

Yisroel Shtern's "Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism" and the Path of Yiddish Literature

Jon Levitow (2006)

Why doesn't literature matter more – to the average person, first and foremost, but by the same token to the educated one, occupied with the pursuit of worldly success? This question lies at the heart of Yisroel Shtern's, "Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism." Ironically, given Shtern's argument in the essay that the job of criticism is to bring "clarity" to the "chaotic" world of the imagination, his essay may not be easy for many readers to follow¹ (Shtern 11). However, Shtern's answer is simple enough: literature loses its relevance by failing to address the basic spiritual question phrased in the title of a Y.L. Peretz story, "What is the Soul?" Moreover, whereas Peretz distinguishes himself in Shtern's analysis precisely by his artistry in handling this question – and by treating it above all *as* a question, criticism has unfortunately not followed his example and so has rendered itself insignificant.

"Crowns" begins with a diagnosis of the average person's limited, fragmentary experience of the world. Although Shtern speaks ominously late in the essay of "the heavy curse and the gigantic confusion in which our days are enmeshed" (8), his analysis begins on a satiric note, imagining a typical person who gives money to a beggar and afterwards congratulates himself on doing his duty (5). Then, says Shtern, "he jumps on a tram, takes out his weekly planner to check a telephone number -- and has forgotten the whole thing." (5) Similarly, when most people read, they make no attempt to place individual works into a larger context. Why would they? The point is to enjoy the literary experience itself. The common reader, says Shtern, ...picks up each one separately, divorced from everything else. Every book exists on its own; every writer is different. The reader takes them as they come. He has enough to think about with what's *in* the book."(3)

Such readers, says Shtern, don't care what one literary work has to do with another. Their pleasure consists in consuming each piece of literature as it comes to hand, unrelated to anything before or after. They have no reason to take a broader view.

In contrast, the critical person thinks, combines, and compares one experience with another. For example, Shtern says, after giving money to

¹ All notes by Jon Levitow; page references are to "Crowns", in his translation on this site.

someone in the street, such a person wonders about the injustice of life -- even if this does no one any good. Simply by thinking and without producing any results, the critical individual has reached a more elevated level than that of the unreflective person. Shtern says of such thinkers,

Their joy is not that of a dog over meat. It is purer and more refined because along with their enjoyment they succeed in extracting, if not all, at least some of the reasons or results of their enjoyment. (2)

Thinking means to go beyond the present satisfaction or frustration, back to its causes or forward to its repercussions. Rather than encountering things in isolation, the critical point of view brings them into juxtaposition in order to deduce underlying principles. According to Shtern, “Even if it can’t encompass the entire chain of processes, it (criticism) seeks the law implicit within things.” (2)

Most importantly critical thought performs an essential function when it comes to literature, gathering the disparate pieces of literary experience within a single frame, connecting what seems disconnected to the average reader. It belongs specifically to the critic, Shtern says, to fashion “the endless tulle ribbon connecting and uniting all artistic discoveries.” (3) Or, as Shtern says elsewhere,

Criticism doesn’t rest content with absorbing into itself more and more literature. Nor does it take its pleasures strewn about or in isolation. It stokes the forge, to hammer out the barrel hoops which hold in and hold together. Dramatic events and characters don’t exist on their own -- each is made a piece of an imagined whole. (4)

In contrast to the passive consumption represented by the most common kind of literary awareness, criticism approaches the data of literary experience actively, building out of them new and ever-more broadly encompassing unities. Shtern makes clear in the course of “Crowns” that this critical ingenuity has its limits. It has not been able to take the lead in the development of Yiddish literature in general, and it has failed to grasp the significance of Peretz in particular. However, Shtern does not mean that the critical project serves no purpose. Far from it: criticism “should and must exist,” he says (6). It mainly has fallen short, in his analysis, by not casting its net wide enough and so by leaving essential considerations out of the picture. It has failed in other words to perform its proper function. The goal of “Crowns” is to tell us exactly what has been overlooked.

It may help to locate these ideas within the literary history familiar to readers of English – rather than that familiar to Shtern himself – particularly because on this issue he fits neatly into the main current of early 20th century modern or “Modernist” criticism in Britain and America,

represented most notably by T.S. Eliot in essays such as, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1917) and “The Metaphysical Poets” (1923). Shtern apparently did not know English, and Eliot’s criticism is not likely to have appeared by the twenties in either Polish or German, languages which we can assume Shtern did know. Nevertheless, in Eliot’s view as in Shtern’s, what appears fragmentary to the “ordinary” person acquires significance only within a larger, encompassing perspective. The following comment by Eliot could easily have been said about Shtern’s tram-hopper:

When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes...”
 (“Metaphysical” 532)

The crucial distinction here is once again between a relatively low level of thought which recognizes only unrelated, fragmentary pieces and a higher perspective where these elements are assimilated and integrated into a unifying framework. In fact, Shtern’s description of the critic as binding all of literature within the covers of a single volume has little to distinguish it from Eliot’s famous idea that the works of the past form an “ideal order” which each new art work partially alters. Eliot says,

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists... the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. (“Tradition” 56)

If Shtern had no direct knowledge of Eliot, he seems to have pulled some of the same ideas out of the air. The critic, unlike the average person, sees the totality and not merely the individual components. Moreover, it is worth noting a final parallel between these two unlikely allies, which is that Eliot praises the “metaphysical” poets of the English 17th century on the grounds that they “...feel their thought as immediately as the color of a rose,” uniting emotion and intellect in elaborate metaphors or “conceits,” and this valuation might be applied to Shtern’s poetry as well (“Metaphysical” 532).

However much the above quotations agree, there remains a great difference between Shtern and Eliot on the question of the function of criticism. Eliot famously denied that criticism should be concerned with finding the author’s personal opinions or personality within the literary work. Although later criticism may have exaggerated the implications of such statements, Eliot said, “...the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will

be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.” (“Tradition” 59) Shtern on the other hand argues that in unifying the elements of the literary work, the critic also restores the connection of the work to its author. Describing the fragmented reading experience of the average person, Shtern emphasizes such a reader’s disinterest in the author in particular. The reader may recognize Dovid Bergelson in a Warsaw street, for example, and watch him as he walks away, “noticing which shop window he stops at and how he settles himself into a droshky. As soon as the driver strikes the horse to leave, however, Bergelson is gone.” (Shtern 4) What does this kind of reader care about? As we have said, the work itself -- and nothing else!

According to Shtern, on the other hand, the artist’s own spiritual trajectory is crucial to the work. The discussion of individual Peretz stories in the final section of “Crowns” makes clear that literature for Shtern consists in large part of autobiography. The predicaments of the fictional characters mirror that of their real-life creator and vice-versa. Moreover, the personal dimension of the literary work forms the basis of an essential connection between the poet and the critic. As Shtern says a little later in the essay, “...unlike the common reader, the critic not only takes pleasure in the poetry but also commits spiritual energy to taking stock of the poet as well.”(6) Or, elsewhere, “Everything he sees adds to his awareness of the condition of the writer – prior to, during, and after his artistic work.” (5) In the following passage, Shtern describes both the trials of the artist and the critic’s involvement with them:

...in creating, the artist struggled and fought; his blood coursing with tides like an ocean. On ropes of intuitive scaffolding that he braided out of day and night, the artist not only pulled himself upwards to the heights but often had to let himself back down again. Up and down this structure his soul went, like the angels in Jacob’s dream, but amidst the wrangling, during the feverish journey, something got lost, got left behind. Who will find and uncover it?...The job of the critic should be to scramble upwards, level after level, blood boiling and eyes straining, alert for every sign, every trace of a footprint of the eternal wanderer and creator...to collect it all and reveal it, to the joy of those who need it, want it, and long for it. (11)

The artist descends into the underworld and flies through the heavens in tormented, passionate struggle before returning like Orpheus to our surface world. Most importantly, what is brought back from this journey cannot be conveyed by the artist alone. It’s not a one person job. The critic must come along and retrace the poet’s steps, pick up what the artist couldn’t get the first time around, clean up after the fact as it were, and in effect complete the work by explaining, clarifying, uncovering, and *re*-covering what the poet had to leave behind. “The world of the fantastic is chaotic!” says Shtern. (11)

Therefore, "...what is the be-all and end-all of criticism? To tackle the work with body and soul and dig out that which lies buried there, in its deepest levels." (10) In other words, the work of art does not leave the artist's hands ready to be handed over to the public. Parts of it remain "buried" and therefore inaccessible until brought to light by criticism.

To say the artist needs the critic's help is not putting it strongly enough. The critic must become the poet's friend and even his or her disciple. Shtern expands on this point in the following passage. Implicitly rejecting the relation between artist and critic as we know it (for none of the conditions which Shtern calls for in the passage below pertain in our time), he asks,

Does he (the poet) sense in his knowledgeable colleague (the critic) someone intimate or close? Does he feel that here is someone prepared to put himself at risk in order to accompany him down the entire road of his creation, along the incredibly hazardous and difficult way which stretches across so many pitted and stony paths?...Does the creator see in the expert a person striding towards him barefoot, after traveling a great distance -- knowing that the place where the poet will soon stop will be holy...? (7)

The implied answer to all of these questions is in the negative. According to Shtern, the critic of our time does not know how to appreciate or serve the poet. In the passage above, in contrast, the exalted view which Shtern has of the artist assumes Biblical proportions, and he appears as a "holy" person to whom the critic makes a pilgrimage, and before whom he removes his shoes like Moses did before the "Burning Bush." Pushing the analogy a step further, just as Moses needed Aaron to help him speak before Pharaoh, so the poet requires the critic to follow, serve, and interpret. We might note that this model of criticism as discipleship also duplicates the relation between other Tanakhish pairs such as Elijah and Elisha, Jeremiah and Barukh ben Nerya, as well as that of latter-day Hasidic Rebbes and their secretaries like Rabbi Nakhman Breslaver and Rabbi Noson Shternhertz. We will have occasion to discuss R. Nakhman again later.

Meanwhile, another look at literary history, this time at a precedent certainly familiar to Shtern, may help to clarify his point of view. For, in spite of the "Modernist" opening of "Crowns," Shtern's emphasis on and exaltation of the artist betrays his debt to nineteenth century Romanticism. The idea of the artist as "eternal wanderer and creator," suffering for the rest of humanity next to the forge of artistic creation, reverberates throughout Western literature in the nineteenth century, from Blake to Rimbaud and beyond. To take just one example, Rimbaud also emphasizes in a well-known letter the trials which the artist must undergo and the exaltation which awaits once they are surmounted. He says:

The poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, prodigious, and rational *disordering of all the senses*. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness: he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessences. This is an unspeakable torture during which he needs all this faith and superhuman strength, and during which he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed – and the great learned one! -- among men...

So, then, the poet really is the thief of fire. He is responsible for humanity,... (Rimbaud 204, emphasis Rimbaud's)

The similarities between this passage from Rimbaud and a number of passages in Shtern's essay are striking. Rimbaud emphasizes the suffering of the poet, and "Crowns" opens by evoking the poet's endless labors, the "burning out (of) his or her nerves and bone marrow drop by drop and grain by grain," thinking and re-thinking the work as it develops (Shtern 1). Moreover, when Rimbaud calls the poet "the great patient," Shtern readers may think of the so-called "hospital" poems, which focus on the poet's inspiration during a period of invalidism. Finally, however, Rimbaud balances his idea of the poet as a kind of invalid with an emphasis on the moral courage which the poet's discipline requires and the "superhuman strength" it takes to carry out the heroic work of being "thief of fire...responsible for humanity." We are only beginning to see how thoroughly Shtern agrees with this exalted view of the poet's office.

The very end of "Crowns" also reinforces the Romantic connection. There Shtern cites a saying he claims to have heard from the "old people" which recommends an "intelligence fed on nectar" ("der sekhel vos vert geshpayzt fun nektar") (30). If this nectar-fed intelligence gives off an aroma of romanticism, it is surely because it recalls the end of the Samuel Taylor Coleridge poem entitled "Kubla Khan," where the poet anticipates his own ostracism at the hands of his contemporaries because of the vision of a "pleasure dome" which his poem describes (Coleridge l. 2):

...Beware! Beware!
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
 Weave a circle round him thrice,
 And close your eyes with holy dread,
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,
 And drunk the milk of Paradise -- (ll. 49-52)

The Romantic poet in Coleridge is a transgressor, inspired and dreadful, going outside the limits which define the knowable and safe in order to reach the sources of beauty and ecstasy. In this connection it also becomes clear why Edgar Allan Poe makes an appearance in Shtern's essay at the end of section two. Beloved by Baudelaire and his followers, to them Poe represented the revolt of the repressed chaos of emotions, what Shtern calls

during his brief discussion of Poe a demon-haunted wilderness and “a distant, uncanny murmur of underground waters,” against the tyranny of reason (Shtern 9).

If “Romantic” and “Modernist” versions of Shtern abut each other in “Crowns” like exposed geological strata, it is the Romantic who prevails through the middle pages of the essay, where Shtern describes what the artist brings back from his or her wanderings. We should not let Poe’s brief appearance in “Crowns” mislead us, however. Although Shtern praises Poe elsewhere in his critical writings and includes more than a touch of decadent purple in the prose of “Crowns,” he does not finally adopt the “transgressive” model of Romanticism or take as his hero in the essay the “poete maudit” or “cursed poet” after the pattern of the later Coleridge, of Poe himself, of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. In fact, Shtern denies having any interest in the “superhuman magic tricks” of Symbolism (8) and also rejects the doctrine of “art for art’s sake” (13). In place of sensual derangement, he calls for the artist to return from the underworld with wits intact in order to carry out a mission of great, practical importance: to instruct humanity about how to perceive what exists in front of our eyes and ears even though we usually aren’t aware of it. Shtern says, “Who will raise us to mystical heights? Who will teach us to hear the sounds around us and see the things around us? Who if not the writer?” (18) As faithful in this respect to the English roots of romanticism as if he had gone hiking with Wordsworth and Coleridge in Windermere, Stern identifies the gift of art as the ability to “see” and to “hear.” The artist brings us into contact with the world around us.

Close attention to Shtern’s language in the previous quotation suggests an ambiguity though. Does the poet reveal what exists “around us” or what lies somewhere far off, “in the heights?” Does art remove the veil from the world we already know or take us to a new one? Again, different layers must be carefully excavated, but certainly in one sense, Shtern’s “mystical heights” are not somewhere far away, in another dimension like Kublai Khan’s “pleasure dome.” Rather, they’re here, on planet earth, in any town, in Warsaw between the wars. In several remarkable passages Shtern catalogues the sights, sounds, and significance of the world he knew:

A tree, a cat, a wagon in the street, a rainbow, the signs on the stores that speak in colorful phrases as if they were Heinrich Heine, the young man whom I’ve run into for two weeks, sitting alone on the same bench in the Saxon Gardens, whose eyes are as deeply in love with some riddle as if they were Rabbi Ibn Ezra,...the walls of your room, which have seen so much but remain silent, your child who fears you just as you fear him...– not for nothing do all these faces wink in invitation at the expansive moods of the days and the closed hearts of the nights, no, not for nothing do they beckon us. Their glances make

fiery allusions; they are symbols, signs of a great – of the greatest – plan. Here something is to be built. Everything on earth will become a ladder, reaching up to Heaven. (18)

The details in Shtern's lists, like so many of the descriptive passages in his poetry, such as the bloody sunsets of "Springtime in the Hospital" and "Efraim Goldbrukh," or the latter's concluding evocation of the Ostrolenka marketplace, are remarkable and immediate. However, what do we need to "see" in these fragments of Warsaw life? Shtern takes pains to emphasize that the perception that he's talking about here does not transport us to a different, higher, or better world. It consists of direct, sensual perception of earthly life, and therefore belongs properly to the realm of aesthetics: "It's about our being able to absorb sounds in their compete, inner purity, to take in sights in their full and most penetrating clarity." (19) The seeing is seeing what is.

What, then, is "mystical" about the perception that Shtern urges? The image of the ladder which has appeared in two quotations by now supplies the missing term of the equation. Let the objects of perception in Warsaw be what they may; the ladder represents the changing way they are *perceived* as the perceiver moves from one rung to the next on a spiritual or psychological scale of values. At the apex of this ascent stands a liberation from mental shackles such as any romantic would recognize. In other words, the ladder marks the inner distance that has to be traveled in order to perceive things rightly. Shtern says,

The only measure (of a great artist) is the artist's capacity to build a ladder which starts at our sickly feet and stretches upwards, so as to approach ever closer to the primordial, regal head and broad, cloud-covered brow of the Universal. (11)

The poet provides us with an earthly experience, but it is of an earth where "we hear each echo and see each shape differently." (18) In the above passage, Shtern describes this transformation as a turning toward the "Universal," which is an expression crucial to "Crowns." Here it appears as a personified abstraction in the style of the eighteenth-century, like a visitor from Olympus in an otherwise monotheistic essay. In fact, the term "Universal" (in Yiddish: "di Universal") is only one in a series of more or less synonymous words which Shtern employs to convey his meaning, for example, "commonality" (14, 22, 27)² and "wholeness" or "completeness" (12, 19).³ It's not too much to say that the central focus of "Crowns" lies in explicating this principle, according to Shtern at once the source of the highest satisfaction and the touchstone of the most profound art.

² Yid: "algemeynkeyt" or "klalyus," respectively.

³ Yid: "gantzkeyt."

Shtern begins by distinguishing the wide-angle perspective which brings the Universal into view from the limited focus of our familiar, secular literature, even that of its greatest practitioners. Discussing *Crime and Punishment*, for example, he argues that Dostoyevsky can't help but focus on an individual destiny, a particular case, "an instance, a piece torn out of the entirety of Nature" (14). That is, in spite of the profligate energy of a Dostoevksy novel, the very nature of the enterprise constrains it and brings these energies to bear on something concrete and singular, something unique and therefore limited. Shtern says,

True, *Crime and Punishment* has a lot of pages, but altogether they produce a single fruit, a single scene, which after we've read it runs wild through our blood like a rabid dog. It's a scene we can sum up in a few words: in a wretched apartment, by the light of a tallow candle, the murderer and the prostitute come together while reading scripture. (14)

Whether or not *Crime and Punishment* would be improved if reduced to its climactic scene, Shtern's point here is that Dostoevksy's novel shines a light into a particular corner of human experience. Everything in the novel works toward the revelation of the potential for salvation inherent in the relationship between what Shtern calls a "murderer – and a righteous person" and a "holy whore" (13), making these figures as "close, familiar, and 'baked-in'" as if they were our relatives (12).

Twenty-first century readers may well be puzzled by Shtern's analysis. Trained to look for precisely this concreteness and this particularity in literature, they may wonder what Shtern would want to see in its place. Shtern does eventually offer an alternative literary model, and a surprisingly familiar one at that, but before redirecting us in literary terms, he makes his primary appeal -- as Wordsworth did -- to the ultimate source of inspiration, that is, to "Nature." (15) Commencing what can only be called a paean to the natural world which occupies several pages in the middle of his essay, Shtern says that whereas Dostoevsky focuses on one segment of the world, "Nature in her full scope is...beautiful in her limitlessness." (15) When one comes face to face with Nature, Shtern assures us, particularity in the sense of self-containment, constraining each thing to exist merely by and for itself, falls away. Then, he says rapturously, "a great expanse opens up...Nothing constricts us; we are the atmosphere enveloping everything...(17). "We're exactly where everyone else is."(16) The vision here is ecstatic in the original meaning of the word, bringing us out of ourselves. The divide between the self and the world dissolves as, "...every voice speaks not just about itself but also tells us something about ourselves." (17) In other words, each individual

thing becomes “universal” in the sense that its existence no longer involves only itself but expands or opens up to include the rest of Nature as well.

We said earlier that the transformation Shtern seeks is aesthetic, having to do with direct perception of the world. It is also aesthetic in the sense of having to do with our inner experience of life, with how we feel. In particular, Shtern associates the principle of Universality with the joy of the Biblical “Jubilee” or Year of Emancipation. He says:

...the Jubilee has come!...Let those who sold themselves into slavery be redeemed! Everyone must be freed from their wormlike isolation, their disgust, their rottenness, trashiness, and swinishness-before-trashiness. For this day slavery ends. Everything belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to Me, to the Deliverer, the Liberator, to God.
(18)

Here, Shtern announces a general liberation from the oppression of individual existence and the “isolation” and the “trashiness” it entails. When “everything belongs to everyone,” and the limited particular coincides with the unlimited Universal, we know happiness. “As we draw closer to the universal aspect of existence,” Shtern says, “our joy is compounded.” (15)

The religious connotations of what Shtern is talking about here are anything but incidental, and he provides a key illustration of what he means with a term borrowed from Jewish religious law, namely, the Rabbinical “reshuyot” or “domains:” the “reshut hayakhid” or “private domain” and the “reshut harabim” or “public domain,” translated here as the “domain owned by all in common.”⁴ This distinction figures into a number of aspects of Jewish law but it is probably most familiar in the prohibition against carrying objects into or out of one’s private domain or through the public domain on the Sabbath. For his part, Shtern puts a utopian spin on the idea of the “domain owned by all in common,” seeing it as the place where the “Jubilee” as we have described it has come to stay, and where the Universal has been revealed, a better, parallel world waiting to be discovered behind or within everyday life and its private concerns. He says:

The writer catches by the ears and casts far away not just the worries that we trade away for small change but our daily needs as well. In their place he shows us brightness and darkness, things dissolved and resolved in succession, outside of us and around us, telling us who you and I aren’t when we’re merely you or I, but who we can become, that is: colorful and endless, if only the conviction would soak into our blood that there is no other domain in the world but the infinite, richly-colored domain held by all in common (18)

⁴ Two other, less commonly cited “domains” need not concern us here.

We should not be too surprised to see the “reshut harabim” take on messianic connotations; it also does so in the daydream of the speaker in “Ven Ikh Bin Rotshild” or “If I Was Rothschild” by Sholem Aleykhem. In that story, social problems and political conflicts alike melt away into a world-wide “domain owned by all in common” where the obliging speaker sees to everyone’s material needs. In Shtern’s “domain owned by all in common,” on the other hand, the form of private ownership to be abolished has to do with the quality of our perception of the world. When “everything belongs to everyone,” as Shtern put it earlier, we all have access to a “colorful and endless” version of reality. Not “*merely*” ourselves, and no longer carrying individual burdens, we share equally in a “common” universe unbound by particulars.

If the recurring image of the ladder, the “Jubilee,” and the “domain owned by all in common” all underscore the fact that Shtern’s Romantic vision of Nature is also fundamentally and intentionally Jewish, he takes the next logical step by openly identifying the literary model associated with this vision as the Hebrew Bible or “Tanakh.” Shtern maintains that an emphasis on “commonalities” rather than “particular instances” is what distinguishes Jewish Biblical literature from its secular counterpart. (14) In the “Tanakh,” he says,

...(the) talk is always of wholeness: “Praise God from the Heavens, praise Him in the heights! Let every angel praise Him, let every host praise Him!”⁵, “May His Glory fill the entire world”⁶, “Awake, North, and come, South...”⁷, “From where the sun rises to where it sets, may His Name be praised...”⁸. The limitations of human nature have no place here. Mortality moves off to a corner and shrivels up... All pettiness fades into oblivion. Wounds heal, not by consolation but rather through fearsomeness. “Praise God, you on earth, you fish and you depths, fire and hail, snow, smoke, and storm winds!” (19-20)

In case one has forgotten this amid the many emotional colors and the many sorrows of the Jewish Bible, Shtern reminds us that a great deal of its poetry, particularly in the Psalms and certain passages from the Prophets, is resoundingly joyful, and that much of this joy stems precisely from awe in the face of creation. In Shtern’s analysis, the joy of the Hebrew Bible reflects the “wholeness” or Universality implicit within creation, overwhelming all limited particulars of existence. It should be clear by now that this theme represents the backbone of “Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism” and accounts for its apparently transverse movement of across Modernist, Romantic, and Jewish terminology. Perhaps it only makes sense that a

⁵ Ps. 148: 1,2.

⁶ Ps. 72: 20.

⁷ Song 4:16.

⁸ Ps. 113:3.

Jewish writer such as Shtern – fifty years before Harold Bloom – would remind us how Biblical the Romantic vision really is.

Taking a step back for a moment to look for literary analogues or precedents for Shtern's ecstatically "Tanakhish" idea of Nature, one might be tempted to compare it to ideas such as the "epiphany" of James Joyce, in which the "quidditas" of a thing issues forth in "radiance" (Joyce 213), or to the literary "image" of Ezra Pound (Pound 152) or the "objective correlative" of Eliot ("Hamlet" 100), all of which emphasize the impersonal or objective catalysis of the literary work. These ideas do not supply perfect analogies, however. Whereas the "image" and Joycean "quidditas" place the emphasis on the inherent properties of the individual work of art, Shtern emphasizes precisely the opposite, as the particular comes to share in the existence of everything which is usually distinct from it and apart from it, everything it usually is not.⁹ Perhaps we could trace a debt here to Spinoza's idea of the single, universal substance whose modes constitute our visible universe, or perhaps a reader better informed than the present writer might trace the idea to other secular sources.

On the other hand, we have had occasion to remark on the similarity between Shtern's writing with that of the "metaphysical poets" of seventeenth century England, and another such parallel is that Shtern, like them, wrote in a literary context permeated with religious literature and thought. A complete study of the subject might therefore want to draw comparisons with Jewish ideas in which the individual is so to speak emptied of inherent existence, as in the Hasidic "bitul ha'yesh," the "negation of the existence" within the Divine Light, to "hitpashtut hagashmiyut" or "casting off of materiality," or even to the foundational Maimonidean idea that G-d's "absolute existence" is not compatible with His having "attributes." (Maimonides 80).¹⁰ (Or, "lehavdil elef havdalot," to Buddhism?)

⁹ In fairness to Joyce, the Shternian principle that "individuality is the concretion of universality" (This phrase is Samuel Beckett's in reference to Joyce; Joyce himself said much the same thing.) became a slogan in Joyce criticism as early as the twenties, when *Finnegans Wake* was still called *Work in Progress*. (Beckett 7) For the view of Eric Auerbach on the Hebrew Bible's "universal-historical claims," see note 14, p. 23 (Auerbach 19). As for Shtern, it might be going too far to argue for a post-structuralist theme of difference and deferral within the same, here, but he certainly acknowledges a principle of discontinuity within literary form when he says, "Finishing a novel, you don't recognize the character you started out with" (20). Or: "...only in art of the first order does a purpose and goal arise -- a goal, that is, apart from the will of the author and even contrary to the writer's intentions." (16)

¹⁰ To give only one example of how such ideas could provide a gloss on Shtern, the Mezritcher Maggid says in a commentary on "Parshat Sh'mot," "Whoever is worthy to see the Upper Worlds at the time of the performance of a 'mitzvah,' that is, who has 'stripped off materiality,' this person will experience pleasure in the 'mitzvah'

Lest the reader should doubt that Shtern would have been familiar with such ideas, those who knew the poet testify to his lifelong religious practice, one which crossed the line separating the Hasidim and “Misnaggedim” of his time. We know that during his Warsaw years Shtern distinguished himself from other writers by spending his days either in the “Litvishe Khevre Sha’s” or Talmudic study group, or in the “shtibl” of the Breslaver Hasidim – either one, in fact, in preference to the Yiddish Writer’s Union. Similarly, in a biographical essay included in the Leyvick edition of Shtern’s works, Shtern’s townsman Menakhem Flakser points out that the poet attended the Lomzhe and Slobodka yeshivas as young man, both of which were associated with the “Musar” movement of Rabbi Israel Salanter, and that the real Efraim Goldbrukh who impressed Shtern as a child was a former Kotsker Hasid.

Does any thematic thread link the Musar movement with Breslav and Kotzk? Arguably, one does – and it is precisely the critical stance toward worldly pleasures and values which also figures largely throughout Shtern’s work, from the scenes of anxiety-laden commercial life in the poetry to the immanent liberation from everyday burdens evoked in “Crowns.”¹¹ Rabbi Nakhman, to pursue only of these examples, repeatedly emphasizes the need to forsake the pursuit of worldly rewards. One must “shatter the desire for wealth” (*LM I-B* 246), he says. Or, “All idolatry is based in money.” (227). Moreover, says R. Nakhman, the religious leader or “Tsadik” must undergo a cycle of torments and exaltation similar to that which Shtern attributes to the poet. “The Tsadik

according to his level: the higher he reaches, the more amplitude and the less constriction there will be...” *Ohr Torah*, Parshat Shmot, para. 71.

¹¹ Indeed, the attempt of the Musar movement and of Kotzk Hasidism to strengthen the inner, “spiritual” or psychological meaning within Jewish religious practice proceeded along remarkably similar lines. “Musar” became established in the influential “yeshivot” of Slobodka and Novaradok in the latter half of the 19th century. Taking as its point of departure traditional works of “musar” or moral reflection such as Rabbi Ibn Pekuda’s “Duties of the Heart,” “Musar” promoted rigorous self-examination in its students in order to counter the inward tendencies toward hypocrisy and pride on the one hand and the outward pressures of conformity and materialism on the other. The Ostrolenka Yizkor Book in fact offers an interesting memoir of the unsettling effect of students from the iconoclastic, “Musarnik” Novaradka yeshiva on the town. Moreover, the novel *Tsemakh Atlas* by Chaim Grade, which describes an uncompromising “Musarnik” unable to make peace with the corrupt world around him, specifically mentions Ostrolenka as one of the towns through which his hero wanders. Meanwhile, Rabbi Menakhem Mendel of Tomashov and then Kotzk (1787-1859) preached uncompromising honesty with oneself and others, a rejection of “pnyot” or ulterior motives in spiritual life and of social conventions in the sphere of worldly action. As will be discussed shortly in the present essay, the inward emphasis of both “Musar” and Kotzk also meant that both schools of thought read the Torah not only as an authority with regard to external action but as an inspiration for and guide to inner development as well. It should meanwhile be stated that the remarks which follow about Breslaver philosophy are based on familiarity with some of Rabbi Nakhman’s writings, with individual Hasidim, and with secondary sources, but not with study within the Breslaver community.

accepts humiliation with love...,” he says. “...Through joy, through rejoicing in his suffering, he elevates the Divine Presence...” (*LM* 4 13) At issue here is a kind of ostracism by uncomprehending contemporaries which resembles that we have seen in Coleridge.

The foregoing discussion amounts to no more than the prologue to an understanding of “Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism,” however. For, even though the essay takes us through religious terrain, its primary destination as we have said is aesthetic. That is, Shtern’s main subject is the development of Yiddish literature, and his goal is to identify Peretz as the avatar of the simultaneously Jewish, Romantic, and modern way of seeing which the essay recommends. Shtern begins his discussion of Peretz by commenting on the “rich and suggestive” (Shtern 8) ambiguity of the world that the classic author creates. He says,

The senses of the reader are sharpened, willingly or not, and music drifts to him as if from afar, enticing and elevating him, without his being able to trace it or grasp it, one door opening onto another, one space appearing over another, there are labyrinths, then suddenly open highways, utter darkness and new dawns, depths wrapped in mystery and gracious dances – thus does Peretz appear to the intelligent reader. (10)

One of Shtern’s virtues as a critic is surely his sensitivity to the changes in mood and implication which characterizes Peretz’ writing. Here Shtern emphasizes the Protean quality of Peretz, which fascinates without by the same token providing a clear criterion for interpretation. This very ambiguity, in Shtern’s view, should spur the critical reader onward to ask the all-important question, what is the source of this variety? Who is the personality behind all the mysteries? As we have seen, Shtern argues that this is the question criticism has failed to ask, and this failure has meant in turn that criticism has not been able to explain Peretz. The multi-faceted author is more than the sum of the individual factors that criticism most often talks about. Shtern says,

Not novelty of form, not excellence of style, not distinctiveness of theme, not grounds to defend Hasidism, not a new apotheosis of Kabbalah – these all follow automatically, but they are only stages gone through...” (22)

Shtern’s argument here falls in line with his general comments about criticism early in the essay. As we have seen, the critic has to do more than study individual pieces in isolation. The responsibility of criticism is to look beyond the fragments to grasp the whole, but the critics of Peretz have not done this, as if ensnared in the rich texture of detail which the author presents.

Shtern begins to assemble these fragments in his discussion of the self-destruction of the young student in “Mekubalim” or “Kabbalists.” The conflict between body and soul which occupies and drives the young mystic to starve himself, according to Shtern, can be turned around and applied to the author of the story as well. In his depiction of ultimately self-destructive mysticism, Peretz is not as simply critical as we might expect. Peretz is in fact a religious writer, Shtern says, “the most religious” in Yiddish literature (26). Clearly identifying with the mystic’s quest, according to Shtern, Peretz shows us through the story that,

Our body, pushed away into a corner, forced into confinement, is bounded; while our spirit shades itself in every wood, finds its reflection in all waters, dances in every storm. When we come to the point that the soul begins to dominate, we encounter the edge of the curtain that conceals the richness of creation, the cluster of infinities. This is what Peretz is seeking.. (22)

Here as in all the Peretz stories he discusses, Shtern slips almost indistinguishably from describing the conflicts of the characters to discussing those which shape the story-telling. Just as the young mystic sees no alternative to effectively starving himself to death in order to escape the physical imprisonment which blocks his spiritual insight, Peretz faced the challenge in his work of finding a way to express the “sphere of infinity” – another stand-in for the Universal -- through art, which is by definition made of limited, material forms.

Thus, in Shtern’s analysis the creator and his creations experience the same conflict between opposing principles of constraining and liberating energy, or to borrow from religious terminology again, the “din” of scrupulous judgment which proceeds from limitation and the “khesed” of unbounded mercy which is open to the universal or infinite. In Shtern’s depiction, “Bontshe Shvayg” or “Silent Bontshe” lays bare the simplicity of soul which defies all worldly wisdom. At the end of Peretz’ play, “Di Goldene Keyt” or “The Golden Chain,” Rabbi Shlomo breaks with tradition and refuses to light the havdalah candles, intending that Shabbos will never end and humanity will be saved from its crushing burdens. Finally, in “Oyb nit nokh Hekher” or “If Not Higher,” the piety of the Nemirover Rebbe overcomes the sadness through which everyone is separated from everyone else, and by means of which the world is judged, found wanting, and condemned. The early part of the story is dominated by the threat that the acidic skepticism of the Litvak will expose some sin or folly on the part of the famous Rabbi and leave his community in despair. The truth, however, reconciles the Litvak to the Rabbi and to life in general. Shtern writes:

...the sick world, contorting itself in a sob, may yet like the woman feel an unexpected warmth. So that not only the Nemirover Rebbe, not only

the Litvak, but every bird and stone, the muddy streets, the lowering forest, the peasant coat, the sinister axe - all may take comfort that we are in this together. That all may rejoice, for God loves us. That everything may play its part in helping, whilst singing the *Selikhes*¹²melody. (26)

At the risk of reading too much into the story, Shtern interprets it as more than the victory of Hasidism over Misneggedism or of faith over skepticism. The Litvak passes through his embittered mode of perception to grasp the source of joy. At the end of the story, Shtern writes,

It's "all for one," and the "all" is one again. All division vanishes, things separated link together, lowliness and humiliation lead towards the ideal. With the least possible means, art's final goal has been attained: from a mere instance has come a new, independent, blessed whole. (26)

In this passage Shtern again elides a discussion of the fictional character with one of the author himself. The Nemirover's suspicious behavior eventually proves his vindication, and this revelation of hidden goodness heals the rift between the Litvak and the world around him. The "mere instance," the Rabbi's hidden righteousness, becomes an "new, independent, blessed whole," a sign of the comforting truth of the world's unity. At the same time, the "mere instance" of the story represents a "new, independent, blessed whole," in which the joy of existence in the "domain owned by all in common" becomes manifest.

Having said the foregoing, it remains less than certain how Shtern intends us to identify the Universal in art when we see it. This question is a key difficulty in the essay. On the one hand, one might get the impression from the above discussion that Peretz' work is all of a piece. At least as Shtern discusses the individual Peretz stories, he underscores the degree to which the author continually interrogates the question of limitation and liberation, separation and universality, which is the main concern of Shtern's essay. On the other hand, Shtern also describes Peretz as developing from an early, materialistic perspective, one which invites an attribution of merely "trivial sociological significance," to one which we have seen Shtern does not hesitate to praise by calling religious (28). From his early work such as that represented by the story, "The Shtrayml," says Shtern,

Peretz had to change the direction of his creativity radically, to achieve his final and decisive triumph...(so he) set about slicing off one olive's

¹² New Year prayers for forgiveness.

bulk¹³ after another and skinned away all corporeality piece by piece, until finally, in the old marketplace¹⁴, he came to depict nothing but the subtlety and sincerity of the Other World and the angels, all their pain and loneliness now behind them – souls alone, nothing but souls. (28)

In other words, the play, “Bay Nakht in an Altn Mark” or “At Night in an Old Marketplace,” represents the apotheosis of Peretz’ art in Shtern’s eyes. Strangely, however, the essay omits any more discussion of it than we have quoted. When Shtern says that the play contains “only souls,” what does he mean? At one level the answer is obvious: the play concerns a tormented “Badkhan” or Wedding Jester who raises up the ghosts of a “shtetl” marketplace as if in an attempt to liberate the repressed and rejected energies of the town’s past. Should we take Shtern’s praise of Peretz for his “corporality-erasing” art literally and interpret him as saying that the spirit of the “Tanakh” and of Romanticism lead logically to a literature of disembodiment, to ghost stories in the style of Poe (29)?¹⁵

Perhaps, on the other hand, Shtern did not intend to prescribe or to proscribe a literary future, to “Judaize” Western writing in a modern-day Maccabee revolt or to freeze Yiddish literature in the style of Peretz. Perhaps, rather, the slogan of “only souls” was intended to highlight an aspect of *psychomachia* or topography of the soul in the work of Peretz that impressed Shtern as conforming to the version of the “Tanakh” he had absorbed from his Musarnik and Hasidic teachers. Every reader will have his or her own answer to the question of whether Shtern succeeded in integrating his literary and religious precursors, in creating a “new art...(which is) something more than, something higher than art,” in finding a literary form to carry on the “Tanakhish” work of linking the individual entity to its source and to the world outside of it, reconciling the here and now and what is repressed, rejected, and hidden (29). At any rate, he said himself that his goal consisted only in laying down a path for others to follow, and we can credit him with achieving this -- even if few in our time have the inclination or the tools required to navigate the path he marked out.

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¹³ The “kezayit” or “olive’s bulk” is a Rabbinical minimum solid quantity in many areas of Jewish law. The corresponding minimum liquid measure is a “revi’it,” as above, Note 40, pg. 20.

¹⁴ Referring to “At Night in an Old Marketplace” - Peretz’ famous late play.

¹⁵ Interestingly, in his well-known book, *Mimesis*, Eric Auerbach describes an aspect of attenuated realism in the Hebrew Bible as: “the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity” (Auerbach 9). Moreover, he links the work’s “universal-historical claims” to this feature (19).

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