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A PAPER ON I.L. PERETZ

by Jillian Davidson

May 1990.

'And...the subject of this novel?'

'It hasn't got one,' answered Edouard brusquely, 'and perhaps that's the most astonishing thing about it. My novel hasn't got a subject. Yes, I know, it sounds stupid. Let's say, if you prefer it, it hasn't got one subject..."a slice of life", the naturalist school said. The great defect of that school is that it always cuts its slice in the same direction; in time, lengthwise. Why not in breadth? Or in depth? As for me I should like not to cut it at all. Please understand; I should like to put everything into my novel. I don't want any cut of the scissors to limit its substance at one point rather than at another. For more than a year now that I have been working at it, nothing happens to me that I don't put into it -everything I see, everything I know, everything that other people's lives and my own teach me...'

'And the whole thing stylized into art?' said Sophroniska, feigning the most lively attention, but no doubt a little ironically. Laura could not suppress a smile. Edouard shrugged his shoulders slightly and went on:

'And even that isn't what I want to do. What I want is to represent reality on the one hand, and on the other that effort to stylize it into art of which I have just been speaking.'

'My poor dear friend, you will make your readers die of boredom,' said Laura; as she could no longer hide her smile, she had made up her mind to laugh outright.

'Not at all. In order to arrive at this effect -do you follow me?- I invent the character of a novelist, whom I make my central figure; and the subject of the book, if you must have one, is just that very struggle between what reality offers him and what he himself desires to make of it.'...!

'And then I see exactly what will happen,' cried Laura; 'in this novelist of yours you won't be able to help painting yourself.'...

'No, no. I shall take care to make him very disagreeable.'

1 Laura was fairly started.

'That's just it; everybody will recognize you,' she said, bursting out into such hearty laughter that the others were caught by its infection.

'And is the plan of the book made up?' inquired Sophroniska, trying to regain her seriousness.

'Of course not.'

'What do you mean? Of course not!'

'You ought to understand that it's essentially out of the question for a book of this kind to have a plan. Everything would be falsified if anything were settled beforehand. I wait for reality to dictate to me.'

'But I thought you wanted to abandon reality.'

'My novelist wants to abandon it; but I shall continually bring him back to it. In fact that will be the subject; the struggle between the facts presented by reality and the ideal reality.'

The illogical nature of his remarks was flagrant -painfully obvious to everyone. It was clear that Edouard housed in his brain two incompatible requirements and that he was wearing himself out in the desire to reconcile them.

From André Gide, The Counterfeiters.

"A SPOKE IN A WHEEL -A STORY WITHIN A STORY"¹; THE STORY WITHIN
PERETZ'S STORIES.

He can be a tavernkeeper, a truck driver, a parson, a beggar, someone mysteriously touched by the magic wand of wisdom and the art of reciting, of remembering, of reinventing and enriching tales told and retold down through the centuries; a messenger from the times of myth and magic, older than history, to whom Irishmen of today listen spellbound for hours on end. I always knew that the intense emotion I felt on that trip to Ireland, thanks to the 'seanchai' was metaphorical, a way of hearing, through him, the storyteller, and of living the illusion that, sitting there squeezed in among his listeners, I was part of a Machiguenga audience.²

Curious but interesting is the fact that, although having never previously written a word on the subject of Jews, Mario Vargas Llosa made the title-hero of his most recent novel, The Storyteller none other than a Jew.³

If we are to take the narrator at his word, this, moreover, is a novel which Llosa has long been enthusing about and trying to

¹ The title-quote is taken from the opening paragraph of another Peretz story, The little stories of Yohanan, the teacher, "Gentlemen! I Yohanan the teacher, want to tell you a 'story'. And the 'story', which I want to tell you, will be like a spoke within a wheel -a story within a story." [sic] Peretz, [Yiddish], the Morning Freiheit, Prompt Press, U.S.A., vol. 6, p. 62.

² Mario Vargas Llosa, The Storyteller. A Novel, trans. by Helen Lane, Farrar Straus Giroux, N.Y., 1989, p. 165.

³ I am relying on the expertise of Dr. Evelyn Fishburn, a professor of Latin American literature at the London Polytechnic.

complete. Fascinated by "the fleeting, perhaps legendary, figures of those habladores who -by occupation, out of necessity, to satisfy a human whim- using the simplest, most time-hallowed expedients, the telling of stories, were the living sap that circulated and made the Machiguengas into a society, a people of interconnected and interdependent beings", his labours proved, however, to no avail.⁴ Frustrated persistently by "the difficulty of inventing in Spanish and within a logically consistent intellectual framework, a literary form that would suggest, with any reasonable degree of credibility, how a primitive man with a magico-religious mentality would go about telling a story", the Latin American author was forced, then, to resign himself to concentrating on other stories.⁵

This, therefore, is the outer-story in The Storyteller, of how the author himself relates to the self-styled "elusive" nature of his material. Such, indeed, is then an exemplary fictional case in point of the "elusive quarry", which historian Peter Burke has detailed so thoroughly in his study on popular culture in early modern Europe. The latter subject also "eludes the historian because he is a literate, self-conscious modern man who may find it difficult to comprehend people unlike himself, and also because the evidence for their attitudes and values, hopes and fears are so

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 157 & 106.

fragmentary..."⁶

In his personal search for discovery and conquest, Llosa was further hindered, though, by a considerable amount of mystery, from within, which he found surrounding, if not defending, the 'habladores' figures. This, he first explained as evidence that, howsoever westernized they might already have become, there were certain taboos which the Machiguengas refused to surrender; that 'mere' storytellers were the object of such secrecy and protection, he concluded, testified to how supremely vital they were to the tribal way of living. Towards the end of his novel, however, Llosa reached, or intuited, the climax of his discovery quite to the contrary: the Machiguengas were not, primarily, protecting the institution or the idea of the storyteller per se. They were, rather, protecting Llosa's old university friend, Saúl Zuratas, who had himself become one of their storytellers, and this showed, instead, how a stranger, who had turned into a Machiguenga, had really become, in their eyes, one of them.

Such then is the central story within Llosa's story, which also conveniently brings us to the probable significance of the Storyteller's Jewish identity. For, all awhile, Llosa had been working under the mistaken assumption that his friend Saúl had made Aliyah to Israel. "What else could the alibi of the Jew making the Return mean, except that on leaving Lima, Saúl Zuratas had

⁶ Peter Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, Harper & Row Publishers, N.Y., 1978, p. 65.

irrevocably decided that he was going to change his life, his name, his habits, his traditions, his god, everything he had been up until then?" Realising, however, the true nature and direction of his conversion, Llosa is able to follow and appreciate Saùl's identification with the small, marginal and nomadic Amazonian community. Saùl, as a Jew, was after all himself "a member of another community which had also been a wandering, marginal one throughout its history, a pariah among the world's societies". Additionally, his huge facial birthmark had rendered him a marginal among marginals, someone whose fate would forever carry the stigma of ugliness. Thus, "in a very subtle and personal way, by going to the Alto Urubamba to be born again, Saùl made his Aliyah." [my emphasis]⁷

Much of Saùl's story still, however, remains exasperatingly elusive and,

Where I find it impossible to follow him -an insuperable difficulty that pains and frustrates me- is in the next stage: the transformation of the convert into the storyteller. It is this facet of Saùl's story, naturally, that moves me most; it is what makes me think of it continually and weave it and unweave it a thousand times; it is what has impelled me to put it into writing in the hope that if I do so, it will cease to haunt me.⁸

⁷ Llosa, The Storyteller, p. 243.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 243-4.

II.

"Tradition is surely no more than the fruit of successful experiment." Ashley Dukes

When analysing the Jewish storytellers of the "new period of Jewish self-determination"⁹ in post-Haskalah/1882 Eastern Europe and "the paradigm of [their] return", it is agreed that one must necessarily begin with Isaac Leib Peretz [1852?-1915].¹⁰ In the first place, there was certainly no greater advocate or pursuer of modernity than he, and it follows, secondly, that upon experiencing a feeling of loss -an awareness that emancipation had exacted too high a price- his sense of that loss was all the more acute. Peretz's very first piece of literary creativity in Yiddish, Monish [1888] accordingly marked "a notable turning point" in the history of Yiddish literature. For herein, "folklore becomes a source of inspiration for Yiddish literature, a deep well of symbolic truth, to be interpreted by the modern artist and adapted to the spiritual needs of the modern Jew."¹¹

⁹ David G. Roskies, "Sholem Aleichem: Mythologist of the Mundane", A.J.S. Review no. 13, 1988, p. 28.

¹⁰ This statement finds agreement with a contention propounded by Roskies in a YIVO summer school lecture, in 1989.

¹¹ Dan Miron, "Folklore and Antifolklore in the Yiddish Fiction of the 'Haskala'", in Studies in Jewish Folklore, ed. by Frank Talmage, Assoc. for Jewish Studies, Camb., Mass., 1980, p. 248.

Peretz's Stories [1903]¹² shares much in common with Monish. Whilst both are partly autobiographical, the latter tells of the complete [one hesitates before calling it successful!] seduction of a Talmud prodigy, whose learning was worthy of bringing the Messiah, by the luring foreign voice and songs of Lilith in the guise of a German, possibly Christian, beauty. Thus juxtaposed, Stories almost seems to start from the point at which Monish finishes off. For, it relates the incomplete and uncertain seduction of an aspiring maskil, in pursuit of 'truth', by the tempting voice of a Polish seamstress who implores from him momentary redemption, through the telling of fantastical folktales.

Both Monish and Stories, furthermore, explore the intricate relationship between modern literature and folklore or, to borrow from Llosa's words, the problematics concerning "the transformation of the convert into the storyteller".¹³ Essentially, this can be detected in the author's complicated feelings -of equivocation and alienation- towards "the Jewish literary tradition", which he was self-professedly adapting for a modern audience. Peretz thus actually interrupts his poem Monish to complain, on the aside, of the difficulty of expressing individual love in a language which

¹² Stories first appeared in Hebrew on the eve of Passover, 1903, in the festival supplement of The Observer and only later in Yiddish, but Prof. Roskies has not been able to establish its first publishing date. See, Roskies' "Peretz's Creative Betrayal of the Jewish Folktale" [Yiddish] in Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division C, Jer. 1982, pp. 354-5. Some of the differences between the Hebrew and Yiddish version will be highlighted in this paper.

¹³ see p. 6 of this paper.

"is all blood and tears", and in which only "giants laugh and weep"; that is, in a language equipped only to describe communal persecution.¹⁴ Stories similarly betokens, but in a far more complex fashion -through a succession of stories within the story itself- the modern author's weaving in and out of, his hovering betwixt and between, and his acrobatic juggling up and down of traditional Jewish and non-Jewish literary sources.

In an essay entitled Escaping Jewishness, Peretz challenges the very raison d'être of a Jewish writer entering upon the world arena, by asking him of what particular contribution he has to offer: "What is Jewish and what is non-Jewish? In what way do we differ from others?"¹⁵ Ironically enough, the two most interesting interpretations of Stories differ in their answer to this question when it is applied to our text. Indeed, their identification of which of the stories within Stories are Jewish and which non-Jewish lies diametrically opposed to each other. This paper, therefore, proposes to explore these two contradictory readings by way of arriving at a richer appreciation of the narrative itself.

Professor David Roskies' approach to modern Jewish folktales is perhaps most akin to the anthropological method which has only recently been adopted and practised by historians, such as Peter

¹⁴ see D. Miron, A Traveler Disguised. The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1973, p. 62.

¹⁵ Peretz, trans. & ed. by Sol Liptzin, YIVO, N.Y., 1947, p. 358.

Burke and Robert Darnton, and which this paper, too, aspires to emulate. It is accordingly worth quoting Professor Darnton, even if at some considerable length, on what precisely he means by proposing this new orientation of cultural history towards anthropology. If called upon to give a theoretical definition of culture, anthropologists would, Darnton explains, no doubt explode in clan warfare but,

when they go into the bush, they use techniques for understanding oral traditions that can, with discretion, be applied to Western folklore. Except for some structuralists, they relate tales to the art of tale telling and to the context in which it takes place. They look for the way a raconteur adapts an inherited theme to his audience so that the specificity of time and place shows through the universality of the topos. They do not expect to find direct social comment or metaphysical allegories so much as a tone of discourse or a cultural style, which communicates a particular ethos and world view. "Scientific" folklore, as the French call it [American specialists often distinguish between folklore and "fakelore"], involves the compilation and comparison of tales according to the standardized schemata of tale types developed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. It does not necessarily exclude formalistic analysis such as that of Vladimir Propp, but it stresses rigorous documentation -the occasion of the telling, the background of the teller, and the degree of contamination from written sources.¹⁶

Roskies likewise stresses, first of all, the distance between a man of Peretz's peerage, and folklore: "It was easier, in fact, for this generation of moderns to drain swamps in Palestine or to organize tallith weavers into a labor union than to turn folklore

¹⁶ Robert Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre and other episodes in French cultural history, Penguin Bks, 1984, p. 23.

and fantasy into the substance of their art."¹⁷ Or similarly, as Roskies has said, in reference to Ansky's return to the Jewish people, it is a prevalent misconception that Ansky's generation, however alienated, could simply reach out with their hands to folklore and tradition, whereas nothing less than a full-scale expedition was, in fact, required.¹⁸ Folklore was thus as much of an "elusive quarry"¹⁹ for Peretz as it is for Mario Vargas Llosa, and, as it is, too, for the historian of early modern European popular culture.

Peretz's return to folklore was, subsequently, faulty in the root sense of that word, which stems from the Latin verb "fallere", to deceive. Or, in the terms of Roskies' own nomenclature, his return was selective, negotiated, and accompanied by values entirely foreign to the folk mentality. The result was, consequently, often far more radical than it was traditional. His art, in fact, amounted to no less than the first creative betrayal of Jewish storytelling, which Roskies can amply demonstrate as, for example, in the case of Peretz's The Magician, with due reference to Beatrice Weinreich's schemata of Yiddish folktales about the prophet Elijah -the nearest Yiddish equivalent to Aarne and

¹⁷ Roskies, Sholem Aleichem: Mythologist of the Mundane, p. 30.

¹⁸ Roskies, "Ansky and the paradigm of return", a paper delivered at the Rapaport Memorial Conference, The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity since Emancipation, 1989, J.T.S.

¹⁹ see p. 4 of this paper.

Thompson's folklore typology.²⁰ Thus, it is only on a superficial level that The Magician resembles the traditional form of an Elijah story. More profoundly, however, the introduction of modern scepticism -the miracle is actually questioned by the would-be beneficiaries- represents a "subversion" [Roskies] or "contamination" [Darnton] of the original type.

On the one hand, of course, the storyteller's nervous meandering in and out of his various inventions and improvisations, as he wanders along the bank of Warsaw's River Vistula back towards his little attic room, bespeaks a sense of great discomfort with each story within Stories or, with folklore in general regardless of which, in truth, belongs, albeit perhaps only remotely, to a Jewish and which to a non-Jewish heritage. Hence, the protagonist's thoughts of uncertainty about not having a story with a princess ready for the seamstress. In the Hebrew first version, Peretz thus despairs: "frowning his brow, who knows whether he would be able to tell her a story today. From where is he to get her such stories [with princesses]? He rose from his restaurant table -but now his mind was very tired- this was going to be one of those days when he would have to hunt for some story-material like a dog chases after summer-flies..."[m.e.]²¹ Still more doubtful is the narrator of the Yiddish version: "But, today, he won't have a story to give her. His mind was confused and restless like the water dashing up

²⁰ see Roskies, "Peretz's Creative Betrayal" [Yiddish] p. 351.

²¹ Peretz, "Stories", The Writings of I.L. Peretz [Hebrew], Dvir Ltd, Tel Aviv, 1926, vol. 8, p. 114.

against the bank. His thoughts wandered vaguely, like the formless clouds overhead."²² Hence, similarly, his feelings of uneasiness when trying to formulate the story of a blood libel; he is simply neither ready for, nor accustomed to, telling tales of that magnitude and force: "'Not for me,' he thinks. 'That needs a stronger pen than mine.'"²³

On the other hand, when Stories is placed specifically in the context of when it was first published - "'אָפּקום' on the eve of Passover, 1903"²⁴ - a date which can only be associated with the pogrom of Kishinev which, again 'אָפּקום', broke out on the first day of Easter, on April 6 1903-, Roskies claims that the blood libel stories involved the narrator qua Jew far more emotionally and personally than any story about some princess. And, in support of this connection, one might very well add, as further historical background, that in the early months of 1903, a rumour of a peasant slain for Jewish ritual purposes was picked up and propagated by the popular Bessarabian yellow sheet Bessarabets, which thereupon, falsely charging the Jews with the crime, called upon the Christian people to wreak their vengeance.²⁵

²² A trans. of the Yiddish version of "Stories" can be found in Maurice Samuel's Prince of the Ghetto, J.P.S., Phil., 1948, [pp. 133-150], p. 135.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 149.

²⁴ Roskies, "Peretz's Creative Betrayal", p. 354.

²⁵ see Louis Greenberg, The Jews In Russia. The Struggle for Emancipation, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1976, vol. II, pp. 50-1.

The context of the Passover festival itself is also of import. Observance of this festival was usually the last surviving ritual retained by emancipated Jews. As one repentant renegade reminisced, "Passover was kept, even among the most progressive. It remained a festival of remembrance, joyful because it recalled not only the Exodus from Egypt, but one's own childhood in the shtetl. The seder was observed, in a highly abbreviated form. Even baptized Jews kept the seder. Though they did not themselves make the holiday feast, they welcomed invitations from their not-yet baptized friends."²⁶ That Peretz's storyteller needs to be informed by a restaurant waitress that it is "a Jewish holy day...their Easter",²⁷ shows, therefore, how very far removed he has become from his Jewish background. Incidentally, in the Hebrew version, it is at this, and only at this, point that the narrator is identified as Peretz himself: "Peretz" left the restaurant laughing."²⁸ In the Yiddish version, however, we are simply told that "In the street, he burst into laughter."^[m.e.]²⁹

Roskies is, of course, fully aware of what he calls "the carnival aspect"³⁰ of the festival cycle in the lives of Eastern European Jewry, and perhaps this appellation is a conscious reference to

²⁶ Pauline Wengeroff, Memoirs of a Grandma, quoted in Lucy Dawidowicz's The Golden Tradition. Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1984, p. 164-5.

²⁷ Maurice, p. 140.

²⁸ Writings, p. 117.

²⁹ Maurice, p. 140.

³⁰ Roskies, YIVO summer lecture.

works such as Darnton's which emphasise the world of carnival: "Folklorists have made historians familiar with the ceremonial cycles that marked off the calendar year for early modern man. The most important of these was the cycle of carnival and Lent, a period of revelry followed by a period of abstinence. During carnival, the common people suspended the normal rules of behaviour and ceremoniously reversed the social order and turned it upside down in riotous procession."³¹ In like fashion, Roskies has recorded that "the folk apprehended the great myths of creation, revelation and redemption through ritual objects and local custom. In particular, it was the holiday cycle -... and, above all, preparing and celebrating the seder- it was on these communal and familial occasions that the ordinary Jew rich or poor, male or female, experienced the transcendant power of Jewish myth."³²

To take Roskies, however, a step further than he himself has gone on this point, in Stories, we witness an opposition parallel to the popular one of carnival and Lent, in the opposition between carnival and Passover. For, although the polarization here is not the traditional one between "jours gras" [a meat day] and "jours maigre" [a day of abstinence from meat], but, comparably, a bread day and a day of abstinence from bread, it certainly matches Roskies' differentiation between what relates to non-Jewish carnival texts and what to Jewish carnival texts. Afterall, while

³¹ Darnton, p. 87.

³² Roskies, Sholem Aleichem: Mythologist of the Mundane, p. 42.

in the restaurant, the storyteller is eating and playing around with bread, and the plot of his princess story revolves crucially around the element of bread, whereas, back in his room, he bitterly thinks that, in obedience to the laws of Passover, there is not a crumb of bread lying around, and the blood libel stories which he thinks up there, presuppose a bread-free setting.³³

From this context of Passover 1903, Roskies has accordingly argued, when comparing the conclusion of the original Hebrew version of Stories, in which the storyteller finally decides to tell the Polish girl a dreadful story without princesses -that is, a blood libel story- with the non-ending of the Yiddish version of a few years later, it follows that in the former "the 'pintele Yid' carried the day". But, in the Yiddish version, there is absolutely

³³ The element of bread also shows, of course, that a substratum of social realism underlies the fantasies and escapist entertainment of folktales. Peretz's Stories, indeed, fits in remarkably with Eugen Weber's whole argument in his essay, "Fairies and Hard Facts: The Reality of Folktales", in Journal of the History of Ideas, XL II, 1981, pp. 93-113. Especially though, "When character in folk tales get gifts or asks for them, when they are granted three wishes and so on, their ambitions are very simple: they dream of better clothes and better places in which to live, but above all they dream of food -pots that will cook endless porridge, tables or table-cloths that set themselves with meals, fairy bread that cannot be eaten out of existence, cubby holes that secrete bread and milk. A proverb of the poor Cévennes makes clear that food is the most prized of presents, and likely to be consumed at once: 'He who appreciates the gift closes his teeth on it.'" One is naturally reminded of Peretz's Bontsha the silent, and also his Travel Pictures which similarly mix reality with fantasy; Roskies argument, in his article about Sholem Aleichem, that Peretz was committed to a strict separation between fact and fancy, whereas, "in contrast, Sholem Aleichem never abandoned his commitment to critical realism" [pp. 30-1]. The anthropological-historical approach to folklore insists, however, that to prove all this does not take the argument very far.

is, therefore, unacceptable.

no way that we can know which story he will tell." [m.e.]³⁴

In the words of Peretz himself, from the same aforementioned article, Escaping Jewishness, the Hebrew version literally proved that as a source of inspiration, "Blood is thicker than water, and that the national instinct persists. It is at times befogged, silenced, deluged by wordly^d considerations, but then it reawakens more vigorous, more vociferous than ever."³⁵ Truly, the blood libel was able to arouse the storyteller's Jewish conscience and so conquer, or literally dam, that foreign muse, or "hermitage",³⁶ of many an aspiring Polish writer -the River Vistula.

Derek Wax's literary adaptation of Stories, which is entitled Stories, a play by Derek Wax based on a story by Isaac Loeb Peretz, falls in direct opposition to Roskies' literary critique.³⁷ Since Wax is, though, probably less well known than Roskies -at least outside of England-, it might be appropriate to give him a brief introduction here. Having read English at Oxford, Wax is currently the staff director at the National Theatre, London where, last year, he worked on the award-winning production of Joshua Sobel's play, Ghetto and co-authored for the production a well-researched and much praised programme brochure. He also staged, last June, at

³⁴ Roskies, "Peretz's Creative Betrayal", p. 354.

³⁵ Liptzin, p. 364.

³⁶ Tadeusz Konwicki, A Minor Apocalypse, trans. from the Polish by Richard Lourie, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, N.Y. 1983, p. 45.

³⁷ Unpublished; I am grateful to Derek Wax for giving me a copy.

the National, two platform performances of his own "inventive adaptation"³⁸ of Peretz's "Hasidic" tale The Wandering Melody, which like Stories deals with the problem, nay impossibility, of sharing a tune or story, which originates in the confines of the [hasidic] shtetl, with the outside world, without changing, or subverting it: "Everything depends on who sings and what he sings... With the same letters of the alphabet, you write, on the one hand, the mystic words of the Holy Writ and, on the other hand, the greatest blasphemies."³⁹ Finally, Wax is now working on the National's new production of Martin Sherman's Bent. From all this, it can, then, be well surmised that Derek Wax, although an autodidact when it comes to Jewish literature and history, has a great interest and involvement in dramatical pieces with a Jewish content.

Although Wax does, further, move back and forth between text and context, and background information does play an important role in his work, so much so that the written compilation of his Stories, which is forty-four pages long devotes a quarter of its space to "background reading" -opening with extracts from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Art of the Storyteller" and including, inter alia, extracts from Primo Levi's poem Passover, pertinent quotes from Janusz Korczak's diary on the importance of fairy-tales for children and the romantic attraction he felt towards the Warsaw

³⁸ Having not seen it, I rely on The Jewish Quarterly, no. 135, Autumn 1989, p. 34.

³⁹ Liptzin, p. 236.

Vistula as against the river Vistula near Cracow, statistics gleaned from Yisrael Gutman's The Jews of Warsaw, and, naturally, a biographical note on Peretz... -, his research does not, however, always have the backing of sound Jewish scholarship. Wax has subsequently set his version of Stories in the year 1912, connecting the blood libel stories with a blood libel case, which occurred in Kiev in 1911. Undoubtedly this libel is of historical significance, but it certainly does not occupy the same primacy of place in Jewish memory or literary consciousness, which the Kishinev pogroms have most definitely held. What is more, Wax has to work with an additional agenda, his own audience, which, in the case of Stories, consists mostly of seminar students from the Spiro Institute For The Study Of Jewish History And Culture. This present context is of equal weight to him as is the historical side, and for this reason alone, it should not come as a surprise to find that he has added another temporal dimension to the picture -that of the protagonist, "now in his sixties", living in postwar London, 1955. What exactly the flashforwards add to the overall scenario is not, however, at all convincing; but, perhaps the most senseless part comes in Wax's flashback scene of when "young Jacob", as he is here called, has returned home for a family 'seder' service, and is asked by his father to repeat the plagues after him in English.

Where Wax differs from Roskies is, however, quite illuminating: the fantastical stories, according to his interpolation are interwoven Nahman of Bratslav stories, whereas the blood libel

stories are taken from scenes of the seder "as Polish antisemitic folklore has portrayed it..."⁴⁰. "Brought up on different 'tales'", Wax elaborates, "the anti-semitic Polish folklore, which believes Jews to be the perpetrators of sinister practices, she will only allow him to kiss her, if he finishes each story with a happy ending."⁴¹ Thus, in one flashback scene, Young Jacob is telling the seamstress, called Anna, the Nahman of Bratslav story of the seven beggars, which is a supreme case of a story within a story, but inconveniently for its new narrator, it has no ending—the seventh beggar does not appear in the original. This annoys the new listener, who feels cheated out of of a happy ending:⁴²

Anna: You think I'm nothing, don't you?

Young Jacob: What do you want me to tell you? This story is very old. Only six of the beggars tell their tales. And the writer of this tale said that we won't hear the story of the seventh beggar until the arrival of the Messiah.

Do you understand?

Anna: Jesus?

Young Jacob: The Jews don't believe that...

Anna: But the Jews killed him. That's a true story, isn't it?

[Pause.]

Young Jacob: It happened a long time ago.

Did you like 'The Story of the Seven Beggars.'?

Anna: Yes.

[She plays with the tips of her long, white fingers, with their needle-scars. Then after a pause she leans forward and kisses him gently on the lips. He tries to embrace her.]

Don't!

It is true that this interpretation contains within it a fundamental methodological problem which, in line with the argument

⁴⁰ Wax, p. 27.

⁴¹ Wax, p. 44.

⁴² Wax, pp. 16-7.

presented in this paper thus far, holds under suspicion the possibility that Peretz might have read the Nahman of Bratslav stories before 1907 [i.e. four years after writing Stories], the year in which Martin Buber's German rendition of them was first published. Prior to 1907, it remains questionable, then, as to how familiar Peretz was with Hasidic tales. Comparing Peretz to the great parodist of Nahman, Yosef Perl [1773-1839], Miron has accordingly said "What Perl knew about Hasidism, Peretz himself never dreamt of!"⁴³ The status of hasidic tales as folkliterature is, moreover, most uncertain: "...hasidic literature [particularly the stories of Reb Nahman of Bratslav]... hardly originated as folk literature, though it may have eventually become part of it." [m.e.]⁴⁴ Thus, in one sense or another, when it comes to Hasidism, as Gershom Scholem has stated, we are all disciples of Buber's interpretation, but "there might be a problem in relating the interpretation to the phenomenon itself."⁴⁵

Ironically, however, despite this methodological factor, or perhaps even because of it, Wax's interpolation makes for a more interesting piece of creative betrayal than Roskies could himself ever have imagined. For, not "only" does Young Jacob try to subvert the Polish blood libel folktales by cheating the accusers, if not history itself, of their cruel victory, but, instead of

⁴³ Peretz course lecture, Columbia, Fall 1989.

⁴⁴ Miron, "Yiddish Fiction of the Haskala", p. 247.

⁴⁵ Gershom Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish spirituality, Schocken Bks, N.Y., 1978, p. 230.

leaving the Bratslav stories unended to signify man's wait for the coming of Messiah, Wax's storyteller constantly interrupts his tales because of his impatience over the seamstress' next coming! As old Jacob recalls on Passover, 1955: "She loved a happy ending. But I broke them up. I had to save something, to make sure she'd come the following week... There were walls within walls. Just like the water-palace. Inside the stories there were other stories. She didn't like that. What she liked most was a happy ending."⁴⁶ What, indeed, could be a more radical subversion than this!

George Steiner, in his most recent book, has pronounced a provocative bid to construe a society consisting solely of the primary, and devoid of meta-texts, or, texts about texts, paintings or music. Asked to explain a complicated étude, so Steiner cites, Schumann sat down and played it a second time precisely because the most "exposed", and thereby most engaged and responsible, act of interpretation is that of performance. Only critiques from within, critiques in action are, accordingly, to gain admittance to the proposed new culture of "real presences": "Literary-academic criticism of George Eliot's Middlemarch is distinguished [see F.R. Leavis]. Our imagined culture will, however, subsist without it."⁴⁷ By contrast, James Joyce's critical experiencing of Homer's the Odyssey is answerable to the original in a way in which no non-creative criticism can be because he "makes the past text a present

⁴⁶ Wax, p. 19.

⁴⁷ see fn. 48.

presence"⁴⁸ and so places at risk the stature and fortunes of his own work. "To what save pride of intellect or professional peerage, is the reviewer, the critic, the academic expert accountable?"⁴⁹

Judging by Steiner's criteria, in Yiddish literature, for example, Isaac Bashevis Singer's story The Last Demon [1959] would definitely gain entrance into the new society as a text which makes Peretz's Monish, a real presence. Derek Wax's Stories would also probably be safely 'in'. But, according to Steiner's ins and outs, Roskies's articles, [together, of course, with this paper!], would find itself "in exile" [to use Steiner's favourite term!] The resultant loss would, however, be immense. For, making Peretz's story into a present presence without making it into an historical presence is, according to the above-argued tenets of this paper, unacceptable, and the very idea of it explodes the untenable nature of Steiner's recommendation, at least with regards to Yiddish literature, where there can be no creative "response which is, in the root sense, responsible",⁵⁰ without scholarship.

E.M. Forster's refusal in his lectures Aspects of the Novel [1927] to deal with chronology is likewise unacceptable. Whilst, instead of creating a society without any literary critics, he 'merely'

⁴⁸ George Steiner, Real Presences. Is there anything in what we say?, Faber & Faber, London, 1989, p. 14.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 8.

calls for visualizing the English novelists "seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room -all writing their novels simultaneously."⁵¹ His reasons for desiring such a vision stem, however, from a deep sense of modesty, [of which no one would accuse Steiner!] and fear that whoever classifies books by time normally does so without having the sufficient equipment or knowledge. It is, then, in awe of "pseudo-scholarship" that he says that "Literary tradition is the borderland lying between literature and history, and the well-equipped critic will spend much time there and enrich his judgement accordingly. We cannot go there because we have not read enough. We must pretend it belongs to history and cut it off accordingly. We must refuse to have anything to do with chronology."⁵² To re-emphasise our point here, though, the reviewer of, in this instance, Peretz's "folktales" must strive to act as both literary critic and historian.

Perhaps, though, we would do well to bear in mind at this point the theoretical and academic mockery of Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian master of invented footnotes, quotations and even authors. In his fiction Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote, he thus tells of an imaginary French author who decided to compose not "another Quixote -which is easy- but the Quixote itself." [sic]⁵³

⁵¹ E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, H.B.J. Book, N.Y., 1955, p. 9.

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

⁵³ Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths. Selected Stories & Other Writings, New Directions pub., N.Y., 1964, p. 39.

The first method which Menard prescribed towards achieving this end was through learning a fluent Spanish, recovering the Catholic faith, battling with the Moors or the Turk, and discarding the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918; in other words, through being Miguel de Cervantes. He soon dismissed this method as too easy. "Rather as impossible! my reader will say. Granted, but the undertaking was impossible from the very beginning and of all the impossible ways of carrying it out, this was the least interesting. To be, in the twentieth century, a popular novelist of the seventeenth seemed to him to be a diminution. To be, in some way, Cervantes and reach the Quixote seemed less arduous to him -and, consequently, less interesting- than to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard."⁵⁴

Although a recognisedly impossible undertaking, Menard nonetheless succeeded in producing, quite paradoxically, a text verbally identical to, and yet "almost infinitely richer"⁵⁵ than, the former Quixote. "It is a revelation to compare Menard's Don Quixote with Cervantes'."⁵⁶ They contain the same words, but they read so entirely differently. Of course, all this smacks very much of scholarly debunking; its message for, and relevance to, the subject of this paper is, however, seriously and genuinely instructive. For, it establishes the truism that all readings and writings are

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43.

misreadings and miswritings; all storytelling is perpetual subversion and re-invention. To return to our opening Llosa quote, the art of the storyteller is that of "reciting, of remembering, of reinventing and enriching."⁵⁷

With this firmly in mind, Roskies's comment that "when looking for authenticity, one finds forgery"[m.e.]⁵⁸ has a most perplexing ring to it. Does he not realize that even the very word "story", in every language with which this writer is well acquainted, has the double meaning of a tale, on the one hand and a lie, on the other. In French, for instance, "un conteur" means both a storyteller and a liar; in German, too, "Märchen" means a tale or a fib. Perhaps only in the Hebrew language does the word for story also signify a fact!! Should we, one might well ask, really expect authenticity from a storyteller? *histoire*

Such is the question now being addressed -and the title's question mark is the crucial point since fakery is a matter of context- by the British Museum's current exhibition, "Fake? The Art of Deception", a history of art shown through the inauthentic! Included amongst the frauds on display is, of course, James Macpherson's "translation" of the ancient Celtic poetry of the nonexistent Gaelic bard, Ossian [reputedly third-century], which was tremendously popular and influential all over Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries -the "great age of

⁵⁷ see p. 3 of this paper.

⁵⁸ YIVO summer lecture, 1989.

faking".⁵⁹

Peretz did, however, demand authenticity of himself and his confreres, in his essay Advice to the Estranged and so too in What Our Literature Needs. "If you really want to return, then do so with all honesty...",⁶⁰ seeing with Jewish eyes, feeling with a Jewish heart and hearing from the Jewish soul. "The key word is 'enjoy'."⁶¹ At the same time, though, Peretz insisted upon an all-encompassing, authentic return: "Being Jewish is dynamic. Everything in the Jewish world and at all times: not a single authentically Jewish moment should ever be erased."⁶² In brief, "I must try everything and enjoy everything."

In making these demands, Peretz' was, furthermore, not without disciples. The second generation of Yiddish literary critics, who, collectively, constituted what may plausibly be called the Nizer school of criticism, accordingly read literature mainly on the basis of these two guiding principles -on the basis of sincerity and an all-encompassing Jewishness.

This dualism contained within itself, however, an obvious and inherent paradox, signs of which can be detected in Peretz's essay

⁵⁹ "In London, A Catalogue of Fakes", The New York Times, Sunday, April 29, 1990, p. 43.

⁶⁰ Liptzin, p. 346.

⁶¹ Voices From The Yiddish. Essays, Memoirs, Diaries, ed. by Howe & Greenberg, Ann Arbor, Uni. of Michigan Press, 1972, p. 26.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 30.

On History. Herein, Peretz tries to prove to a "proster yid" that he cannot truly love Jews because he does not know them. Through posing the analogous question of whether this Jew loves his whole family, the latter replies jovially that he cannot be expected to since, for instance, one is a confirmed atheist, and besides there are some whom he does not even know. Thus, the simple Jew falls into the trap which Peretz has set him, but Peretz himself fails to realize the power of his own analogy. For, if a religious Jew cannot really love his atheist cousin, it follows that a secular Jewish writer cannot write authentically about hasidim. Knowledge alone cannot ensure an authentic return.

At best, such authenticity could only be attained, according to Peretz, very briefly and only subjectively; and, if not by him personally, then by a fictitious persona in one of his monologues. [Perhaps this explains the absence of Peretz's name in the far less confident Yiddish version of Stories] Authenticity of this kind tends, however, to be utterly faulty; it is often based on a lie, and the paradoxical truth of this can best be seen in Peretz's "Hasidic" tale Between Two Peaks [1901]. For herein, although the reader does not find out what the Brisker Rov sees, he or she does know what actually lies before him: poverty-stricken hasidim, who are dressed in tatters, dance in dirty, narrow shtetl streets. The Biale Rebbe, by contrast, who believes in the importance of dancing, has a mystical experience watching them: "On the meadows with their sparkle, groups of Hasidim were strolling. The satin caftans and even those of cotton- the old and ragged, as well as

the new ones- were glittering like mirrors. And the little fires which surged between the grasses would tease and touch and be reflected from the holiday garments. It seemed as if lights were dancing around every Hasid with exaltation and tenderness..."⁶³ This vision is, however, abruptly interrupted by the Litvak's reprimand, forcing him back to mundane Halachic requirements, that it is time for the evening prayer, thus demonstrating that subjective truth can only be captured most fleetingly.

From this, it should now seem more understandable why Peretz could never boast of a permanent literary style nor agenda. The essential part for him had to be the longing; to long for something, to enjoy it, and then to begin longing for something else. Longing is afterall what unites the two souls in Stories: "...and yet there is something that draws them to each other. Both are filled with longing for happiness; both have missed it; both are willing to be deluded for a few minutes."⁶⁴ The storyteller's employ of the story-within-a-story device is, furthermore, an expedient trick determined to keep the seamstress longing for a happy ending. With a happy ending achieved, not only would she leave but, should the fourth boy reach the princess, "that would be a pity. He would be left without anything -he would not even have a vain-longing to look back on and self-reproaches to cling to."⁶⁵

⁶³ I.L. Peretz. Selected Stories, ed. by Howe & Greenberg, Schocken Press, N.Y., 1975, p. 94.

⁶⁴ Maurice, p. 135.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 145.

Enjoyment, and even art itself, can only really thrive in a condition of longings, as Peretz himself forcefully states in his A Trip Into The Future. For, in the social politic of the future where one no longer needs to grow bread, since chemistry can make it instead, one can also no longer appreciate a good storyteller: "Once a humorist, Sholem Aleichem, happened to pass through. He was invited to a meal. He read from his works and all -yawned."⁶⁶

Hersh D. Nomberg [1874-1927], one of Peretz's Warsaw coterie, wrote an autobiographical essay, on the fourth anniversary of his master's death, in which he relates how "Peretz used to tell a story, I think from Arabian Nights, but he used to adorn it and ornament it with his own colors and pictures, and when he told it, that always meant he was in high spirits."⁶⁷ The story involved a young prince who, blessed with every worldly finery, still pines for some unbeknown grace. Beyond his palace, lies a beautiful, prohibited garden. The prince, though fully cognisant of the warning that he must not enter the garden, is overwhelmed by the temptation. He, therefore, steals into the greenery, and discovers a whole world of delightful enchantment. Upon picking his first flower, however, he finds lumpy mud in his hand; upon stroking the animal closest to him, he finds himself touching a hideous beast. A pattern sets in: whatever he wants to hold repulses him, until a sudden heaviness possesses him and a dwarf springs forth from a

⁶⁶ Liptzin, p. 290.

⁶⁷ quoted in Dawidowicz's The Golden Tradition, p. 293.

cave, bringing him a mirror, in which the prince sees the visage of an ugly, old man. "This struggle with desire, longing, and revulsion went on all of Peretz's life. He used to tell this story as the final answer to all possible questions, as the word of ultimate wisdom. And that was always when he was at fever pitch, when his eyes glowed and smiled. I heard this story many, many times from him and always I had the impression he was reciting his credo. What is plucked, attained, felt, is slime and disgust; only longing is beautiful and attractive."

III.

The American Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein [1896-1971], in his essay on Peretz and the Jewish nineteenth century [1947], attributed to Peretz the admirable task of "creating single-handed a Jewish nineteenth century".⁶⁸ Most significantly, this can be understood as implying that Peretz introduced Romanticism into the Jewish cultural scene. For, in the footsteps of other leading Romantic thinkers -the early Schiller and the later Fichte, Schelling and Jacobi, Tieck and the Schlegels when they were young, Chateaubriand and Byron, Coleridge and Carlyle, Kierkegard, Stirner, Nietzsche, Baudelaire- Peretz attacked and weakened the Classical belief that "there existed a reality, a structure of things, a 'rerum natura', which the qualified inquirer could see, study and, in principle, get right." Truth, in the age of the European Romantics, was accordingly no longer regarded as an objective structure, independent of its seeker. On the contrary, "the common assumption of the Romantics which runs counter to the 'philosophia perennis' is that answers to the great questions are not to be discovered so much as to be invented. They are not something found, they are something literally made."[m.e.]⁶⁹

Perhaps of all the philosophers and poets of Romanticism, Heinrich Heine was the one with whom Peretz could most strongly and closely

⁶⁸ Voices From The Yiddish, p. 53.

⁶⁹ Isaiah Berlin in a preface to H.G. Schenk, The Mind Of The European Romantics, Oxford Uni. Press, 1979, pp. xv & xvi.

identify. Certainly, Peretz was greatly influenced by this German-Jewish "convert" to Protestantism, who, so Peretz argued, could not spread his wings in the dark, narrow ghetto, but was Jewish in his every expression, in his every jest and in his every earnestness.⁷⁰ Heine was, perhaps, even Peretz's prime model of the ideal synthesis, which was to be arrived at through an interchange and exchange of Jewish spiritual treasures [the thesis] and European culture [the antithesis]. Heine's story, The Rabbi of Bacherach, in particular, represents an exemplary synthesis of this kind, a synthesis, moreover, which Peretz strove to realize in his Stories, without conclusive effect.

Begun in 1824, but not resumed until it "acquired a new and terrible relevance"⁷¹ in 1840, the year of the Damascus blood libel, Heine's The Rabbi of Bacherach is set in the late Middle Ages, the period which played so evocative a role in literary Romanticism. The setting is, however, by no means limited, but, rather, all-encompassing in the way Peretz himself called for. Thus, although Peretz, not unduly, berated his fellow writers by asking them where the Sephardic Jews were in Jewish literature, the title-figure here, the Rabbi himself was educated in Spain, and meets up with his old comrade, the Spaniard Don Isaac, in Frankfurt. Peretz further rallied Jewish authors to go back to the Bible, and to proceed therefrom. And, Heine's tale itself has a

⁷⁰ see Liptzin pp. 338 & 354.

⁷¹ S.S. Praver, Heine's Jewish Comedy. A Study of Portraits of Jews and Judaism, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 39.

firm biblical foundation -the Rabbi is afterall called Abraham, his wife is Sarah, and like the foremost biblical patriarch and matriarch, they lamentably have no child. In addition, the question of their having to wait seven years before marriage and then again go seven years begging is an explicit allusion to the biblical story of Jacob and Rebecca.

The Rabbi, moreover, opens with Abraham presiding over the first evening ritual meal of the Passover festival. Celebrating spiritually and joyously in the company of family, disciples and other close ones, they read together from "a very curious book called the Agade, whose contents are a strange mixture of legends of their forefathers, wondrous tales of Egypt, remarkable stories, questions of theology, prayers and festival songs."⁷² From this text, not even legendary Kings and Queens are missing, and so Abraham turns aside to play on the old saying that on this night a Jewish father regards himself as a King, calling to his wife, "'Rejoice, oh my Queen!' But she replied, smiling sadly, 'The Prince is wanting'"⁷³ -not, in this instance, for finding any princess sleeping yonder, but for asking the questions which relate to the meaning of the Passover seder.

Two strangers have, meanwhile entered, supposedly in order to partake of the religious ceremonies. Upon discovering, though,

⁷² H. Heine, Jewish Stories and Hebrew Melodies, Marcus Wiener Publishing, N.Y., 1987, p. 25.

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 29.

that these unknown guests have in fact brought with them the corpse of a dead baby so as to incite a blood libel case against the rabbi, in mid-service, Abraham immediately flees from Bacherach taking with him only his wife. They run away from the seder table, from the blood libel, just as Peretz's narrator ran away from his home seder at the mention of the plagues in Egypt, and the ritual spilling of the wine in commemoration of the Egyptian blood which was shed. Both the rabbi and the storyteller must thereafter be hounded by guilt. Whether Abraham and Sara will, nonetheless, settle contentedly in their new environment, in Frankfurt, remains unsettled. Heine left the work open and unfinished, very much like Peretz's own Stories.

A creative adaptation of Peretz's Stories could, then, be splendidly enhanced by the inclusion of this story by Heine. Indeed, the narrator of the former, who had never seen a mountain, but would say to the seamstress: "'High, very high, very high up...' and she would lift up her eyes and follow his forefinger"⁷⁴ could, with excellent reason, very well have continued by thus weaving in Heine's tale from the banks of the Rhine: "'High, very high, very high up...'" ... "Where the hills and cliffs with their romantic castles rise more defiantly, and where a wilder, sterner dignity prevails, there lies, like a fearful legend of old times, the gloomy and ancient town of Bacherach..."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Maurice, p. 136.

⁷⁵ Heine, p. 21.