

**"WHO WILL REMAIN? WHAT WILL
REMAIN?": YIDDISH LITERARY CRITICISM
IN AMERICA**

**CLASSIC YIDDISH FICTION: ABRAMOVITSH,
SHOLEM ALEICHEM, & PERETZ**

By Ken Frieden

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995

Pp. xiii + 364. Paper, \$19.95.

**A BRIDGE OF LONGING: THE LOST ART OF YIDDISH
STORYTELLING**

By David G. Roskies

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Pp. x + 419. \$37.50.

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The study of Yiddish literature is conducted under unique historical and cultural conditions setting it apart from studies of most other contemporary literatures. To begin with, few Yiddish writers are alive and productive today. Additionally, the once vibrant Yiddish press has nearly ceased to exist. Most important of all, the Yiddish readership has been reduced to a small group consisting primarily of elderly people and academics. What remains of the great Yiddish culture, which during the interwar period spanned three continents with a Yiddish-speaking population of approximately twelve million, are Yiddish college courses and intensive summer programs, the National Yiddish Book Center, Klezcamp, and a few Yiddish weeklies and theater groups. Without a living cultural context, current Yiddish literary studies tend to focus on making the lost Yiddish heritage available to readers lacking a solid knowledge of Yiddish. As a rule, the Yiddish literary scholar must provide much of the cultural and historical background material; frequently, even classical Yiddish works are not available in translation.

In these two new books of Yiddish literary scholarship, significant space is given to basic biographical facts about Yiddish writers and to extensive summaries of their works. Both books critically analyze works of literature as well as seek to portray the lives and works of writers originating in the European Ashkenazic culture destroyed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during and after World War II. Thus the literary scholar becomes a cultural historian with a more or less pronounced agenda to enlighten the reader about Yiddish culture. This is expressed by Ken Frieden in the foreword to his book *Classical Yiddish Fiction*: "Today, in light of prevailing ignorance of Yiddish culture, the time has come to reeducate the educated" (xi). Frieden correctly points out that "Isaac Bashevis Singer is only the tip of the iceberg...and Yiddish literature has never received the recognition it deserves" (ix). Both this book and David Roskies' *A Bridge of Longing* can be seen as attempts to remedy this ignorance and lack of appreciation of Yiddish literature.

Classical Yiddish Fiction is a clear and accessible introduction to the classical trio of Yiddish literature, Sh. Y. Abramovitch, Sholem Aleichem and Y. L. Peretz. In addition to presenting the writers' life stories based on their autobiographies, Frieden discusses important critical approaches to their work in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English; he also analyzes selected works published be-

tween 1864 and 1916. Frieden employs postmodern theory, Russian formalism (particularly Mikhail Bakhtin), and Harold Bloom's theory about "the anxiety of influence." A key word in his reading of Abramovitch's work is "polyphony" in the Bakhtinian sense of a chorus of disparate, often incongruous, voices creating parodic effects through their sheer incompatibility. Building on *A Traveler Disguised*, the seminal work about Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Book Seller) by the Israeli literary scholar Dan Miron, Frieden delineates how Mendele's status as participant-observer and editor of manuscripts by fictive autobiographers in *The Little Man* and *The Magic Ring* (1865) was expanded in later works such as *Fishke the Lame* (1869) in which Mendele plays a more active role in the narrative. Although Abramovitch continuously revised and expanded his Yiddish novels over the next several decades and adapted them in Hebrew, Frieden argues that "the true beginnings of modern Yiddish fiction have been obscured because only the original versions of Abramovitch's Yiddish novels show the development of his narrative voice" (39).

In his chapters on Sholem Aleichem, Frieden presents some interesting insights by relating how "the anxiety of influence" was played out in Sholem Aleichem's worship of Abramovitch on the one hand and his sharp rejection of Peretz's modernism on the other. In the chapter on Sholem Aleichem's "Jewish Novels" and "monologues of mastery," Frieden shows how Sholem Aleichem came into his own as an artist by creating a diverse cast of humorous colloquial monologues culminating in the *Tevey the Dairyman* and *Menakhem Mendl* story-cycles.

Frieden applies the Russian formalist term *Skaz*, defined as "stylistically individualized inner narrative placed in the mouth of a fictional character and designed to produce the illusion of oral speech," to characterize the constructed, seemingly simple oral tenor of Sholem Aleichem's stories, behind which power plays, social criticism, and ambiguity can be discerned. Concluding that Sholem Aleichem took over where Abramovitch left off, the former's literary heritage is summarized: "Sholem Aleichem extrapolated countless speakers whose rambling stories, pathetic uncertainty, quiet resignation, self indulgent confessions, and comic errors represent the vanishing essence of popular Yiddish culture" (224). Ironically, Sholem Aleichem, who began his literary career by publishing a fictive legal case against Shomer, the premier *shund* (trashy) writer of the day in *Shomer's Trial* (1888), became the epitome of light-hearted, popular humor for successive generations of Jewish intellectuals.

One of the keys to Peretz's artistic development is his correspondence with Sholem Aleichem in 1888 and 1889 in connection with the publication of his first Yiddish poem, *Monish*, in Sholem Aleichem's *The Jewish People's Library* (1888). At the beginning of his literary career at the age of thirty-eight, Peretz broke radically with nineteenth-century Yiddish literature by creating his own individualist, neoromantic artistic credo. In a letter written in Hebrew (17 June 1888), Peretz states: "I write for myself, for my own pleasure; and if I sometimes remember the reader, he is from the higher class in society, a person who has read and studied in a living language" (240). Thus Yiddish modernism was inaugurated in a rejection of the previous utilitarian, post-maskilic (Jewish Enlightenment) concerns that sought to enlighten the reader by speaking to him or her through the voice of a folk persona. For the first time a Yiddish writer explicitly announced his intention to speak in the first person singular and described his ideal reader as a well-edu-

cated European familiar with non-Jewish literature—a projection of himself.

Although Frieden includes these important letters in his biographical sketch of Peretz, he approaches the latter's work as a member of the classical trio, rather than as a radical break with Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem. Like those two writers, Peretz "specialized in irony and parody" (311) and developed the monologue form for his own artistic purposes. Even in regard to audience, Peretz is seen as adhering to the post-maskilic writer's role vis-à-vis his audience: "Irony, satire, and parody drew authors and readers together in an overtly or covertly conspirational group" (312). This emphasis on Peretz's artistic similarities with, rather than striking differences from, Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem enables Frieden to show how the three classical Yiddish writers grew out of the same nineteenth-century ideological and cultural matrix.

Frieden asserts that "[o]ne of Peretz's great contributions to Yiddish writing was his borrowing of conventions from contemporary European fiction" (232), but he does not explore the wider ramifications of the non-Jewish influence that made him "The Father of Another Literary Family." Peretz europeanized and universalized Yiddish literature by creating a literary discourse inspired by symbolism, Nietzsche, and neoromanticism—in short, early modernism—transcending the literary ethos and folksy narrative style in Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem's work. By focusing on works such as Peretz's early psychological stories about madness and his later hasidic tales and excluding, for example, the important *Impressions from a Journey in the Provinces* (1891), as well as the self-revealing artistic credo, *My Memoirs* (1913), Frieden presents a narrow sample of Peretz's *oeuvre* which corresponds with his critical portrait of classical Yiddish fiction as "a trio rather than a sequence of solo performances" (311). Thus, he misses an essential part of Peretz's uniqueness that opened new artistic venues for second- and third-generation Yiddish writers.

Unlike Ken Frieden who is relatively new to the field of Yiddish literature, David G. Roskies has written extensively on topics in the areas of Yiddish language, literature, and culture. His new book, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, includes chapters on seven Yiddish writers from the early nineteenth-century Nahman of Bratslav to Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-91). Significantly, the art of Yiddish storytelling, the book's main theme, is viewed as lost or nearly lost. Like Frieden, Roskies introduces an important and mostly forgotten branch of Jewish literature for an audience unfamiliar with its basic tenets.

The title of Roskies' book comes from a poem by the American-Yiddish writer Yankev Glatshiteyn written in the aftermath of the Holocaust:

Who will dream You?
Who will remember?
Who will deny You?
Who will yearn after You, then?
Who will flee You, over a bridge of longing.
Only to return again? (1946)

This poem encapsulates the return of the Yiddish writer to his people, his tradition, and his dialogue with God after the Holocaust. Similarly, Roskies uses the triad of rebellion, loss, and return to characterize the Yiddish writer's origin and development as storyteller. This combination of autobiographical and literary-genre analysis, together with a thorough mastery of the many contextual meanings in the texts, makes for some penetrating readings.

A key concept in Roskies' book is what he calls "creative betrayal." This refers to the ways in which Yiddish writers took traditional forms and styles, such as the folk tale, the chap book, scriptural texts, and the hasidic hagiography, and reappropriated them for their own modern, often subversive, artistic purposes. The *sine qua non* of "creative betrayal" is that "we live after the tradition" (5); it becomes a pivotal Jewish response to modernity. "Creative betrayal" does not only apply to literature and other artistic expressions but also, for example, to a contemporary Jewish wedding, which Roskies envisions as a way of reclaiming and refashioning old customs in a new context.

The modern Jews "who occupy that middle ground, seeking to synthesize old and new, form the subject of my book" (4) writes Roskies. This excludes, on the one hand, the ultra-orthodox, mostly Yiddish-speaking, communities purposely secluding themselves from the temptation of the modern world (e.g., Brooklyn's Borough Park and Mea Shearim in Jerusalem), and on the other, assimilated Jews without interest in applying Jewish meanings to their lives. Roskies' main topic and ideal audience are those modern Jews who wrestle with their identities through dialogue with Jewish sources and interpretative strategies.

Roskies distinguishes between two types of "creative betrayal": "the romantic-messianic storytellers...and the tellers of grotesque-sentimental tales" (75). The first group includes Reb Nahman of Bratslav, Peretz, Der Nister, I. B. Singer, and Abraham Sutzkever, who wanted "to achieve a revolution of the spirit." The second group consists of Isaac Meir Dik, Sholem Aleichem, Itzik Manger, Y. Y. Trunk, and Yosl Birstein, who based their work on "ancient and local lore [in order] to restore the Jewish body politic" (75). These two schools of Yiddish storytellers reappropriated Jewish tradition in different ways and with different degrees of rebellious urgency.

Roskies points out that his coinage "creative betrayal" is similar to the critical approaches by two important Israeli literary scholars, Dan Miron and Gershon Shaked, in their critical work on Hebrew writers Bialik, Berdyczewski, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Like them, Roskies is intent upon documenting the autobiographical and artistic development that turned "self-conscious modernists...into latter-day folk artists" (9). The artist-intellectual's alienation from both Jewish tradition and his or her Jewish audience created a psychological and artistic barrier that prompted the Yiddish writer to don the guise of a folk persona.

The abundance of literary pseudonyms in modern Yiddish literature provides a good example of "creative betrayal." Yiddish writers created folk personas who developed lives of their own; so much so, in fact, that today we usually refer to Sh. Y. Abramovitsh as Mendele Moykher Sforim and to Sholem Rabinovitsh as Sholem Aleichem. Other Yiddish writers are known only by their folksy pseudonyms such as Sh. An-sky (Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport), author of the famous play *Der dibbuk*; Der Nister (Pinkhes Kahanovitsh), meaning "the hidden one," a writer of tales as personal and cosmological quests; Itzik Manger (Isidore Helfand), who recreated the old *Purim shpil* tradition through his readaptation of biblical narratives; and Yitskhok Bashevis/Varshavski, who became world-famous writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. Such changes of name were intrinsic to these writers' artistic identities as well as crucial for their storytelling art.

The monologue or storytelling round (fictionalized in different settings) provides the generic thread through the book. Novels, autobiographies, and poems (except for those by Itzik Manger and Abraham Sutzkever) are only included to the extent that they can

elucidate aspects of the writer's storytelling art. Roskies views the modern Yiddish storyteller's art as an often subversive *midrash* on traditional material, typically expressed through colloquial monologues such as Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories, Peretz's hasidic tales, and Singer's demonological monologues.

Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810), a hasidic leader and great-grandchild of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of hasidism, turned to storytelling after all "his other efforts had failed" (25). According to Roskies, "modern Yiddish storytelling was born" in the summer of 1806 when Nahman of Bratslav announced to his hasidim that he wanted to tell stories. The background to this was a personal and spiritual crisis: the combined result of his failed messianic striving, the sudden death of his son who played a central role in his messianic scheme, and the intensified attacks on him from the hasidic establishment. Storytelling was the last symbolic resort left to Nahman after he had mastered the traditional Jewish ways of self-expression: prayer, scriptural exegesis, and ethical self-improvement. The stories' "subtext is Reb Nahman's own life and complex personality" (32). By replacing the traditional ways of reading Jewish texts as *peshat*, *remez*, *derashah*, and *sod* (respectively, the literal, allegorical, homiletical, and mystical meanings) with an existential-biographical reading, Roskies establishes interesting connections between Nahman's life and his stories.

Instead of creating codified *aggadic* material to be added to the scriptural law and lore in the Torah and Talmud printed in Hebrew-Aramaic in a *seyfer* (a holy book), Nahman of Bratslav told his *mayses* (stories) to his disciples in the mother tongue, Yiddish. After his death, his disciple Nathan of Nemirov recorded the stories in a bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish version. Roskies concludes by stressing the unique cultural significance of Nahman of Bratslav's tales: "By bridging Hebrew and Yiddish, the scholars and the folk, mythic past and historic present, Reb Nahman invented a new form of Jewish self-expression" (55).

Y. L. Peretz is given a seminal role as initiator of the "art of creative betrayal." Unlike the other classical Yiddish writers Sholem Aleichem and Sh. Y. Abramovitch (the latter of whom is not included in the book), "Peretz never adopted a folk persona in his writings.... Peretz appeared in his writings as what he was: a modern, secular Jew, urban and urbane, straddling several cultures and critical of them all" (106). Roskies illuminates Peretz's neoromantic, individualist artistic credo through readings of his first important prose work, *Pictures from a Journey through the Provinces* (1891). Then he charts Peretz's political radicalization in such stories as "Bontshe the Silent" and the journal *Holiday Pages* (1894-96). In order to circumvent tsarist censorship, the latter journal was given the seemingly pious name *Holiday Pages* and published in connection with the Jewish holidays. Behind this cover, Peretz could express his radical cultural and ideological views.

Peretz's imprisonment for illegal political activities in 1899, during which he wrote one of his best hasidic tales, "Between Two Peaks," is seen by Roskies as a turning point: Peretz's "self-transformation on the eve of the twentieth century effectually initiated the art of creative betrayal" (116). Since Peretz had already published several other hasidic stories such as "The Teachings of the Hasidim" (1894) and "Yokhanan the Teacher's Tales" (1897), their significance for his life might be less central than Roskies suggests. The hasidic tales, which Peretz soon abandoned for other genres, could as well be seen as only one of many artistic forms and styles

employed by the artistically versatile Peretz throughout his literary career.

More to the point is Roskies' analysis of how Peretz redefined the hasidic tales for his own neoromantic ends. Like Martin Buber, Sh. Agnon, and Berdyczewsky in their return to Hebrew and Yiddish tales based on *aggadic* and folkloristic material at the turn of the century, Peretz endowed his hasidic stories and *Stories in the Folk Vein* with "secular humanistic values" at odds with a traditional religious system. Such stories as "Devotion Without End," "Three Gifts," and "If Not Higher" imitated the traditional forms of storytelling while suffusing them with a secular Torah of individualism, humanism, and universalism. These stories became a modern guide for the perplexed providing the newly secularized Jews with a symbolic universe that spoke directly to their spiritual and cultural needs.

The title of the chapter, "The Conjuror," is taken from the story of the same name, in which an Elijah-the-Prophet figure disguised as a German provides a poor Jewish family with a Seder meal replete with candles and silverware and then disappears. Similarly, Peretz is viewed as "a conjuror, a maker of tricks and perhaps of *kunst* (art) as well" (142). Finally, in his readings of "Stories" (1903) and "Yom Kippur in Hell" (1915) written shortly before Peretz's death, Roskies concludes his portrait of Peretz by characterizing him as "too much the maskil, the modern, the maverick" (146) to draw any ultimate redemptive meaning from his storytelling art.

After the death of the classical Yiddish writers in rapid succession during World War I, a new era began in three Yiddish literary centers, represented in *A Bridge of Longing* by Der Nister (the Soviet Union), Itzik Manger (Poland), and I. B. Singer (Poland and the US). As a disciple of Peretz and inspired by Russian symbolism, Nahman of Bratslav and E. T. A. Hoffman, Der Nister began his literary career as a teller of fantastic, complex, and elitist tales that "brilliantly refashioned the Yiddish tale [but] were never channelled back into the folk" (194). After a few years' sojourn in Berlin, which became a shortlived Jewish literary center in the 1920s, he cast his lot with Soviet Communism and returned to the Soviet Union in 1926.

Der Nister's optimistic belief in the transformative potential of art to lead the way to a utopian society was terribly disappointed in the Soviet Union. In the fascinating account of Der Nister's struggle to remain faithful to his artistic credo in the Soviet Union, which only allowed socialist realism in artistic expression, Roskies gives perceptive readings of the stories "A Tale of an Imp, of a Mouse, and of Der Nister Himself" (1929) and "Under a Fence" (1929). Even under these difficult circumstances for a Yiddish symbolist, Der Nister turned the struggle to maintain his artistic autonomy into a storytelling drama without comprising his unique artistic style.

The chapter on Itzik Manger, "The Last of the Purim Players," who wanted to become a Yiddish *klasiker* (classical writer) and succeeded, is executed with great precision and sensitivity. Manger's work suits Roskies' critical agenda well because he can actually document when Manger decided to return to the folk tradition. The pivotal event took place in Bucharest around 1929 when Manger saw a troubadour, Old Man Ludvig, paying tribute to the great modern inventors of Yiddish theater and folk song, Avrom Goldfaden and Velv Zbarzher. Manger reminisces: "All the wedding jesters and Purim players who had entertained generations of Jews suddenly came alive. I will become one of them" (246).

Referring to the two meanings of the Hebrew word *begidah* (to cloak and to betray), Roskies characterizes Manger's art as recloak-

ing or retexturing the tradition rather than betraying it. Itzik Manger's *midrash* on the Bible and the Book of Esther, his *Khumesh-lider* [Bible Poems] (1935) and *Megile-lider* [The Book of Esther Poems] (1936), turned the scriptural scheme of creation, revelation, and redemption into "domestic dramas" without the Exodus or the giving of the Torah at Sinai. He showed a positive predilection for the underdogs such as Abraham's concubine Hagar while at the same time ridiculing the matriarchs, patriarchs, and other self-important figures. This attitude made him anathema to both the Zionists and the orthodox establishment. Only the Jewish Labor Bund in Poland could endorse the poetry of Manger, whose solidarity with the workers combined with protofeminism fit nicely with the Bund's nationalist, humanist, and progressive ideology. Manger's subtle poetic circumvention of the Jewish tradition made him one of the most popular Yiddish poets among the Jewish Polish masses in the 1930s.

Roskies' chapter on Isaac Bashevis Singer provides one more example of a "born-again Jewish storyteller" who "[a]t a certain point in his career found his way back to Jewish fantasy and folklore" (269). This return often followed a midlife crisis in which the Yiddish writer lost faith in his artistic future. For Singer, it happened after his emigration to the U.S. in 1935, two years after his masterpiece, *Satan in Goray*, was published. During the next seven years, he abandoned fiction writing altogether and survived as a bread-and-butter journalist for the Yiddish press in New York.

Singer's return to Yiddish literature was initiated by two critical articles in 1943 in which he outlined his antihumanist, nihilist credo by rejecting the Yiddish literary tradition except for a few positive references to Peretz. These were followed by the 1943 republication of *Satan in Goray* with five new stories, some of which were monologues told by demonic narrators, foreshadowing the development of his demonological storytelling art.

Roskies gives some interesting examples of how Singer's stories, steeped in traditional *yidishkeyt* (Jewishness) and utilizing the richness of Yiddish idioms, are stripped of their associative complexity in English translation. Pejorative references to Christianity are erased in the English translation of the story "Zeidlus the Pope" in which the so-called *lehavdl loshn* (a language of distinction) is used to depict the *goyim* (the Gentiles) in traditional negative stereotypes. The toning down of this anti-Christian aspect of Singer's demonological narrators in English translation loses their *raison d'être* as symbols of a traditional universe of good and evil.

Singer's main artistic scapegoat was the popular Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, whose optimistic humanism and belief in individual spiritual redemption carried Peretz's gospel to a simplistic apotheosis. Only by acknowledging how deeply Singer was "enmeshed in the fabric of modern Yiddish writing" does it become possible to

understand his great achievement as recreator of the Yiddish story for a contemporary international audience: "Where Peretz and Asch had raided the *shtetl* past for parables of individual action and self-transcendence, Bashevis revisited the same sites to strike a final blow at the redemptive schemes that gave rise to modern Yiddish literature in the first place" (293).

Yiddish storytelling after the Holocaust became "a form of reminiscence" (312). Mourning the loss of the Yiddish heartland in Eastern Europe, Abraham Sutzkever and Y. Y. Trunk developed, respectively, symbolist/surrealistic and autobiographical/folkloristic narrative strategies in order to resurrect the destroyed Ashkenazic culture in imaginative poetry and prose. Yosel Birstein, who emigrated to Israel from Poland in the early 1950s following a sojourn in Australia, condensed episodes from Israeli daily life in small Yiddish sketches that were later presented in Hebrew for a radio audience in Israel: "Birstein found the lost art of storytelling and a living Jewish audience—but in so doing, he lost Yiddish" (339).

The question of audience is particularly central to Yiddish literary studies in regard to both the literary work's implied "horizons of expectation" and the addressees for today's Yiddish scholarship in English or Hebrew. On the one hand, the Yiddish literary scholar must uncover the many cultural, historical, and religious meanings inscribed in the literary text and contextualize it in relation to its original audience. A good example of this text-archaeological approach is the republication of literary works by Itzik Manger, I. B. Singer, I. Rabon, Shmuel Agnon, and Abraham Sutzkever in the original Yiddish with scholarly introductions and cultural historical footnotes by the Yiddish Department at the Hebrew University.

Unlike this attempt to reconstruct and resurrect "a world which is no more" (the title of Y. Y. Singer's autobiography from 1946), the two works under review here apply current critical theory to Yiddish literary texts. The text-archaeological and the literary-analytical methods are both necessary in making Yiddish literary texts available for today's readers. From different vantage points these two critical methodologies seek to retrieve and integrate Yiddish literary artifacts, which have been mostly marginalized or forgotten in current Jewish literary discourse.

Interestingly, the theme of loss, estrangement, and fragmentation, which runs like a red thread through modern Yiddish literature, is reflected in Roskies' and Frieden's attempts to reappropriate Yiddish works for readers disconnected from the Yiddish literary tradition. By describing the Yiddish writer's homecoming to more indigenous Jewish styles and themes as "creative betrayal" or canonizing it as "classical Yiddish fiction," the two books signify a return to a Yiddish literary discourse less determined by its original context than by late twentieth-century critical concerns.