is the “Soul-Boy,” ridiculed for always daydreaming, as he recapitulates his lonely search for a language of the soul. Peretz endows each of them with an utterly distinct Polish-Yiddish voice; the first two, through interior monologues supposedly narrated in real time, with a narrative voice-over setting the stage and marking the major transitions.

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18 [Jacob Dineson], “Eynike verter fun’im heroysegeber,” *Bekente bilder* by Leon Perets (Warsaw: Boymriter et Gonshor, 1890), 3-4. In 1894, the Warsaw publisher Yitskhok Funk put out a second edition in which each story appeared under a separate title in chapbook format.
Examining his dysfunctional self, Berl speaks exactly as if he were studying a difficult Talmudic tractate. “Es hot gemutz in mir arayn a dibek,” he says towards the beginning, a dybbuk must have entered me:

someone else, an Other who thinks for me—while I go around thinking it’s I who do the thinking. The proof is, When I have strength (every day but Mondays and Tuesdays) the Other has no power over me; and then I think even less. How is it possible for a man in this world to understand himself? What does it mean to want to understand yourself? I want to tear myself out of my body, I want to stand apart from myself, or have the Other stand apart from me. Then “he” can look at me or I—he can look at him-19

Berl is talking Talmud; he uses the discourse of Talmud study in what Jordan Finkin has called Peretz’s “meta-Talmudicity” to work through his emotional turmoil.20 His language is rich in the Hebrew-Aramaic terminology that is used by men who study rabbinic sources: “veho raye (the proof is), un beemes (and in truth), di khkire iz (the speculation is), ikh vil mikh masig zayn (I want to comprehend).” His psyche becomes a text that he subjects to intense dialectical analysis. But when Wolf the Merchant enters the study house and the two engage briefly in verbal repartee, Berl’s inchoate thoughts suddenly fix on their object of desire: Wolf’s wife, Taybele, the only woman in all of Ciechanówka who shows Berl any kindness. Hidden from Berl’s consciousness are the hereditary nature of his madness (he is named after his uncle Berl, the famous hair-splitter) and the most immediate reason for his angst. Today is Tuesday, and he hasn’t eaten a thing in two days.

Conscious of the fierce winter storm and of the sharp pains on the left side of his chest, Shmarye the messenger cannot admit to himself that he should not have gone out today. So he tries to stave off the fear of death by remembering the hard times, his long years of service as a Cantonist, a child recruit in the Tsarist army, for example. “Ba Fonyen iz a gut kheyder,” he says to himself, “there’s no better school than serving the Russians” (Y 2:33). Shmarye’s speech is peppered with Slavicisms because the Slavic outback was his school of life. Now that he has returned to the Polish provinces, he rehearses in his mind that a Polish nobleman must be addressed as jaśnie panie, “esteemed sir,” and not, in Russian, as vashe

20 On Peretz’s meta-Talmudicity, see Jordan D. Finkin, A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 128.
visoko blagorodye, “your excellency.” Yet despite his best effort to stay the mental course, the piece of cheese that the merchant’s wife gave him yesterday reminds him of his own late wife, Shprintse, and of the time he almost choked to death in the besmedresh when she locked him out of the house (Y 2:33-34).

It was winter, just before daybreak. He had been relieved by the day watchman, Hayim Yonah—may the Kingdom of heaven be his!—and Shmarye, thoroughly chilled, his arms and legs blocks of ice, had come home. He had knocked on the door and his wife had shouted at him from the bed:

“May you fall through the ground! I thought it wouldn’t be you returning but your ghost!”

Oho! She had been angry at him ever since yesterday. He actually couldn’t remember what had happened yesterday, but there must have been something.

“Shut your mouth and open the door!” he had shouted.

“I’ll split your skull!” he retorted.

“Let me in!”

“May you fall through the ground!” she repeated.21

That near-death encounter also occurred in the dead of winter, when he was replaced by Hayim Yonah, the watchman who is no longer among the living. Shprintse used every curse in her lexicon to wish him dead, although afterwards, when they brought him home half-dead, she wept bitter tears. Maybe he ought to stop at the inn and warm up a bit before delivering the contract and the money? And just before he loses consciousness, he imagines his four children smothering him with kisses.

Go easy, dear children—easy, now. Don’t hug me so hard! I’m no longer a young man—I’m headed into my eighties. Go easy! You’re strangling me; go easy, my children. My bones are old. Careful! There’s money in that pocket: they entrust me with money, thank God! Enough, children—enough.\(^{22}\)

Shmarye is lulled into eternal sleep just as the diminutive “kinderlekh” and the homey, Slavic sounds of “volne, loosely,” and “dishet, chokes,” grab hold of his fading consciousness. Through the reverie of his children, he can also admit to consciousness his true age: for an eighty-year-old to undertake such a hazardous mission was nothing less than suicidal.

“What Is the Soul?” subtitled “a tale of youth,” begins with the death of the speaker’s father, whose soul must surely have flown straight up to heaven, and ends with him being granted a new soul, in the person of Gitele, the love of his life. Structuring each of its fifteen short chapters is a dialogue or memorable speech, which turns this mini-Bildungsroman into an anatomy of language through the deconstruction of a single word, neshome, soul. Although “What Is the Soul?” has not fared well with academic readers—both Ken Frieden and Marc Caplan consider it a failure\(^{23}\)—Ruth Wisse did well, in my judgment, to commission a new translation for her I. L. Peretz Reader (E 93-104). This story reminds us that language, speech and dialogue were for Peretz a means of transcending observable reality as much as they were a means of decomposing that reality. This story “works,” because the adult narrator has keen linguistic recall; because through formal and informal instruction, he learns to mediate the ruins of his mind and the corpses in his heart, the corporeal and the spiritual, Eros and Thanatos. “Un er flegt zogn, he used to say” he recalls the brutal words of Zorach Pinch, his sadistic Talmud teacher from the age of fourteen (Y 2: 41, E 94),

> “יוֹוָאַ נְיִשְׁט, יוֹוָאַ נְיִשְׁט אוּמְזֶיסִיט! אָאָ קָבַּר דָאַר דַּיִי גַּוָּא! רַאָד שֶאַדְט דְּרִי, דַּי דָי, וּאָרֶעַס אַיִן קָבַּר ווֹעל מֶבְּלַגַּו ווּיִיָּנְיעֵר אַי עֶסְג?“

> “Don’t cry over nothing! I only pinch your body! What harm can it do if the worms in the grave will have less to eat?”

What the fourteen-year-old discovers, however, is that even a sadist like his teacher of elementary Talmud can speak in more than one voice. “He taught with the harsh, coarse, and angry voice that he used when speaking to his wife. But when he told stories, he spoke in the same soft, small voice that he used in talking to his ‘dear soul’ [his daughter] Shprintse” (Y 2: 42, E 95).

Thankfully, our impressionable young hero soon advances to a new Talmud teacher, Reb Yoyzl, renowned as a healer, preacher, shofar blower, and

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\(^{22}\) Ibid., 185, revised.

employee of a great Hasidic rabbi. So doing, he moves from the hortatory, epigrammatic, cutting style of Zorach Pinch to the iterative, high rhetorical style of Reb Yoyzl, whose every third word derives from the Hebrew-Aramaic component of Yiddish (Y 2:47, E 99 revised):

“But even among us Jews, not all souls are the same. There are coarse, ordinary souls like Zorach Pinch. Your tutor, the freethinker, for example, has a soul like the rebellious Korah. Then there are great souls that come from the Hidden Enclave, just beneath the Throne of Glory. There are very great and elevated souls that may be compared to the most refined flour.”

Reb Yoyzl, who employs an allusive and elusive language, who negotiates the map of heaven and can identify from a plethora of souls precisely which ones emanate from the Hidden Enclave that lies just beneath the Throne of Glory, this man must be a joy to have as a teacher and moral guide.

Meanwhile, back on earth, many questions still remain unanswered. Can Jews and Christian Poles, for example, find a common language, even if they’re speaking Polish? Once, when ice skating behind the town, our narrator decides to do some fieldwork among the local population to determine how it was that Gentile boys also had a dent above their upper lips, the same as Jews did. So he asks Jaszek in Polish, “Ty także masz duszę? Do you also have a soul?” To which Jaszek replies: A tobie, pśie dusza, co do tego? And you, you dog’s soul, what’s it to you?” (Y 43, E 96).

Failing to bridge that divide, our narrator leaves the most difficult question for last: is there a language of the soul that can bridge the abyss between male and female? Yes there is, in plain Yiddish, and it’s the language of love. “Ven di mame, oleha hasholem, hot gelebt,” Gitele explains to him one day, “hot der tate shtendik gezogt, az iz iz zayn neshome, when my mother, may she rest in peace, was alive, my father always said that she was his soul” (Y 2: 52, E 103), whereupon—

I don’t know what came over me, but at that moment I clasped her hand and said, trembling, “Gitele, would you be my soul?”

She answered very softly, “Yes!” (E 104)
In *Bekente bilder*, Peretz demonstrated his ability to render psychic life through inner speech. To accomplish this, he replaced plot with optimally favorable situations and sites for speech and dialogue. Speech is the plot. The tension between the spoken and unspoken, between self-articulation and the unconscious, is key to the structure of the story. The vernacular setting delivers the social message. What was the *besmedresh* if not the living academy of Jewish civilization, whether on the pages of the Talmud as studied out loud or within the feverish mind of the starving young scholar? When Berl Khantshes finally confronts his own visage in the wash basin, he contemplates suicide as the only way out. The last mission of an elderly malnourished messenger suffering from heart disease turns a wintry night into a rehearsal of his most vivid and voluble confrontations with death. Contrariwise, the home, the cheder, the study house, the frozen pond just outside of town become sites in which a sensitive boy might explore speech and dialogue as routes to self-transcendence. Someone who keeps asking everyone he knows, “What is the soul?” will eventually find the answer—not in heaven, not in sacred texts, but through his elective affinity to someone of the opposite sex. In this rare reprieve from the dreadful here-and-now, Peretz reimagined his childhood and youth as an idealistic journey through speech.

Peretz’s *Bekente bilder* were the first sorties into inner speech ever attempted in Yiddish, and his first sustained use of dialogue to open a crack through which to look into each individual human soul. As first-person narrative they were fundamentally different from their immediate precursor in Yiddish fiction, Abramovitsh’s allegorical novel *Di klyatshe* (The Mare, 1873; trans. 1886), which Peretz acknowledged having read in Polish translation.24 Subtitled “The Writings of Yisrolik the Madman,” *The Mare* were writings that Mendele purportedly received in such a chaotic state that he was obliged to “put her into shape, divided her into chapters, and gave each chapter a fitting title—a drudgery for which some people would affix their names to a manuscript and call themselves authors.”25 In style, diction and structure, therefore, Yisrolik’s published “writings” were at a remove from the labyrinth of the deranged author’s mind. *The Mare* was composed not so much of vernacular speech and dialogue as of formal soliloquies, elaborate debates, and political-philosophical symposia among several talking heads. It was Abramovitsh at his most modern (i.e., pessimistic), linguistically normative, and declarative.26 Compare that to the solipsism of Peretz’s mad Talmudist, speaking in real time, in a study house like any other, about nothing more exalted than his divided self and his thwarted desire. Where Peretz did have something significant to learn from Abramovitsh was in the representation of Yiddish as group speech.

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24 Frieden, “Psychological Depth in I. L. Peretz’ *Familiar Scenes*,” 146-47.
Shtetlspeak

Yiddish was the lingua franca of the Belorussian-Polish-Ukrainian market towns called shtetleh, a socially and linguistically differentiated space that was memorialized—and satirized—by Sholem-Yankel Abramovitsh. Peretz’s ability to hear and register the speech of the shtetl owed as much to Abramovitsh as to his own ability to endow each member of the shtetl marketplace—male and female, young and old, sane and insane—with a distinct voice. But beware a shtetl that spoke with one voice. Since the famous opening scene of Abramovitsh’s Dos kleyn menshele (The Little Man, 1864, 1879), the marketplace made the shtetl out to be a place of obscene intimacy populated by unruly Jews talking all at once, whether in Tsviatshits (Hypocritsville), Tuneyadve (Idlersville), or Kapstansk (Beggarsburgh).27 Recording the banality and venality of their speech was the narrator, an insider-outsider, whose own moral credentials were called into question by his very ability to join in their banter, and to decode it. Such vernacularity defied all civilizational norms.

“Ciechanówka,” a fictional place name probably based on the real Polish town of Ciechanów,28 was Peretz’s stand-in for a provincial backwater, occupied by many irascible, excitable and extremely talkative Jews. In “Reb Berl” (1890; Y 2:204-9), they congregate in redlek, circles, out on the street, exactly as they do in Abramovitsh’s fictional geography.29 Going from one group to another, the narrator, a stranger in town, an insider-outsider much like Mr. Mendele, can learn nothing substantive from their redundant, circular, formulaic, and purely emotive speech about the talk of the town, the eponymous Reb Berl, who lies at death’s door. Exactly on cue, the narrator records the standard repartee of Ciechanówka, with its expletive “Eh!”, its all-purpose “Fhi! Fhi!” and “Fhi, fhi fhi!” and its exclamatory “U-va, u-va!” (Y 2:205-6, 207). Even at story’s end, there is nothing to be learned from the rabbi’s two-hour long eulogy, expounding on the verse (from Jer. 22:10), Weep rather for him who is leaving, about the deceased. In this shtetl, orality—and learned oratory—have run aground, barring the very possibility of meaningful dialogue. One fact we do learn, however, is that Reb Berl was a Kotsker Hasid, which situates Peretz’s shtetl within the heartland of Hasidism, dominated by men who spend much of their time drinking, shmoozing, and praying among their fellow believers, and whose heavily Hebraicized, remarkably compressed, allusive, wildly disjointed speech represents a distinct subdialect. Only a reader schooled in the same core curriculum can possibly decipher the cryptic punchline (a shtikl mit a pasikl) of

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28 Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, personal communication.
29 “Reb Berl,” first published in Vol. 1 of Di yidishes bibliotek, was eventually appended to the end of the “Bilder fun a provints-rayze,” where it clearly does not belong. Ruth Wisse wisely excluded it from The I. L. Peretz Reader.
the stranger’s sojourn in town. The narrator overhears a debate between Reb Yoyne, his landlord, and a young Talmudist over the dispensation of a pension to Reb Berl’s widowed sister. “—Shoyte! Un ‘ve-odor?’” (Y: 2:209) says the young scholar, which, once decoded, means: if he has willed her sixty rubles a year at a rate of five per month, what is to be done in a leap year when there are two months of Adar in the Jewish calendar? Peretz’s love of dialogue, by contrast, his dedication to the poetics of small talk, gave his shtetl folk free rein to speak their minds with as little intervention as possible. Where the chosen subject was one Reb Berl, a paragon of fake virtue, the best strategy was to let them hoist themselves on their own petard.

Peretz fashioned his beletristik out of bilder, mere scenes and sketches. Ideally, therefore, small talk began at home, with a narrator who briefly set the domestic stage, then allowed his characters to speak. Scene One: Mendl the water carrier returns home to his wife Sarah with full buckets and empty pockets. Following their brief dialogue, when the four starving children wake up, demanding food, Mendl mines his religious imagination to turn their hunger into a special fast day (“The Fast Day,” 1890). Scene Two: A tableau of a dying klezmer musician taking leave of his wife and sons (“A Musician’s Death,” 1891). Scene Three: A mother of the old school obsessed with sexual purity browbeats her daughter into submission and destroys the marital bliss of the young couple (“The Destroyed Sabbath,” 1892). Scene Four: From Shmarye the Messenger’s bittersweet recollections of his Shprintse comes “A kas fun a yidene” (A Woman’s Anger, 1893), an explosive scene from a Jewish marriage in which husband and wife inhabit disparate worlds and answer to a different language. Scenes Five and Six: Following the Soul-Boy’s discovery of a soul-mate comes the love talk between Hayim the Porter and his wife Khane in “Sholem-bayis” (Domestic Harmony, 1891) and between Trayne and her husband the teacher, who occupy the fourth bed “In kelpershtub” (In the Basement Apartment, 1893). Yiddish at its most natural—and laconic—is a language of intimacy and love. Leaving no stone unturned, Peretz’s narrator pursued the possibility of dialogue across gender, class, generational, ethnic, and faith-based fault lines.

Now supposing the narrator were someone who had taken up residence in “their study house” and had quickly adopted the speech, vocabulary, and

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worldview of the secular world. When that someone returned home, if only on a brief humanitarian mission—were he to go slumming, as it were, among the natives—how estranged would he feel? How would their speech, which only yesterday had been his own, register in his psyche? This is the background for the statistical expedition of the Tomaszow region that Leon Perek undertook in 1890 with a borrowed horse and buggy and in the company of his childhood friend Yeshaye Margolis, tasked with documenting the appalling conditions under which his coreligionists were living.\(^{31}\) From the moment he arrived, the distance between Warsaw and “the provinces” appeared to him to be as from here to the moon. It was the push-and-pull between the narrator and his seemingly benighted subjects that made Peretz’s *“Bilder fun a provints-rayze, Scenes from a Provincial Journey,”* (Y 2:117-91; E 20-84) a twenty-two-part sequence that appeared in the second volume of *Di yidishe bibliotek,* different from any other “bilder” he had written before, or would ever write again.\(^{32}\)

The Prologue is written in the voice of an intellectual, a true citizen of Europe, who stands at a vast remove from the subject at hand. In the same breath he speaks of “der ruekh,” the spirit (from the Hebraic component of Yiddish) and “the Zeitgeist,” in these, the fading years of “the nineteenth century,” and expounds on how “di astronomye barekhnt frier yede like-khame, like-levone,” astronomy predicts each solar and lunar eclipse, while [social] psychology can make no such claim (Y 2:119, E 20). If this hybrid, highfalutin diction were to be the narrator’s linguistic medium, then he could hardly hope to communicate with the shtetl-folk; and indeed, the market women from Łoszczyce (Lashtshev), his third stop, are quick to size him up as just another busybody Germanizer, “a Gentile who speaks Yiddish” (Y 2:161, E 52 ). The stylistic baseline of his speech, no less than his stylish apparel, make him a total outsider.\(^{33}\)

“Scenes from a Provincial Journey” is a transcript of almost unrelieved human misery. Since the face of that misery is everywhere the same and there is no way to separate the mind-numbing statistics from the unending Jewish litany, what distinguishes one shtetl from another, one site from another, one informant from another, is the specific genre and manner of speech: whether it is a chorus of voices or a monologue; whether the speaker is a man or a woman, an adult or a child, a person-on-the-street or a self-styled raconteur, someone learned or someone simple; and whether this speech is censored or not. On his first stop, the town of Tyszowce (Tishevits), the shrayber-statistician enjoys the privileged vantage point of a *roye veeyno nire,* someone who can see the market women without himself being seen (Y 2:121, E 21), and thus is privy to a transcript not meant for his ears. In most settings, he simply records, pencil in hand, what is being said to him; sometimes he cannot contain his frustration and throws in a few caustic words. From the start of the expedition, however, the other voices

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32 Translated by Milton Himmelfarb as “Impressions of a Journey through the Tomaszow Region,” which includes “The Pond,” added to the sequence in 1904.

take over, and as they do, the ideological, social, and psychological barriers between him and the shtetl-folk begin to break down. These are voices of a civilization gone mad, and two-thirds into his itinerary, he too feels himself to be on the verge of a mental breakdown.

Thus the “Scenes from a Provincial Journey” invite a centrifugal reading, in which the narrator’s psychic state is echoed in what Marc Caplan calls “the fragmentation of speech,” a speech which Caplan further characterizes as “archaic regionalism.”34 But this is the same Yiddish dialect that Peretz championed in his correspondence with Sholem Aleichem only two years before, no more regional than Congress Poland as a whole, and only archaic insofar as it was no longer spoken by the urban and secular Yiddish audience that Peretz was trying to woo in the pages of Di yidishe bibliotek. “Scenes from a Provincial Journey” also invite a centripetal reading, which discerns in the dialogue of both market women and menfolk alike a “compressed intimacy” and “cultural intricacy” that set the bar of Judaic literacy very high.35 For all that the narrator imagines himself going mad, as the chorus of intractable voices intrude upon his consciousness the linguistic divide between the citified visitor and the shtetl-folk also narrows, allowing him to listen more closely and compassionately to what they are saying. Instead of seeing the small-town Jew as a “reactionary caricature of the earlier Jewish reformers,” Peretz’s traveler invites us to see, in the words of Ruth Wisse, “a civilized man or woman delicately balancing faith and doubt—or rather, faiths and doubts—not unlike his own.”36

If the task of a shrayber was to record (farshraybn) statistics, then his scientific-modernizing mission was doomed. But if the real challenge for a shrayber was to record the orality of the Polish-Jewish marketplace, which meant not only to register the depths of his subjects’ despair and their desperate hopes but also to decode their ongoing struggle between faith and doubt, even while maintaining the loose, associative flow of his own distinctively Polish-Yiddish voice, then the small talk of I. L. Peretz now spoke for the entire marketplace, group-by-embattled-group, soul-by-grieving-soul.

All in the Family

Of all the venues for Peretz’s dialogical imagination, none was more vital—and tenuous—than the Yiddish press. Even a heavily censored paper was better than none. For Peretz, as for the Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia as a whole, January 5, 1899 marked the dawning of a new age, for on that date there appeared a biweekly, then weekly, newspaper under Zionist auspices with a global-Jewish reach and a program to foster national dialogue. Published in Krakow to break the logjam of tsarist censorship, but with its editorial offices in Warsaw, Der yid was a superbly edited and democratic forum, which provided a

34 Ibid., 70.
35 Wisse, Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture, 21.
36 Ibid., 25.
home for both veteran and aspiring Yiddish writers across a remarkably broad political spectrum.  

For Peretz, it was a dream come true. Not only was Der yid a natural home for his neo-Hasidic tales, monologues, and “conversations” (“If Not Higher,” “Between Two Mountains,” “Transmigration of a Melody,” “A Conversation,” 1900; “He of Blessed Memory and his Disciples,” 1901; “The Missing Melody,” 1902), which spoke of unifying heaven and earth, spirit and flesh; for his first sortie into the literary fairy tale, the messianic fantasy “Dray khupes” (Three Canopies, 1901), but also gave free rein to the polemical and topical sides of Peretz, master nonpareil of the feuilleton.

It was as if we were back on the statistical expedition, only now the informants came to him, instead of him having to trek from town to town by horse and buggy; and rather than draw on a tiny circumference, his bailiwick now consisted of Greater Ashkenaz, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from Yekaterinoslav to London, from Jerusalem to Buenos Aires. A regular feature of the paper was Mordecai Spektor’s column “Shtet un shtetlekh,” Cities and Towns, a composite portrait of Jewish communal life gathered from correspondents across the country—until the day that Spektor defected from Der yid to join a rival paper and the entrepreneurial young editor, Joseph Luria, turned the column over to Peretz. Peretz wasted no time setting a new tone and establishing a new persona, signing himself Di bin, the bee that produces honey but can also deliver a painful sting (Y 8:165). For the next eight months, May–December 1902, without missing a single week, Peretz emerged on the pages of Der yid as a fearless, tireless, outrageously funny, and all-seeing critic and commentator of Jewish life.  

Nothing was sacred; no one was spared. Peretz was an equal-opportunity satirist and parodist, the target of his parody extending even to himself.

Luria’s timing was just right, because Peretz’s first posting (8:161-65) came as Jews everywhere were celebrating Passover, which was the hook for him to repackage two letters, one from Grodno and the other from Łódź, into two sets of Four Questions from the Haggadah, as it were, of Jewish communal graft and cruelty, to which the answer was one and the same: “Avodim hoyinu,” We were slaves—and slaves we do remain. In other words, the letters received from readers and the news items gleaned from other newspapers in Hebrew, Polish, and Russian, were but grist for the mill. With the innate ability of a honeybee, Peretz extrapolated disparate Jewish voices from the welter of news items and local correspondence, turning them into a wildly associative, mordantly funny, superidiomatic, intra-Jewish dialogue.

Each column was a pastiche of quotations and dramatized speech. Once before, in Fishke the Lame (1888), Abramovitch had found the authentic speech of the eponymous hero, an abject professional pauper, to be so halting, so defective and primitive, that no unschooled reader could possibly decipher it. So

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he delegated “Mendele” to normalize and harmonize Fishke’s lengthy monologue of woe (chs. 13-17). Peretz, by analogy, deemed the flow of letters from the readers of his column to be written in a style so artificial, disingenuous, pompous, and linguistically hybrid, that no sane reader could possibly learn anything useful from them. The correspondents’ use of loshn-koydesh, Hebrew-Aramaic, was as parasitic as their use of multisyllabic Russian loanwords was laughable (Letter 1, Y 8:161). The piles of newspapers in Hebrew, Polish, and Russian from across the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires weren’t any better, because their task was to obfuscate, sensationalize, or worse yet, prettify, the true face of Jewish reality (see, for example, Letter 2). In contrast to Abramovitch’s impulse to normalize, Peretz’s countermeasure was to vernacularize his textual source material, the better to demonstrate that only through Yiddish could one wrest meaningful dialogue out of this flood of banality and bad faith. “Eyder meshiekh vet kumen,” he free-associated, citing an unknown source, “vet fun der zhargonisher literatur keyn zeykher ništ blaybn; oder goyish, oder loshn-koydesh—azoy zogt men! Before the Messiah comes—so they say—nothing will remain of a literature in Yiddish; only in Goyish, or the Holy Tongue!” (Letter 2, Y 8:167) But until the coming of the Messiah, there was still plenty of time to wreak havoc.

Peretz’s columns gained such notoriety and garnered so many letters of protest that he felt obliged—and as pleased as Punch—to dedicate an entire Letter (#15) to retractions and denials. “Faynshreyber,” the columnist pointed out with pride, “bakumen keyn hakhshoses, keyn protestn ništ, writers who whitewash never have to contend with denials and protests” (8:267); still, he marveled at all the trouble these “Protestants” went to in order to call his attention to the most trivial mistakes (8:268). (“Protestants” was Peretz’s gleeful pun on those-who-protest.) True to form, Peretz presented his disgruntled readers as if they were literally talking back at him. The most formidable was an extremely dapper dayyan, rabbinical judge, from Warsaw, who appeared at the editorial offices to protest an earlier exposé of the Kosher-for-Passover industry. Di bin, no slouch when it came to the fine points of halachic argumentation, gave as good as he got; when the debate reached its rhetorical crescendo the dayyan burst out, in exasperation (8:272):

א! איזערע אס IList dub רעב רעב איין דרייקום, איך רעתן אלילן היסלאַך איין הייש איזן! 
ביז רעられます אל Mongot . . . א רע דיארפ איין טופל. . . איין איין מוענoidal, מוע מוע—

(Y272)

Yes, of course! This is your pet peeve! You love rabbis and zaddikim who chop their own wood and heat [ovens] at [the hovel of] poor widows . . . [But] a rabbi also has to eat . . . and when you want to eat, you must [demand payment for your services] —

Although the dayyan professed to hate Yiddish and read only the Hebrew and Russian periodical press, he hadn’t passed up Peretz’s neo-Hasidic tale, “If Not Higher” (Y 4:98-102, E:178-81) when it first appeared in the January 1900 issue
of Der yid. So here was a card-carrying member of Polish Orthodoxy who parroted Peretz’s utterance in order to parry the secular humanistic politics of Yiddish. Why, indeed, should men of the cloth be held to an impossibly high standard? By admitting parody and self-parody into his popular column, however, Peretz affirmed the ethical superiority of secular humanism over all other contenders.

The “Cities and Towns” column became Peretz’s writerly school in a number of important subjects, from reader response to the present state of spoken Yiddish. How was Yiddish literature being received by those whom it had written off as dead? What was the true face of Polish Hasidism? (The “real” Bialer rebbe makes a cameo appearance in Letter 6, where he cuts an ugly figure.) How rapid was the pace of linguistic assimilation across the length and breadth of Yiddishland? Who still spoke Yiddish in the Polish metropolis? The column tested Peretz’s ability to impersonate and mediate all sectors of the Jewish Street. Allowing his readers to talk back helped him hone his own synthetic-speakerly style. Giving the natives their day in court turned a motley of readers into a national debating society.

Peretz found his ideal interlocutor in Grandmother Yakhne, who hadn’t been heard from since 1895. Last time, she and her husband Shakhne spoke with one voice. Now poor Shakhne is too old and sick to travel, so it is up to Yakhne to make a special trip to Warsaw, for the sole purpose, it seems, of giving her uppity nephew a good tongue-lashing. In Letter 18 (Y 8:289-98), which also appeared under separate cover (Y 8:415-24), Peretz gives her center stage. Addressing her nephew with such terms of endearment as “kosher-ketsele, futer-fesele, lebn mayns, binele and binenyu—kosher-kitty, coverlet, my life, little bee, tiny little bee,” he returns her affection by describing Aunt Yakhne as someone who combines “a sakh libshaft, a kleyn bisl khoyzek, much love, with some mockery thrown in” (8: 416). More than any female character in Peretz’s oeuvre (with the possible exception of the rabbi of Skul’s widow [Y 2:166-69; E 56-58], who quoted her husband’s oral lore), Yakhne’s speech is a trove of proverbial expressions, which bespeak both deep faith and bitter life experience:

(416)

Today’s God is the same as yesterday’s and tomorrow’s.

א קרמא איז זוי איז איז. . . דויטן איזי לייבן ביצי ייעורט איזענשריפות. (423)

A store is like a nursemaid. She gives milk until she becomes all shriveled up.

דעלט מאטט פסולים. דער מונערא איז איז איז איז טראışı ייטר­סנט בישט. (419)

Poverty breeds a lot of garbage. Hunger doesn’t bring out the noble side.
Raised on a strict diet of Jewish homily and exegesis, she can also throw in a proverb from classical sources (from Abraham Ibn Ezra on Gen. 9:18), “A sakh mayse oves yarshu bonim, [I can show you] many [instances of] how the deeds of the fathers devolved onto their children.” Her agenda is much the same as the Warsaw dayyan’s, to upbraid the influential Yiddish columnist for making rabbis and Hasidic rebbes the main targets of his satire, although she does admit that there's none like her nephew to deliver chastisement. “Shtrofreyd zogn—konstu, rebuke is something you sure know how to do! (8:418).

“So what do you believe in?” she asks her nephew repeatedly, to which he finally replies, “Ikh gleyb in yener zayt fun der zakh, I believe in the other side of the issue” (8:420). The rationale for staging these dialogues, debates and rebuttals is to keep the reader guessing. For every argument there is a counter-argument. For every piece of received wisdom there is cause for skepticism and disbelief. Whenever Yakhne is about to get the upper hand, The Bee interrupts to ask about her ornate, old-fashioned costume: the shternnikhl, the gold-embroidered brustnikh, the resplendent pearl-and-coral necklace, and the locket, each described in great detail. Under her nephew’s scrutiny, Yakhne is forced to admit that all these items are fake, only not for the reasons that her nephew suspects. One by one, Aunt Yakhne matter-of-factly explains, these precious items were hocked to pay for another exigency or family emergency. Behind the façade, therefore, lie nobility and self-sacrifice, not fakery and show. They cannot be brought as evidence that Polish Judaism itself is a sham. The agnostic and skeptic has come up short.

Before taking her leave, Yakhne says how much she doesn’t envy her nephew his muckraking job, but with tongue-in-cheek, he wraps things up by invoking a rabbinic maxim (from Tractate Semachot, chap. 8): “Harbey shlukhim lamokem—afile a bin! There are many messengers to the Lord—even a Bee!” (8:424). So it’s all in the family—the family of Polish Jewry; those family members who still partake of the conversation. So long as it lasted, the most lively, irreverent, eclectic, and Jewishly-engaged conversation in Yiddishland was a weekly column that covered the beat of “Cities and Towns.”

When recalling his visits to the locked library of foreign books in Zamość, Peretz neglected to mention what additional lessons he had learned over the course of his career. Transcribing and decoding live speech and dialogue had taught him that dialogue was disagreement, or makhloynes, learned debate, the most basic habit of the Jewish heart since at least Mishnaic times. The press review of Jewish “Cities and Towns” was animated from the start by Peretz’s exposé—and theatrical display—of Jewish dissent, disagreement, and strikes. Letter 3, for example, began in a mock-reverential tone, with an invocation of a prelapsarian age, when all East European Jewish communities supposedly lived shtil-misnagdish, adhering quietly to a single and sober rabbinic ethos (8:173). Even the storm wrought by the early Hasidim, then by the Maskilim, was a mere flash in the pan, and peace and tranquility would have descended upon the House of Israel once again, were it not for those feisty young Zionists, who just had to stir things up again. Thank God that here in Warsaw, the Bee assured his readers
by quoting a rabbinic maxim (from Yoma 38b), “ein malkhus noga’as baḥavertah—yedes shtryaml geyt zikh zayn veg, one kingdom does not interfere with the other—each Hasidic dynasty goes its own merry way” (8:176). In Letter 5, the Bee pulled out all the stops, with a farcical overview of all the strike activity on the Jewish street, more symbolic than real, and none involving the urban proletariat, prefaced with a review of the “literature” on the subject, from Moses who had stood up to Pharaoh in Egypt to the Rabbi of Tishevitz who, as described by the Yiddish writer Peretz in his “Travel Pictures,” refused to adjudicate any halachic matter or supervise any local election unless he were given a raise (8:188). By the sheer energy, chutzpah, compressed intimacy, and cultural intricacy of his written-as-spoken prose, Peretz created a new sovereign space for Yiddish and its secular literature, one that embraced all regions, all competing ideologies, parties, and factions, with but one proviso, that “in vikuekh tsvishn moykhes un hertser darfn zikh di grobe hent nisht araynimishn, in the internal debate among [Jewish] minds and hearts, let no bullies mix in,” by which he meant explicitly the anti-Semitic Polish-language press (8:178).

Of all of Peretz’s aesthetic, ideological, and pedagogical projects, then, none was more sustained and sustaining than the dialogical. In the course of fourteen years, from 1888-1902, he went from poetry to prose, from inner speech (both spoken and unspoken) to group speech, the same everywhere; from the coarse speech of those who labored on earth to the sublime speech of those who negotiated the heavens; and from the static, entropic bILD to the mercurial, carnivalesque, and ever-topicual feuilleton. Then he branched out into drama, and took the future with him.

From Small Talk to Jewspeak

In Warsaw, Peretz became an opera buff, and attending the opera dramatically expanded his thematic and generic range. Wagner’s Tannhäuser inspired Peretz to write “Mesires nefesh” (Devotion Without End, 1904), his most perfectly realized romance, and Wagner’s concept of total theater fed Peretz’s ambitions to produce a theatrical spectacle that would combine word, music, dance, sound, and light.39 (“Their” study house still had much to teach the insular Jewish world.) The result was Bay nakht oyfn altn mark (A Night in the Old Marketplace, 1907-14), Peretz’s most spectacularly innovative work.40 The play can most profitably be read as a libretto rather than a script, and the first edition (Warsaw, 1907) is especially rich in musical notation, some of which was included in the Halkin translation that first appeared in Prooftexts (January

1992) and was later appended to the revised edition of the *I. L. Peretz Reader*. As in opera, the musical score adds an overlay of meaning to the lyrics, which is what Peretz had in mind when he created the set design and arranged his huge cast of characters into distinct choral arrangements: Souls from Purgatory, The Dead, Shopkeepers, Circle of Girls, Hasidim, and so on. When the curtain rises on an archetypical Polish shtetl, the two foundational religions, Judaism and Christianity, face off against one another on opposite sides of the stage, the Catholic church boasting two towers, one with a bell and one with a gold cross, and the old shul, most of its windows broken, with a weathervane in the form of a tin rooster atop “its heavy, oddly misshapen roof” (E 365). The old synagogue (stage left) directly faces the tavern (stage right), with its motto, “To the Last Drop!,” spelled out in little lightbulbs; the study house (stage left), standing next to a ruin, faces opposite a pharmacy (stage right) identified by the shingle of a barber-surgeon and boasting a new second story with large windows and a balcony that command a view of the market. Atypically, an idolatrous, hermaphrodite idol stands guard in the middle. The stage, in short, is set for a *makhloykes*, a millennial-old and millenarian debate, even before the first word is uttered and the first sound is heard.

This debate is conducted, as befits opera, entirely in rhyme, and because it is conducted in rhyme, the impresario and stage manager—aft the Director, Narrator, Stage Manager, and Poet are consigned to the sidelines and the loquacious Wanderer falls asleep on stage—will be that master of doggerel first encountered in the opening of *Monish*, the one who makes you laugh and cry, the wedding jester. He, in turn, will orchestrate a total experience, combining the speech play of boys and girls, with their word games, alphabet rhymes, counting-out rhymes, parodic and scatological songs; the child’s recitation of the *Shma*; the singsong and diction of *lernen*, adult Talmud study; the mystical midnight ritual of mourning for the Destruction; a woman’s incantations to ward off the evil eye; political slogans—all this to the accompaniment of appropriate sound effects: the ringing of church bells, the blasts of a shofar, klezmer music, the blowing of a whistle, the crowing of a rooster. How is the audience supposed to make sense of this cacophony? Not with the help of dramatic dialogue. True dialogue, where one character responds directly to another, happens hardly at all, except in Act IV, when the Jester tries to rally the dead.41 Rather, what drives the elusive and allusive plot and forges some connection among the characters are the rhyming couplets internal to a character’s speech, augmented by the startling rhymes that link one’s character’s speech with another’s. Peretz’s huge cast of characters interact both orally and aurally, and one offsets the other.

Here is how it works. Act I opens with young voices chanting in the study house (stage left), “*Haney miley—a mukes-eyts!*” followed in rapid succession by a hoarse voice from the tavern (stage right) shouting, “*Trink—podlets!*” a loud voice from the balcony (stage right) shouting across the marketplace to the public

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meeting, “S’a ayzer gezets!” to which a shopkeeper responds angrily from the street below, “Hets dem oylem, hets!” (Y lines 183-86). Doing the best he can to preserve the rhyme, the English translator, Hillel Halkin, breaks them up into groups of two (E 374):

A YOUNG VOICE FROM THE STUDY HOUSE:

...If she’s a mukas ets, the rabbis think...

A HOARSE VOICE FROM THE TAVERN:

Drink, you bastard, drink!

A LOUD VOICE FROM THE BALCONY:

There’s no two ways about it!

A SHOPKEEPER CALLING UP FROM BELOW:

You still don’t have to shout it!

Had Peretz abandoned the proletarian struggle? The workers who are meeting on the second-floor balcony certainly have not. Was Peretz advocating a return to “our” house of study? Perhaps not, if yeshiva students were still poring over the racier parts of the Talmud, which discussed in vivid detail how a virgin falling from a roof onto a protruding piece of wood could have her hymen broken. Was he siding with the merchant class, which viewed all ideological warfare as being bad for the Jews? It is no more possible to identify the author with any one voice emanating from the old marketplace than it is for the Jester, having just emerged from a state of spiritual and psychic collapse, to find the word “for changing, for remaking everything” (Y line 219, E 376). That his search is doomed is evident the moment he capitulates to a character named Emets, Someone, the libido personified. Someone’s Deutschified speech is doggerel of the worst kind; it is speech stripped of all cultural resonance, stripped even of name, bespeaking nothing but raw desire.

ליפן זומ קוס, ליפן זומ קוס!
גאָר נישט פרצט! ווי גאָר נישט וייס!
(Y371-72)

Your lips are to kiss!
Don’t ask—I don’t want to know! (E383)

Given Someone’s energy and virility, it is the hedonistic, drunken voices emanating from the tavern that pose the greatest existential threat.

What then is the function of rhyme and what cultural work does it perform? The echo effect of four different sets of voices sharing the same rhyme

42 B. Ketubot 11a-b; lit. a woodstruck woman; a virgin who was accidentally deflowered.
creates something akin to harmonic orchestration. The play’s aurality blends the manifold layers of Jewish civilization, from the words of the prophets and the travails of Job to study house debate; from love songs and children’s ditties to slogans and swear words, into one polyphonic sound. The play’s orality, however, cuts in the opposite direction, because by parsing each and every utterance and tracing its etymology, something that Khone Shmeruk accomplished for his critical edition of the play, the silent reader and, someday, the live audience is primed to experience a profoundly dissonant, deliberately jarring choral performance. Peretz is not merely playing fast and loose with the different components of the Yiddish language—the Hebraic, Germanic, and the Slavic—the learned locution of a mukes-eyts with podlets (scoundrel), a Slavic swear word; the High German noun gezets (law, rule) with the verb hets (incite). Through the jarring semantic juxtaposition of textual study, drunken revelry, and political sloganeering, he is letting one cancel out the other. Absent real dialogue, and by turning rhyme into clashing force fields, Peretz radically levels all aspirations and conflicts, turning *A Night in the Old Marketplace* into a parodic carnival presided over by a half-crazed Jester.

For all that the Jester alone plays in every act, reacting to every group that appears, or that he orders to appear, in the marketplace; and for all that his rhymes are a cut above the average, his voice should never be confused with Peretz’s. In the larger scheme of this four-act play, not counting a Prologue and Epilogue, the Jester’s doggerel is the objective correlative of small talk. *A Night in the Old Marketplace* is something else again. It is the sum of its many voices and cacophonous sounds, which, however opposed, as Hillel Halkin has suggested, “belong to a single identity of contradictions.”

Through the old marketplace, Peretz fashioned a chronotope of Jewish time-beyond-time inhabiting a timebound urban landscape. Never had so many contentious Yiddish voices been assembled in so small a place before, to conjure up a sovereign Jewish space, the ultimate site of Jewish vernacularity, where even the statutory argued in Yiddish. More daringly still, Peretz compensated for the radical diminution of space by breaking down the barriers of time. The living were confronted by the recently deceased, who were challenged by the dead of long ago. Hosea and Kohelet made their voices heard alongside Bialik and the Sabbath liturgy. Peretz arrived there thanks to his lifelong “fondness for dialogue,” becoming the great innovator of speech genres in modern Jewish literature. All manner of dialogue, debate and daydreams; stories, sayings, and songs, he demonstrated in his gallery of “bilder,” flowed from the nexus of home, study house, shul, and small houses of prayer. Debate and disagreement became the sum and substance of his irreverent and provocative weekly column, “Cities and Towns,” in which he allowed his readers literally to talk back at him. Turning finally to the modern stage, he used multimedia, a huge cast of characters, and the contradictory nature of rhyme to produce a sound chamber of Polish Jewry.

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43 Halkin “Afterword,” 435.
That sound chamber itself, the natural and indestructible habitat of Jewspeak,44 may prove to be Peretz’s most lasting achievement.

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