

Elie Wiesel and I. L. Peretz

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Despairing of the present, man seeks beauty in legends.

(Wiesel *Souls* 257)

In the first volume of his splendid autobiography, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (1995), Elie Wiesel mentions without elaboration that Itzhok Leybush Peretz, the recognized father of Yiddish literature, is his “hero” (355). Why Peretz? Wiesel, whose heart and soul have re-joined those of the Hasidim he had so loved in his childhood in Sighet, Romania, and who has already published at least three volumes and given many lectures celebrating the renowned Hasidic masters, is seemingly distant from Peretz, the Socialist who satirized rebbes and their disciples in the hope of enlightening and modernizing a backwards sect. Nevertheless, in a review of Peretz’s *Selected Stories* (1974), Wiesel avers he admires and is inspired by Peretz (“Victims” 323). He also endorses a newer *I. L. Peretz Reader* (1990): “If you want to discover the beauty, the depth, the unique wonder of Yiddish literature—read the volume by its Master,” Wiesel announces on the back cover.

The backgrounds of the two writers are undeniably different. Wiesel joyfully followed the ways of his beloved grandfather, a Wiznitzer Hasid,

until they and all the Jews in Hungary were deported to Auschwitz in 1944. In contrast, Peretz, brought up in a traditional Orthodox manner, was taught to shun the Hasidic heretics. He was born and reared in Zamość, a walled fortress town in the Russian Pale (later Poland), a place where Hasidim were, according to Peretz's memoirs, simply "kept out of the city. If Zamość got word that a rebbe was on his way, the police were asked to set a guard at every gate, and the community provided a Jew to stand by him on watch" ("My" 321–22).

In Warsaw, where Peretz relocated after he had been disbarred by the tsarist government with no explanation, he continued to be appalled by the Hasidim for refusing to accept science, for degrading women, and for contributing to the stagnancy and poverty of their *shtetlekh*. He worked for a Jewish agency collecting data about Jews. At the same time in his essays and news columns he "never ceased to criticize the Hasidim for their fundamentalist beliefs and their resistance to change" (Wisse xxi).

A socialist idealist who spent three months in prison for his radical views, Peretz aimed to improve. His popular stories were hailed by many as neo-Hasidic; but the underlying messages of the tales were anti-Hasidic. As David Roskies puts it, subversion lurked "beneath the pious façade" of Peretz's works (7). Maurice Samuel calls Peretz not only Prince of the Ghetto but "a divided man" (121), because he seemed both to love and hate his fellow Jews. Peretz, more subtle than de Maupassant, was a master of the ironic twist. Sympathy unexpectedly gives way to criticism. In "Kabbalists," for example, a penniless yeshiva student starves himself to death, hoping to attain the Kiss of Moses described in the Kabbala. While Peretz portrays the scene with some pity, he makes it clear that the situation is tragic and unnecessary.

Ideologies aside, however, Peretz the artist, who wrote in Hebrew but more often in Yiddish, was largely responsible for introducing the Hasidic tale into modern literature. Like Berdichevsky and other Yiddish writers, Peretz became aware of the treasures of Hasidic literature: wonder tales, allegories, parables, stories of wisdom, revelations of the Torah, mysteries of the Kabbalah. In addition, "Hasidic tales con-

tained a wealth of poetic imagery and lyricism, symbolism and subtlety” (Dawidowicz 68). Hasidism thus infused Yiddish literature, which was somewhat stuck in the preaching Haskala (Enlightenment) mode, with new vigor.

Peretz used his genius to cultivate legends of the Hasidic rebbes and then reshape them according to his humanistic and secular beliefs. As Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg put it, Peretz reworked folk and Hasidic tales “in a way that appears to be folklike but is actually the product of a sophisticated literary intellect” (14). He somehow sapped the essence of a story, removed the piety, and rewrote it so that it became a paradigm of clarity, vision, and morality. Ken Frieden states that Peretz’s stories had a direct influence on Martin Buber, who became more aware of them around 1901, when Peretz was being honored in Warsaw. Buber began publishing his own neo-Hasidic stories in 1905–06. Says Frieden, “Wiesel is one of the most compelling in a long line of latter-day retellers of Hasidic stories.”

Wiesel is one of the greatest aficionados of stories; he even boldly proclaims that “God made man because he loves stories” (*Gates* 10). His devotion to Hasidism is directly linked to what he considers to be “the most important aspect of Hasidism. . . . [I]ts teachings are transmitted . . . in tales—in legends” (“Letter” [14 April 1971] 78). Wiesel praises Peretz, the “admirable storyteller,” who “weaves a melodious and evocative spell. His language is at once poetic and down-to-earth, lyrical and interspersed with wit. With one sentence, one image, he succeeds in restoring to us a Jewish world long since vanished, the world of the *shtetl*, with all its poverty and nostalgia” (“Victims” 321).

“If Not Higher” (1900) is perhaps the most famous Hasidic tale that Peretz reframed, giving it, as usual, unforeseen developments. The inner story is a familiar one about Rebbe Moshe-Leib of Sassov (Howe and Greenberg 15). Whereas Wiesel presents other stories about this Rebbe, Peretz adds the Litvak to the popular tale. To Polish Jews like Peretz, Litvaks (Jews from Lithuania) are stereotypically dry, humorless rationalists. They speak a different (and therefore funny) Yiddish dialect and base their lives on the Talmud. Hasidic melodies and dances are forbidden. When Hasidism quickly spread through Eastern Europe in the

eighteenth century, Litvak rabbis banned it; they even excommunicated a few renowned rebbes. Wiesel vividly brings these historical conflicts to life in *Souls on Fire* (1972) and *Four Hasidic Masters and Their Struggles Against Melancholy* (1978).

In Peretz's story, the Litvak, being, of course, a skeptic, decides to find out empirically where the Nemirover Rebbe is spending his days; he does not believe the Hasidim who assert that their holy leader ascends to heaven in order to intercede for his people. The Litvak has the chutzpa to hide under the Rebbe's bed and stalk him as he goes out in the cold early morning. To the Litvak's astonishment, he secretly witnesses the Rebbe changing into peasant's clothing. Then, he sees how the disguised Rebbe chops wood, brings it to a bedridden widow, and lights the fire in her dark, chilled hut. These good deeds affect Peretz's Litvak deeply, turning him into a staunch disciple of the Rebbe: the next time someone murmurs that the Rebbe spends his days in heaven, the converted Litvak quietly answers, "if not higher" (181).

The Hasidic rebbe is heroic not because of his great piety, nor because he performs miracles, fasts and prays all day, and delves into the mysteries of the Zohar, nor because he confers his blessings on everyone around him. To the contrary, he performs concrete good deeds on earth, where they are sorely needed. This is true righteousness. The Litvak's appreciation underlines the message.

Interestingly, Wiesel calls Peretz the "rebbe of Yiddish literature" because, like the Nemirover, he unselfishly aided others. Peretz received, guided, enlightened, and inspired many aspiring young writers. "Like Hasidim coming to their rebbe, they came to him in Warsaw," reports Wiesel ("Victims" 321). In 1915 when Peretz died, a throng of 100,000 Jews converged at his funeral in Warsaw to mourn the gifted writer. His popularity, as well as his literary impact, was apparently colossal.

Peretz's "Bontshe Shvayg," one of his best known tales, deals with an insignificant pauper who, despite bitterly and unjustly suffering all his life, never once complains to people or to God. The story was greatly acclaimed in progressive circles for its argument that the degraded poor need to protest their condition and not meekly wait to ask for a buttered roll from the Heavenly Tribunal. The judge tells Bontshe,

“There, in the world below, no one appreciated you. You yourself never knew that had you cried out but once, you could have brought down the walls of Jericho. You never knew what powers lay within you” (151). Bontshe’s quiet acceptance of his misery, no matter how saintly it seems, proves needless and meaningless. Peretz blatantly asserts that being quiet is a hindrance to justice and progress. Bontshe “was born in silence. He lived in silence. He died in silence. And he was buried in a silence greater yet” (147). Had Bontshe spoken up for himself as a human being, he would have been able to partake of at least a few of the pleasures of life.

Wiesel singles out “Bontshe Shvayg” for discussion. Bontshe, he writes, is “the meekest among the meek, the eternally offended, the condemned; Bontsha [sic] who has never known a moment of respite, of serenity; who has received nothing but blows and insults from life; who has never complained.” When offered a reward by the celestial judge, Bontshe cannot imagine what he wants. Wiesel, as usual, asks the astute questions: “But who is to blame? Mankind which has humiliated him too long? God who did not intervene soon enough?” The story, continues Wiesel, is “timeless” and “also reflects the Jewish condition of today: the generation that is mine could have shouted so loud that it would have shaken the world. Instead it whispered, content with its ‘battered roll’” (“Victims” 322–23).

Wiesel actually uses the same Yiddish verb, *shvaygn* (to keep quiet), in his groundbreaking *Un di velt hot geshwign* (1956). In that first autobiography, Wiesel, of course, condemns the silence of the world while six million innocent Jews were tortured and incinerated. He has also criticized Soviet secret police for having used silence “as the most refined of tortures” (“Letter” [15 April 1980] 114). In these instances Wiesel and Peretz are in agreement about the evils of what Wiesel terms “practical silence, which is the mark of the indifferent ones” (“In the Shadow” 111).

In general, however, Wiesel ascribes huge significance and depth to words unspoken. His appreciation of silence, according to Alan

¹I am indebted to Alan Rosen for pointing out Jewish religious sources, such

Rosen, is partially based on Jewish religious texts.¹ Wiesel reports that “some Hasidim used to boast that they went to the Pshishker. . . ‘to listen to the rebbe’s silence’” (“Storyteller’s” 57). Regarding his own writing, Wiesel believes “in the words you do not say” (“Tales” 60). He admits he is “obsessed with silence because I am afraid of language” and declares that “a work of art can be judged by its weight of silence” (“In the Shadow” 111). He speaks of aiming for “a very eloquent silence, a screaming silence, a shouting silence”; he also speaks of “the power of silence,” “silence with a capital S,” and silence as a character in his text *The Jews of Silence* (1966) (“Use” 82).

As a matter of principle, Wiesel embraces inconsistencies. Hasidism teaches “that contradictions are an intrinsic part of man,” he explains (*Souls* 9). “I’m not against contradictions,” he says (Wiesel and Heffner 154). Wiesel’s “favorite words” are “and yet” (124). This phrase, occurring throughout his works, also forms the title of the beautiful concluding chapter in the second volume of his memoirs, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969– (1999)*. Because of his determined willingness to be open and non-judgmental, Wiesel can appreciate a finely crafted tale by Peretz and fully accept (but not necessarily agree with) Peretz’s authorial intention.

For Peretz, too, displays inconsistencies which only broaden and enhance his writing. Indeed, Peretz admits in his memoirs to an appreciation of the spiritualism of the very Hasidim he denigrates. He speaks fondly of Reb Mikhl, one of his childhood teachers, who was later rumored to be a covert Kotsker Hasid. “If he was a Kotsker, he would have had to keep it secret; our city was anti-Hasidic, and the study house too,” he recalls. Peretz remembers an incident when his town’s shrunken innkeeper, “who was so old and frail the merest breath could blow him away,” leaped over tables and benches to slap the face of a large stranger who had blurted out words from a prayer about Redemption “that only Hasidim used.” Peretz claims he learned nothing scholarly from Reb Mikhl, but he asserts that “if I did no more than copy his silence, I must have absorbed from it the good-hearted sorrow that I recognize in some of my writings. Maybe those meditative eyes passed on to me a little of his Hasidism?” he asks (“My” 273).

Wiesel undoubtedly appreciates the tenderness with which Peretz writes his tales. Peretz may portray his characters as being totally wrong in hanging on to their traditional religious beliefs, but they are victims. Wiesel is most famous for writing about Holocaust victims; of course, the situations are incomparable. However, Wiesel favorably contrasts Peretz's love for his characters with their treatment by a writer like Isaac Bashevis Singer. (Wiesel is too gentle to supply his name, but the reference is obvious):

Rather than turn them into caricatures, monsters obsessed by sex or money, he shows their human vulnerability, their simplicity; he shows them as victims of society, victims of God, but victims always. Instead of judging them, he takes their defense, fighting the injustices that befall them. ("Victims" 321-22)

Wiesel always values Peretz's "brotherly love for the most wretched" (322).

Similarly, Wiesel lauds Peretz's "social consciousness" because Peretz glorifies the most humble and obscure. Wiesel dismisses Socialism and politics altogether. Peretz's emphasis on the abject, states Wiesel,

explains why certain scholars stress the importance of social consciousness in Peretz's work. Rightly or wrongly, no matter; let us simply say that his consciousness is essentially Jewish, therefore sensitive to injustice in any form. His response: he loves the poor but not poverty; he admires the humble but he opposes submissiveness. (322)

One of Peretz's *folkstimlekhe* (folk-like) stories, "Three Gifts" is similar to "Bontshe Shvayg" in that it appears to laud Jewish martyrdom while at the same time underlining its tragic purposelessness. A Jewish soul, trying to get through the heavenly gates, attempts to bribe his way in by offering gifts to the saints in paradise. The first present is a handful of "bloody earth," soil from the Holy Land for which a Jew was stabbed to death as he tried to protect it (226). The soul acquires the second gift

from a Jewish girl who pinned her skirt to her legs while being dragged to death. She had been sentenced to have her long braid tied to the tail of a wild horse for the crime of “stealing out of the ghetto,” looking at the sacred Christian procession, and thus defiling it (227). The gift here is a “bloody needle” pulled from the girl’s leg, which retained her modesty. The third offering is a blood-soaked yarmulke. A Jewish victim was forced to run the gauntlet between soldiers wielding knouts. Nobody knew what he had done to deserve this punishment. Halfway through the beatings, his skullcap was knocked off. He “turned around to retrieve the fallen cap” and started back down the line, “soaked in blood but serene” (230). When he collapsed, the soul seized the yarmulke and brought it straight to heaven. The saints, who enjoy getting gifts, admit him immediately to eternity in paradise. A voice up above declares, “Ah, what beautiful gifts! Of course, they’re totally useless—but to look at, why, they’re perfection itself!” (230).

“Beautiful gifts” indeed. While some pious Jews may appreciate the holiness of martyrdom, of dying *af kidush haShem* (for the holy Name), Peretz punctures and deflates a religious value system in which gory gifts are prized and pain is ignored. The angels acknowledge the torment of the Jewish victims merely by calling it “useless.”

Wiesel’s first drama, “A Black Canopy, A Black Sky,” performed to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, contains a moving scene reminiscent of Peretz’s third gift:

A German hit him with his rifle. The Rov kept right on walking. A second German tore off his hat and threw it into the mud. The Rov bent down to pick up his hat, but the German gave him another blow with his rifle-butt. So the Rov took a handful of mud and smeared it on his head. Then he went on—with his head covered. (23)

There is an innate nobility in both Peretz’s and Wiesel’s martyrs; they would have suffered less had they not been so concerned with the Orthodox injunction that a man must cover his head. Peretz underscores that all the suffering is “useless.” Wiesel might again pointedly ask, as

he did of Bontshe's sad life, "but who is to blame?" Wiesel, though he presents his Rov with a dignity that even the murderous Nazis cannot defile, often decries Jewish suffering. This contrasts with the religious point of view which encompasses God's plan and stresses that human beings merely do not and cannot understand the divine design.

Wiesel's writings seem to echo Peretz's in other places as well. Victoria Aarons, for example, remarks that the vivid dramatic scene in which the gentile townspeople attack Gregor, the child playing Judas in Wiesel's novel *The Gates of the Forest* (1966), reminds her of the devils in Peretz's short story "Yom Kippur in Hell."² In the Yiddish tale, Peretz depicts the satanic creatures as "dumbstruck, mouths agape, tongues hanging out, faces contorted" (262). In Wiesel's novel, the anti-Semitic audience is comprised of real but no less satanic people: "Projected out of time they were like wax figures, grotesque and idiotic, without destiny or soul, clay creatures, damned in the service of the devil. Their upraised arms hung in the air, their mouths were swollen" (107). Wiesel adapts a scene out of hell to describe a hellish scene in Europe during the Holocaust.

Peretz met a Hasidic rebbe only once in his life (Roskies 15). His skeptical stories champion morality, justice, education, science, and progress. Though not religious, he learned to understand the attraction of Hasidism, especially the way it provided sparks of comfort to downtrodden Jews who were victims of increasingly terrible pogroms and hideous blood-libels, especially from 1881 on. Jewish life was changing, but not for the better; and this had nothing to do with whether Jewish men were wearing *kapotes* or suits.

Peretz the reformer could not have foreseen that Jewish life as he knew it would be exterminated just thirty years after his own death. Wiesel bears witness to atrocities that should make Peretz's celestial judge weep, not laugh, as he did in Bontshe's case. Largely because of the Holocaust, Wiesel understandably portrays his own Hungarian *shtetl* and the *shtetl* in general with sentiment. He refers to the "warm and colorful world of Mendele, Peretz, and Schneour" ("*Shtetl*" 295). "The world of hasidism . . . is the world of my childhood, and per-

haps of my innocence lost,” Wiesel explains (“Letter” [14 April 1971] 77). In his essay “The World of the Shtetl,” he admits that Jews were continuously victims in Europe, even enduring massacres in 1648 of such horrible brutality that, “in Sholem Ash’s [sic] words, one would lose faith in the humanity of man” (318).² Nevertheless, Wiesel remains pointedly fixed in his affections. His love of Yiddish is also somewhat connected to his aching for the pre-Hitler past:

I love speaking Yiddish. There are songs and lullabies that can be sung only in Yiddish: prayers that only Jewish grandmothers can whisper at dusk, stories whose charm and secrets, sadness and nostalgia, can be conveyed in Yiddish alone. . . . I love Yiddish because it has been with me from the cradle. It was in Yiddish that I spoke my first words and expressed my first fears. It was in Yiddish that I greeted the Shabbat. I did not say “Shabbat shalom” but “a gut Shabess.” (330)

“Need I say that I miss it?” he asks rhetorically about his first fifteen years in Sighet. “Must I say aloud what, in many of my writings, I repeat in whispers? The shtetl is my childhood. I remain attached to it and faithful” (319).

Wiesel deliberately chooses to romanticize and sentimentalize his childhood and his early Hasidic life. His own father, after all, was an emancipated Jew. His literary portrayals are closer in tone to Asch’s idyllic “*Dos shtetl*” than to Peretz’s disparaging depictions of its corruption and sad poverty. “I know that many villages were not as beautiful as I make them and that many people were not as saintly as I make them,” Wiesel admits, “but that is the least I can do for them: to give them their purity. Camus once told me, ‘One must approach mankind not through its ugly common point but through its most exalting opening’” (“Creative” 286). Like Peretz, then, Wiesel intentionally crafts his material in a way that makes it appear naive while it is actually sophisticated.

Wiesel is not ironic like Peretz, but neither is he simplistic. Wiesel

²Wiesel is referring to Asch’s historical novel *Kidush ha-Shem* (1919).

presents tales of the early Hasidic masters, describing the stories and their legendary rebbes “with fervor” (*Souls* 255):

The Rebbe: confessor, master, guide and above all: father. He does not invoke lightning; he is gentle, kind. As the shepherd of an ill-starred flock, he defends it against the iniquities of man and heaven. Thanks to him, those who have been tried may catch their breath and no longer feel forsaken by the God of Israel and the people of Israel. (209)

And then, dramatically and unexpectedly, he bursts into questioning survivors’ sorrow and rage. For example, he elegantly describes the offer of Rebbe Moshe-Leib of Sassov to dance for his friend, since he had no money, but he follows this lovely story with a chilling passage in which he tries to imagine the grandfather he adored, Dodye Feig, a Wizsnitzer Hasid, “in the train that carried him away” (167). And when speaking of the anger of Rebbe Mendl of Kotzk, Wiesel wonders if he could have foreseen a great fire whose “first victims would be Jewish men and women abandoned by God and by all mankind?” (254).

In short, Wiesel and Peretz are not the polar opposites they might initially appear to be. To begin with, both the Hasid and the socialist are humanists. Wiesel defines Hasidism as “the apotheosis of humanism in modern history”; it stresses “the sacredness of man and what makes him human” (“Letter” [14 April 1971] 77). Similar to the Hasidic masters, Peretz and Wiesel each has his own *nign* (tune). According to Byron L. Sherwin, “Like I. L. Peretz, Wiesel searches for the *niggun* [*sic*], the melody of past times, in order to find the appropriate melody for our times. In Wiesel’s writings, the *niggun* [*sic*] of the past is transmigrated into the present” (120).

In addition, many of the dreams of the Hasid and the socialist are the same. Both seek justice. Wiesel, in speaking of his favorite legendary Rebbe, Levi-Yitzkhok of Berditchev, visualizes him “as a powerful, invincible defender of the weak, a dispenser of mercy ready to risk all and lose all in the pursuit of truth and justice” (*Souls* 90). These words could be used to describe the ideal socialist reformer as well as the Rebbe;

Bontshe would certainly have benefited from either one.

Both Peretz and Wiesel espouse means to elevate the poor, the unfortunate, the insignificant, the hopeless, all the Bontshes of the world. Wiesel praises “Hasidism’s concern for the wretched, for the victimized and forgotten Jew” (*Four* 15). Indeed, this important principle runs strongly and deeply throughout the works of both literary masters.

Another theme common to both authors is that of the modern, rational Jew versus the ancient, mystical Hasid. In Peretz’s “If Not Higher,” a rational Litvak confronts the Rebbe of Nemirov. In Wiesel’s drama *Zalmen, or the Madness of God* (1974), communist Alexey speaks to the Rabbi about Jewish “outlandish ritual, its senseless superstitions[;] your past is a burden—a dead weight that stops you from moving forward.” The Rabbi, however, articulates feelings about admiring the twilight and befriending “others who like myself are looking for the source and know where it can be found no matter how inaccessible it seems.” And when Alexey answers, “I shall break the chain” (71), he is no doubt referring to the metaphoric *di goldene kayt*, the golden chain that links Jewish generations. *Di goldene kayt* (1903) is additionally the name of one of Peretz’s dramas, in which a Rabbi desperately attempts to keep the sacred Sabbath from giving way to the profane weekday. Wiesel also retells the true but “sad story indeed” of Zanz and Sadigur, a bitter example of Misnagdim (literally, “opponents”) and Hasidim battling each other (“Zanz” 295–96). It is very similar to Peretz’s tale, “Between Two Mountains,” which pits the Brisker rov against the Bialer rebbe.

Interestingly, Wiesel in 1975 humorously related his own experience in just this sort of controversy with his esteemed mentor and friend, the late Saul Lieberman:

My teacher now, Saul Lieberman, is a great Talmudist, probably the greatest of the last ten generations. My troubles with him, in the beginning, were due to the fact that he came from Lithuania and was a Misnaged, an opponent of Hasidism, and I come from the Hasidic milieu and love Hasidism. So there was a little antagonism between us in the beginning. Now I think he understands better that not every Hasid is as horrible as he remembers. (“Inner” 236)

Wiesel and Peretz are both extremely talented writers and masters of clear, unembellished prose. Both punctuate their tales with doubts and questions that appeal to the sensibilities of modern readers who are at once attracted to and appalled by the past. Both appreciate and serve beauty and art—in literature and in their ideologies. Wiesel also feels that “Hasidism stresses the element of beauty in Judaism. . . . It teaches us that Judaism is not only religion, not only philosophy, not only ethical principles, but also a work of art: It contains beauty” (“Letter” [14 April 1971] 78).

Wiesel’s narrator in *The Testament* (1981) reads Peretz among other free-thinkers and refers to “our great poet Y. L. Peretz” (89, 45). Wiesel himself promises that “to read Peretz is to plunge into an ancient dream and the fervor it calls forth. You will emerge the richer for having done so” (“Victims” 323). The same is true of Peretz’s disciple Elie Wiesel: you will emerge far richer for having read his work.

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