

“A Reading by Yisroel Shtern in Ostrolenka (Memories and Thoughts)”
By Itzhak Kahn¹

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 Translated by Jon Levitow (2006)

It was early on the morning of a Jewish holiday.² I went over to R' Yakov Bayuk's house to meet Yisroel Shtern, who had been brought to town by the Peretz Library to give a reading. Knowing that Shtern was deeply religious, I wasn't surprised when I found him praying with intense concentration and feeling. He invited me with a gesture to sit down, and then I was able to observe the expression on his broad face, from which a pair of sad, questioning eyes looked out.

It was a sunny, summer morning, and looking at his face, I had the impression that it expressed a kind of twilight melancholy, something uncanny, having to do with shadowy mysteries which accompany the secret of death. His poem, “Twilights,” came to mind:

“Twilights are old people who can't die,
 Twilights are children found by fences,
 Twilights are the lamps in which the wicks are almost burnt...”

I tried to remember other verses from the poem, and Shtern, noticing my lips were moving, asked quietly, “Did you want to say something?”

“No, I'm trying to remember the verses of your poem, ‘Twilights.’”

“You've read my poem?” he asked with surprise.

“Yes, more than a few times. Once I knew it by heart.”

In order to show I meant that literally, I immediately began to recite:

“Twilights are letters from quiet madmen,
 Twilights are letters written and torn up:
 something becomes easier, and something is lost...
 Twilights are rings on severed fingers,
 Blood on gold – gold on blood.”

I became quiet. Shtern's eyes lost something of their sadness and began to smile. “Now I'm very happy,” he quietly began, “that I came to visit Ostrolenka. It comes as a surprise to me! Really, it's a great pleasure that I'm being read in the town of my birth,

¹ Born in Ostrolenka in 1908, I. I. Kahn moved to Melbourne in 1938 and became a successful author and literary critic, writing in Yiddish and English. He passed away in 1996.

² From the time of year described in the essay one would guess “Shavuot.”

and young people know my poems by heart. I really don't recognize the town. I thought maybe nothing would have changed since I left..."

He fell silent, thinking, and he looked somewhere into the distance. This lasted a while, and I had the impression that he had ceased to see me, had forgotten that I was sitting there. Then after some time he said to me, "Come see me after you eat, before the reading, and we'll have a talk."

"Have you read my 'Hospital' poems?" Shtern asked me later. "Tell me how you liked them...I don't mean just them, but in general, what do you feel when you read my poems?"

I began: "In your poems, you have a wonderful way of identifying the human being with nature. You relate to nature as to a great mystery." I stood there, looking for words to express what I meant. I lacked the nerve to give my opinion to a great poet who I esteemed so highly, but Shtern gave me courage. When I felt comfortable, I continued, "Your poems, which are so masterful, breathe the air of the uncanny. They have longing, sadness, and the shadows of death in them, and your poetic flights grab hold of a person strongly. I mean, there's a true, streaming, creative feeling which fills your poems with artistic integrity and with tragic truth, but they're all so sad at heart:

'Twilights are violins which play
while devils snatch the bride from home,'

or,

'Twilights are the flags from battles lost.'

The image is very clear, but it casts fear over our dreamy, summery twilights."

"What makes you see them as so tragic?"

Shtern looked at me with a sweet, embarrassed smile, said something to me about the inheritance of our ancestors, and then became deadly earnest again: "Listen, young hometown friend, do you know what poetry means in its deepest sense? Poetry means to carry the burden of humanity, to feel pain along with everyone, to become unhappy over everyone's cries. (With these words he quickly got up off his chair, walked back and forth across the room a few times, and stopped next to me.) You're a poetry reader, and I want you to think about this. Every poet wants to reach the innermost and the most concentrated part of a person. When everyone is enjoying their rest, their eyes bolted shut – the poet is awake, his ears up, to catch the faintest voices that come from somewhere distant in the night."

He became quiet again, thought, and soon afterwards asked, “Do you know what Peter Altenberg³ said about poetry? ‘Poems come from our tears.’ You asked me before about my poem, ‘Twilights.’ I feel the twilights differently than you do. Daytime moods have a different effect on me than evening or night moods. In the daytime talk flies like sand; a word is like a mark in the sand. It disappears, gets wiped away, is forgotten. Only in the most remote hours late at night, when the world becomes silent, motionless, and dark as a black slate, is a word like something cut out of the slate with a knife. You can keep it in front of your eyes. Anyway, I’ll speak more concretely about this in my presentation.”

We left for the Peretz Library.

The room was overflowing with people, who had come earlier than usual and waited a long time to see their native son. Shtern received an ovation when he first came in. He became visibly confused, not having expected such a warm reception. At the head table he whispered to me, “You know what they say – it’s hard to be a prophet in your own city. I honestly didn’t expect such a big crowd and such warmth (He meant this in more than one sense because it had become very warm in the room...)”

As chairperson I greeted the esteemed guest with a few heartfelt words, emphasizing the place that he occupied in Yiddish literature. By means of the profundity and the mastery with which he presented mood and image, he had put himself in the front of our poetic ranks. I mentioned his artful manner of expression, in which sound, form, and rhythm flowed together harmoniously.

I presented the audience to him as being full of his readers, proud of their gifted native son, a poet blessed by God and possessed of the most wonderful instrument on which to play the song of our experiences and ideas with the most subtle nuances. Today we would have a lively meeting of the poet and his readers.

In deathly silence Shtern began his presentation about art and poetry. From the outset he emphasized the different forms of artistic creation.

“Every great artist creates a new world, an imaginary one next to the real one. For, the essential thing is not that which calls itself life, but that which is around life, over life, next to life...”

“In Peretz’ ‘At Night in the Old Marketplace,’ the dead walk and look at everything that’s happening around them. They try to get to the bottom of things and evaluate both the beauty and ugliness of life. In the tumult of daily life, when people appear to be awake, in fact they’re insubstantial. They have no essence. At night the same people lie tired out, exhausted, and often depressed. Only when they fall asleep do they see in dreams what they have to discover. In unconsciousness they first get the idea, feel something higher than usual, something far away from the daily hue and cry. The

³ Pen name of Richard Englander (1859-1919), a member of the “Jung-Wien” literary group and author of works describing turn-of-the-century Bohemian life in Vienna.

artist and the poet too, even though they're not in the middle of the hue and cry every day, perceive only at night the sobbing in the blue darkness. They hear the heavenly voice: "Woe to my children who have been exiled from me and from themselves – and there is no comfort – how long, how long?..."

We took a short break, and Shtern asked me if the audience understood him. I answered him that for us it was a great, spiritual pleasure, and even those who didn't catch everything could also feel the elevation. After the break, Shtern began with I. L. Peretz again, who he placed among the greatest of artists, always hungry for God. He had sought out the way to God, the way to become closer to Him, and with that to become closer to people. Poetry is the bridge from person to person. Its goal is blessing and joy. Its effort is to penetrate the center of the human "ego," where there is trembling and conflict, radiance and bliss. True poetic creations are artifacts of genuine, unadulterated sorrow, raised up by an inner impulse toward great piety. They want more to seek than to find. Every master builds his or her own building within the great world-space, and there all phenomena and appearances are colored with the artist's own blood. The birth throes are difficult to bear. Even such a master as Heinrich Heine applied all his powers, revised, and re-revised a short poem like, "In the Beautiful Month of May." He, like every artist, devoted all his strength to the ornaments of style, color, and sound.

Although the speaker had gone on a long time, and it was hot, the attention of the audience remained fixed on the podium. Not a scrape was heard in the room. There was a feeling that it wasn't a normal kind of reading, but a profoundly poetic and artistic improvisation, and the thoughts about poetry came out of the poet's mood and thought at that moment (later Shtern expanded and published his wonderful analysis of poetry in literary criticism which brought a spotlight on the writer and his work).

When he ended, a storm of applause expressed gratitude and reverence for the spiritual pleasure of the speech, which lasted over two hours. Moreover, it had not yet ended. The audience besieged the president's table to greet, shake hands, and ask questions. We decided to continue as a group with questions and answers. The questions were of different kinds, and in short answers the speaker shed light on literary and artistic problems. The answers demonstrated not only expertise but striking, imagistic turns of phrase.

Shtern made an exception for a question about "trash" or mass-market art.⁴ He answered with so much humor and satire that we all had the impression a different person was speaking than before, someone new, a scintillating wit and satirist.

"'Trash' is the head caretaker of every literary cathedral and political chapel. 'Trash' is the favorite dance at every wedding, the one who can do everything, the writer who's on the side of 'God and everyone else.' 'Trash' is the guy impressed with himself who walks with his nose in the air in every street and knows how to get what he wants...because he has a different way of speaking to each person. 'Trash' is the unstoppable careerist, his 'for its own sake' attitude is well-known, his idealism – pure

⁴ Yid.: "shund," a target of much of Shtern's critical invective.

gold. What can you suspect him of? Hopes for material gain? Absurd! Even if you wanted to give him money, he'd have nowhere to put it. In one pocket he has all the virtues and in the other good deeds and a heavy pack of righteousness on his poor shoulders. He accepts all insults. Who if not him? He has every means to do so. It's the nature of a person of 'trash' that he lacks for nothing. He has everything in his camp. Anything he needs, he has ready, and he takes it."

All of this Shtern said with a smile, but at the end, he became serious and spoke in a louder voice: "...You often get the feeling you're facing a flood. God has sworn that there won't be another, but Rabbi Nakhman Bratzlaver has explained this: a flood of water there won't be, but a flood of polluted thoughts, of bad thoughts – that there will certainly be! True art and poetry want to remove this flood from our lives. I believe in goodness! There is a treasure in the human heart; one only has to know how to get to it..."

Many years have passed since that holiday when Yisroel Shtern was in Ostrolenka. Most of the audience that day was turned to ash, and only individuals escaped unburnt. The great poet himself, who believed so strongly in the mission of poetry and art and in the treasure of the human heart, staggered over the Warsaw bridge swollen by starvation. Did this prince of art still believe in the treasure of the human heart, which one only had to know how to get to, in his final hours? He took the answer with him forever.

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