## Yitskhok Leybush Peretz

Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, or I. L. Peretz (1835–1917), was a Yiddish and Hebrew writer, known for introducing modernist trends into Yiddish literature. Born in the town of [Zamość](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zamosc) Poland, he lived significant parts if his life in Warsaw, which he helped make a center of modern Jewish and Yiddish culture.

Peretz had been a Hebrew writer since the 1870s and was then known mostly as a Hebrew poet, although he was also capable of writing in Polish. He first expressed his ideas concerning Yiddish in his letters to Sholem ALEICHEM in the late 1880s; he "confessed" his affinity to Yiddish, referring to it as "the language of Beril and Shmeril," in a Hebrew poem. His Yiddish writing debut was the long poem *Monish* (1888), which is considered to be the first folk narrative to be employed in modern Yiddish literature, with a style and plot heavily influenced by Goethe's *Faust*.

His early Yiddish prose included a collection of stories titled *Bekante bilder* (1890). These texts embody psychological complexity, employing the form of internal monologues, and are considered to represent a significant development in modern Yiddish fiction. "The Messenger" (*Der meshulakh*) tells the story of the dying traditional Jewish-*shtetl* economy through the confessional story of an of an old man suffering from chest pains, reminiscing and hallucinating about his life, who is carrying a sum of money and a contract that he needs to deliver. "The Crazy Idler" (*Der meshugener batln*; in English often translated as "The Mad Talmudist"), consists of the internal monologue of a person suffering from a split personality disorder.

In Peretz's first Yiddish masterpiece in prose *Bilder fun a provints rayze* ("Impressions of a Journey Through the Provinces", 1891), the narrative voice belongs strictly to the modern man. If his precursors in Yiddish literature, such as ABRAMOVITSH and Sholem Aleichem, used literary personas to serve as a bridge between the *shtetl*-Jews and the modern, here Peretz does not require such a conduit. Inspired by his participation in a statistical expedition into the Jewish Pale of Settlement, "Impressions" drew an atmospheric image of despair and doubt, reflective of Peretz's viewpoint regarding the extreme alienation encountered by the modern Jewish intelligentsia when they tried to connect with the Jewish masses. It signified a new genre in Yiddish literature of "the reportage".

In his early years in Warsaw, Peretz was close to the Jewish Positivist circles, in which the attitude toward the Yiddish language was purely practical. Towards the mid 1890s, he became acquainted with Jewish socialists, and was inspired to create literature that was primarily devoted to exploring social relations and exposing suffering in society. He dedicated many of his artistic productions during the rest of the 1890s to political aims. Short stories such as *Bontshe shvayg* (Bontshe the Silent, 1894), the epistolary *Veber-libe: dertseylung in briv* (“Weaver-Love: Story in Letters”, 1897), *A kaas fun a yidene* ("The Anger of a Jewish Woman", 1893), his Yiddish journal *Di yontef bletlekh* (The Holiday Pages), and many others– became instruments of the nascent Jewish Labor Bund, which would in later years become the biggest Jewish-Marxist party.

During the twentieth century, he evolved from being a social realist, naturalist, and romantic bilingual writer into becoming a predominantly Yiddish writer of symbolist drama, neo folk-tales, and neo-romantic Hasidic stories and poetry. The long-standing convention in Peretz scholarship was that his interest in new literary styles coincided with a rejection of revolutionary politics. However, contemporary scholarship shows that in fact it reflected his ongoing search for new ways of expressing his radicalism.

### References and Further Reading

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### List of Works in Yiddish

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