

...Not that Peretz ever dropped his opposition to the Hasidic dynasties, their miracle-working rabbis, their faith in the supernatural, or their reactionary policies. Peretz's greatest Yiddish interpreter, Shmuel Niger, is certainly correct in inviting us to differentiate between 'hasides' and 'hasidish' – between, on the one hand, the author's continuing dislike of Hasidism and, on the other, his discernment of certain vital, 'democratic,' and spiritual elements within the Hasidic movement that could be put to artistic use. Like his stories in the folk manner, so too **these stories in the Hasidic manner** shaped an imaginary past that could provide an enriched present. (...)

Until then Hasidim and Hasidic courts had represented to Peretz as to most Haskalah writers a pre-modern, obscurantist element in traditional Jewish society. Indeed, at the same time and in the same periodical that Peretz published his tales in the Hasidic manner, he continued to excoriate the real Hasidic leaders who still ruled their small-town flocks. But now he also began to find in the social sympathy of Hasidism for the ordinary unlettered Jews, and in its metaphysical yearning for a taste here on earth of the ecstasy of God's presence, a metaphor for his own struggle. Moving backward in time to the beginnings of the movement, he used Hasidic materials more as legend than social reality, the legend of the soul's rebellion against materialist reductionism. (...)

It was as though Peretz, after too many years of exposure to rational social theory, tried to release his damned-up faith by evoking those who still possessed theirs.

Critics recognized that these neo-Hasidic stories were part of the general neo-romantic trend in European culture that likewise reacted against a surfeit of realism and rationalism by reaching for transcendence at second hand. A few readers, then and since, have found them hollow; Nornberg, who had been so enraptured by Peretz's earlier Hebrew romantic verse, thought that they captured only the costume of Hasidism, not its spiritual core. Peretz himself expressed his envy for the writer M. I. Berdichevsky, who, having grown up among Hasidim, knew them authentically and at first hand. Most of the stories make no attempt to conceal the critical intelligence that is monitoring the achievement of Jewish mystics and ecstasies. Because the narrators of these stories, even the purported Hasidim among them, do not invite suspension of disbelief, readers who yearn as genuine Hasidim do for the transcendent will feel cheated by the humanistic application of motifs of faith. Yet Peretz did something remarkable in the stories on folk and Hasidic motifs: he alerted his contemporaries and the next generation to the mythic and spiritual resources in their indigenous culture as well to the potential sterility of modernity should it lose those resources. Together with the resurgence of political will, Peretz inspired an introspective Jewish literature that drew from deep religious roots.

Ruth R. Wisse

I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture.

Seattle / London, 1991, p. 56-59.