Marking Territory: A *Flâneur*'s Failure in I. L. Peretz's *Mayses*

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Abstract

As the first prominent Yiddish writer from the Polish territories of the Pale of Settlement, I. L. Peretz (1852-1915) was from the beginning of his career an outlier in the geographical politics of Yiddish culture. He dramatized this difference in a number of ways: insisting on the linguistic difference of his Yiddish from that of his colleagues, dispensing with the overt appeals to oral discourse which Yiddish literature had adopted and adapted from Russian literary models, and demanding of himself and his readers a sensitivity to literary style on the highest level of sophistication. As an outlier, these aesthetic differences find representation in analogously exceptional approaches to the question of literary space. Unlike his primary colleagues, and competitors, in Yiddish literature of the day – Sh. Y. Abramovitsh (c. 1835-1917) and Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916) – Peretz dispenses with the convention of creating prototypical, imaginary shtetlekh *in order to situate his stories, including his most fantastic and parodic narratives, in a verifiable Eastern European geography. He is moreover the first great Yiddish writer to describe these traditional communities from a perspective of the writer living in a modern metropolis, even if the metropolis itself figures in comparatively few of his narratives. What emerges from these strategies is a writer who situates himself not only as an "outlier" with respect to the linguistic and literary conventions of his contemporaries, but also with respect to the territories he describes. His narratives are neither traditional nor modern, neither metropolitan nor peripheral, neither realistic nor phantasmagoric, but in each instance somewhere in between and, more significantly, constantly in a state of flux among these contrasting locations. This essay will trace the narrational techniques and representations of space in Peretz's fiction to demonstrate the dislocations which determine his best writing and provide a model for the leading trends in Yiddish modernism that follow in his wake.*

The Yiddish language has several terms to describe an indigent idler: a *leydik-geyer* ("one who goes around with empty pockets"), a *luftmentsh* ("one who lives on air," a person with his or her head in the clouds), a *batlen* (a perennial student who lives on community charity), a *kasriel* (someone so poor that his or her continued sustenance depends on God's grace);[1] with a culture so mired in poverty as Eastern European Jewry was, it is no surprise that its language developed such an overabundant lexicon for designating the character types produced by privation. What Yiddish lacks, because the term exists in no other language but French, is an equivalent for the *flâneur*, a wanderer who despite his material limitations is able to remake the city in his own image, whose urban itineraries transcend hierarchies of class, wealth, and custom by transforming the city into a spectacle choreographed for his private entertainment in public spaces.[2] The *flâneur* is what Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) would describe as a dialectical image of modern capitalism – in the crowd but not of the crowd, an observer-participant in the new sociology of the marketplace who collects images of everyday life in lieu of collecting commodities, in equal parts a rag-picker and a poet, who mediates between the two roles through his perambulations in the public square.

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[1] This term provides the name for the prototypical shtetl in the work of Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), Kasrilevke. For an explanation of how this town got its name and what this signifies about its inhabitants, see *Di Shtot fun di kleyne mentshelekh* in Sholem Aleichem's *Ale verk*, vol. 3, (New York: Morgn Frayhayt oysgabe, 1937), 9-17. A translation of this story by Julius and Frances Butwin can be found in *Selected Stories of Sholom Aleichem*, ed. Alfred Kazin, (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 28-34.

[2] Perhaps the best conceptualization of how walking signifies a politically transgressive gesture against the social order of the city is the section "Spatial Practices" in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; 1988), 91-130.

The development of the *flâneur* as a character type therefore reflects a shift in the depiction of urban space in modern literature. As Benjamin himself notes in the transition reflected from E.T.A. Hoffmann's final narrative, *Des Vetters Eckfenster* ("The Cousin's Corner Window," 1822) to Edgar Allen Poe's story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840),[3] Poe's narrator watches the street from the window of a public coffee-house, whereas the cousin is sitting at home. Poe's observer succumbs to the fascination of the scene, which finally lures him out into the whirl of the crowd. The cousin in Hoffmann's tale, looking out from his corner window, has lost the use of his legs; he would not be able to go with the crowd even if he were in the midst of it. His attitude toward the crowd is, rather, one of superiority, inspired as it is by his observation post at the window of an apartment building.[4] Benjamin in turn traces the influence of Poe's story on Charles Baudelaire's poetry, and through Baudelaire (1821-1867) to the subsequent development of modernist literature in Europe.[5] Yet in spite of the *flâneur*'s declared resistance to the marketplace's imperative to produce and consume, *flânerie* nonetheless reinforces the cultural hegemony of the West and capitalism, insofar as it is a social role unavailable to groups marginalized in the social life of Europe, regardless of the *flâneur*'s own willful marginality.[6]

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[3] Although Poe (1809-1849), of course, was an American writer, his story takes place in London, a city where he had spent his formative years; the imprint of the story on European literature, in fact, is greater than on United States literature, thanks to a translation that Charles Baudelaire made of it into French.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" [1940], in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 189.

[5] As Benjamin elsewhere describes the *flâneur*, "The street becomes a dwelling place for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among house façades as a citizen is within his four walls. To him, a shiny enameled shoe sign is at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his living room. Buildings' walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; newsstands are his libraries; and café terraces are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done." See "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" [1938] in *The Writer of Modern Life*, 68-69.

[6] One can liken the social status of the *flâneur* to one of his attenuated descendants in the United States, the Beats of the 1950s. Although the Beats declared themselves in opposition to the conformity and imperative to produce in the post-war social economy, their identification with African American and Native American cultures, along with Eastern religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism, only reinforced the conspicuously bourgeois origins of the Beats themselves. What Norman Mailer (1923-2007) misses in his 1957 encomium to the Beats, "The White Negro," is not their identification with African American culture, but their indelible, indomitable whiteness.

The *flâneur*'s ability both to mimic and invert the logic of the marketplace is contingent on his ability to move through the crowd anonymously, uninflected by markers of ethnicity, class, or gender. There is, for example, no feminine counterpart to the *flâneur* (*flâneuse*), because according to the logic of European modernity, a woman in public not purchasing or selling commodities was herself a commodity, i.e., a prostitute.[7] In nineteenth-century Europe, a Jewish man, one could argue, would similarly be marked in a way that would preclude him from functioning as anything other than an agent of commerce.[8] At least in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century, this is certainly the case[9]; in the greatest realist novel of nineteenth-century Polish literature, Bolesław Prus's *Lalka* (*The Doll,* 1889), the danger posed by Jewish characters consists not of their exemption from the commercial sphere, but in their usurpation of Poles' roles in urban and economic domains through stereotypically superior financial instincts and commitment to hard work.[10] In Yiddish literature of the nineteenth century, urbanization as such is seldom depicted, since the preferred setting for Yiddish writing in that era was the shtetl rather than the large city.[11] When Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916) depicts the metropolis in his epistolary series *Menakhem Mendl* (in print, 1887; in book installments, 1892-1909),[12] his protagonist does not stand aloof from modern capitalism, but struggles continuously, preposterously, at times poignantly, to participate in a game, the rules of which he cannot understand and which are stacked against him from the first.

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[7] As Anke Gleber has written, "When a woman signals the *flâneur*'s aimless and purposeless drifting along the streets, she risks being perceived as a 'streetwalker,' as the object of a male gaze usually characterized by the *flâneur*'s disinterested attitude." See "Female Flanerie and the *Symphony of the City,*" in *Women and the Metropolis. Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 76.

[8] One hastens to add for separate though related reasons that in the context of the United States an African American, whether historically or today, could not comfortably play the role of a *flâneur* because his presence is always under surveillance, for reasons both too apparent and too complicated to be elaborated upon here. For one of the best and most succinct accounts of the surveillance that has been imposed upon African Americans in Europe, see James Baldwin's classic essay "Equal in Paris," first published in *Commentary* (March 1955), more recently included in the volume *Baldwin. Collected Essays*, (New York: Library of America, 1998), 101-116.

[9] A credible argument can be formulated that in Western Europe, Jewish *flânerie* was possible as a consequence of assimilation; such an argument is suggested, for example, in the family history that Edmund de Waal chronicles of his ancestors in nineteenth-century Paris and Vienna, *The Hare with the Amber Eyes* (New York: Picador, 2010). Similarly, the most significant exposition of *flânerie* in German literature, and a foundational influence on Benjamin's conceptualization of it, is *Walking in Berlin. A Flâneur in the Capital,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), written by Franz Hessel (1880-1941), a writer of Jewish origins. In Eastern Europe, however, such assimilation remained unattainable, and for the most part undesired, during the nineteenth century.

[10] See Bolesław Prus, *The Doll,* translated by David Welsh, (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2011). Despite the sinister tone that Prus (1847-1912) sets in his depiction of Jews, the novel is nonetheless relatively liberal in its outlook; the Jewish characters come in for less rebuke than the lazy and decadent Polish characters who allow the Jews to take over their affairs, and the clannish, conspiratorial Jews are counterbalanced with other Jewish characters who have sought to create a common culture with liberal Poles, however few and far between such Polish liberals were

Sholem Aleichem's greatest counterpart, I.L. Peretz (1852-1915), similarly depicts urban spaces only intermittently in his fiction, most notably in his relatively late short story *Mayses* ("Stories").[13] The themes that he schematizes and dramatizes there were first suggested earlier in his career, in his debut Yiddish ballad *Monish* (1888) and the prose sketch *In Post-vogn* ("In the Mail Coach," 1891), though in both examples the setting is the shtetl rather than the city. *Monish* figures a young yeshiva prodigy's attraction to European culture as his seduction by a she-demon disguised as a beautiful non-Jewish woman.[14] *In Post-vogn* similarly describes the dilemmas facing modern Yiddish writers such as Peretz through the unhappy marriage of a still-traditional man and a modern Jewish woman involved in a love affair with a non-Jewish Don Juan. As Peretz writes in that story of the domestic situation that prompted this affair

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in the novel or in real life. Prus's attitude toward Jews apparently darkened considerably later in his career.

[11] The definitive (Anglophone) treatment of the shtetl in Yiddish, and Hebrew, literature is Dan Miron's essay "The Literary Image of the Shtetl" (1995) in his collection *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 1-48.

[12] In the original, see *Menakhem-Mendl*, vol. 2 of Sholem Aleichem's *Ale verk*, (New York: Morgn-frayhayt, 1918; 1937). In translation, see *The Adventures of Menakhem-Mendl*, translated by Tamara Kahana, (New York: Sholem Aleichem Family, 1969).

[13] The dating of the story, in fact, is contested: Ruth Wisse in the *I.L. Peretz Reader* indicates the story was written in 1903; the *Ale verk* edition published in New York in 1947 groups the story in the years 1905-1910, making it one of the last stories Peretz would have written before focusing in the final years of his life on drama, memoir, and programmatic essays. Since I'm consulting both sources I'll happily split the difference by dating it in the final decade of his career as a fiction writer, and accordingly "late."

[14] For a (revised) version of *Monish* in Yiddish, see Y.L. Peretz, *Ale verk*, vol. I, (New York: CYCO, 1947), 3-27. In translation see *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth Wisse, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990; 2002), 3-15.

> Two separate worlds, a man's world and a woman's world – a world of the Talmudic "Four Categories of Damages," and a world of storybooks, bought by the carton… When he reads, she falls asleep; when she reads, he falls asleep. At the least, I think, we ought to unite the two worlds. It is the obligation of every Yiddish writer – but Yiddish writers carry too many obligations of their own. If only we had some supplement to our income![15]

Rather than articulating the balance that the narrator seeks in Peretz's earlier story, between Jewish tradition and European modernity, the newly urbanized male protagonist in *Mayses* replays the seductions and apocalyptic downfall of Monish to depict not a bridge between the two worlds the author evokes, but a trap leaving the character, and his generation, stuck in a condition of irresolvable desire.

Mayses is one of relatively few Peretz stories that takes place in Warsaw rather than a shtetl – often in Peretz's stories a geographically identifiable shtetl rather than the prototypical yet parodic shtetlekh favored by his contemporaries Mendele Moykher-Sforim (c. 1835-1917) and Sholem Aleichem. There is much that should be said about the diffidence among the authors of "classic" Yiddish literature in the late nineteenth century to depict the urban experience in Yiddish fiction. This ambivalence is evident in the term *mayse* itself, a word integrated into Yiddish from Talmudic rhetoric. It literally means "deed" and it conveys simultaneously an actual occurrence, as in the expression *mayse shhoyo* (a tale that actually happened), as well as a fabricated incident (a *bobe-mayse*, or old wives' tale). The favored term for describing literary narrative among nineteenth-century Yiddish writers, a *mayse* is situated between the traditional and the modern, the real and the fantastic, the oral and the written. For Peretz, an ostensibly assimilated, Polish-speaking Jewish community leader in Warsaw, the modern, urban perspective simultaneously situates his production as a writer and eludes its own self-representation. This can be likened to a remark attributed to Peretz's contemporary Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) about eating at the restaurant in the Eiffel Tower because it was the one spot in Paris where one couldn't see the Eiffel Tower; as Roland Barthes (1915-1980) uses this remark to critique Structuralism, the position from which a particular perspective is achieved is that location which cannot be depicted in the system it generates.[16]

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[15] See Y. L. Peretz, *In Post-vogn*, *Ale Verk*, vol. II, 74-75. In English, "In the Mail Coach," *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, 110-111. My translation slightly modifies the published version, done by Golda Werman, to convey more explicitly the double meaning of the Yiddish word *khoyv*, signifying both "responsibility," in an ethical sense, and "debt," in a financial one – hence, "obligation."

Maupassant's remark also signifies the paradox of the *flâneur* in architectural and technological terms. At the moment when *flânerie* was becoming obsolete via the replacement of open air bazaars and covered arcades with department stores, new skyscrapers transform the *flâneur*'s roving voyeurism vertically; the cousin's perspective in Hoffmann's story becomes integrated into the logic of city planning, and with the introduction of ticketed access to the top of these constructions, the Olympian perspective on urban space could become another commodity. If *flânerie* promised the *flâneur* both the anonymity and the amnesia of the marketplace, just as the new high-rise buildings promised to erase prior urban histories, including the periodic transformation of the European urban landscape into a revolutionary battleground, Peretz's urban protagonist finds himself continually trapped, "read," both by his memories from the shtetl and the expectations of non-Jews identifying him in the streets he roams. In an attenuated sense, therefore, Peretz uses the techniques of the *mayse* in his urban storytelling to dramatize and complicate the specific paradoxes of the male Jewish gaze. Instead of the verticality of the new urban landscape that enables tourists to escape themselves and their surroundings in order to perceive the city as a panorama, it is the inescapability of memories and shtetl life that prevents his ostensibly emancipated protagonist from living the life of a spectator or an uninflected subject. *Mayses* as such offers a meta-textual commentary on Peretz's status as a writer, as well as his location in Warsaw.

The story begins with the unnamed protagonist, an aspiring Jewish writer transplanted to Warsaw from the shtetl, strolling on the banks of the Vistula and imagining his love interest, a non-Jewish seamstress, visiting him in his rented room. The perspective from the very beginning of the narrative shifts between inside and outside, private and public, in ways that continue to structure the story and spatialize the conflicts that Peretz previously identifies with the "obligation" of Jewish literature from the beginning of his career. Less than half a page into the narrative, Peretz indicates that these star-crossed lovers – it's unclear in fact if they have consummated their relationship in any meaningful sense – first met at the Saxony Gardens (*Ogród Saski*), a telling detail because long before Peretz wrote this story it had served for both Poles and Jews as a stereotypically "Jewish" yet upwardly mobile space, akin perhaps to Central Park West in twentieth-century American fiction or popular culture.[17] The Saxony Gardens is a provisionally Jewish space, yet the presence of Jews there is a source of resentment for nativist Poles who consider them interlopers or outsiders in the cityscape, while a working class Pole such as the seamstress in this story is from an opposing perspective equally displaced there.

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[16] See "The Eiffel Tower" in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 236-250.

The detail moreover reveals part of the political motivation for this exceptional narrative in Peretz's writing: to critique the aspirations toward Polish-Jewish "symbiosis" among the generation of assimilationist intellectuals in the era following the brutally suppressed Polish uprising against Russia in 1863. One of the features of Polish Positivist literature in the immediate aftermath of the 1863 uprising was the motif of doomed love between a Jewish man and a Polish woman; though their relationship was often thwarted by the convenient death of the Jewish man fighting for the Polish cause, or the less melodramatic decision that he remain loyal to the religion of his ancestors, this plot device expressed the naïve hope in liberal circles that cultural and linguistic differences between Jews and Poles could be overcome in the creation of a new, autonomous, yet homogenous Poland of the future.[18] On the opposite side of this political divide, but with increasing virulence in the growing historical distance from the events of 1863, anti-Semites used the figure of the assimilating Jew to warn against the dangers of Jewish materialism, financial corruption, and sexual predation as symptoms of Poland's reverse assimilation or "Judaization."[19] By the first decade of the twentieth century, the anti-Semitic attitude toward Jews had won over even former adherents of Positivist liberalism. For Peretz, writing in Yiddish, the notion of Jewish assimilation among Poles – whether in linguistic, political, or erotic terms – is at best the material for bleak irony, rather than hope or fear. Hence, the narrative he creates on the subject in *Mayses*.

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[17] For a historical discussion of Polish and Jewish perceptions of the Saxony Gardens, see Magdalena Opalski and Israel Bartal, *Poles and Jews. A Failed Brotherhood*, (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1992), 25-26.

[18] This motif figures, for example, in Prus's great novel, though here it functions to evoke an explicitly bygone era: the best friend of Wokulski, the narrative's Polish protagonist – whose adventures offer a picaresque chronicle of Polish life from before the 1863 Warsaw uprising up to the novel's present in the 1880s – is a Jewish doctor, Szuman, who had contemplated suicide over an unhappy love affair with a non-Jewish woman. Saved from suicide, Szuman is "born again" as an objective observer of both Jewish and non-Jewish life in Warsaw, the last witness to the shattered dream of symbiosis between Jews and Poles.

Although the aesthetic logic of the narrative depends on the seemingly inflexible contrasts between inside and outside, naturalistic detail and Symbolist fantasy, a close reading of the story indicates not only a blurring of boundaries separating these ostensibly clear oppositions, but also a deeper engagement through the story with wider currents both in contemporaneous European literature and the aesthetic antecedents that fed the imagination of the fin-de-siècle avant-garde. The Saxony Gardens in this respect locates the story in a liminal yet recognizably Jewish space, but the actual encounter between the two unnamed protagonists shares unmistakable affinities with the first encounter between Golaud and Mélisande in Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelleas et Mélisande*, an international sensation in Symbolist theater that attracted several artistic adaptations during Peretz's most active decade as a writer.[20] Seen through the lens of the drama's second scene, Peretz's female protagonist, lost in the rain, seeking insufficient shelter under a tree, and initially reluctant to speak to the male protagonist, before relenting and taking his hand as he escorts her home, resembles Mélisande – lost, traumatized, and incommunicative – weeping at a well in the depths of a dark forest. With this literary precedent in mind, not only does Peretz's inspiration come more clearly into focus, but the ultimate fate of the male protagonist, never clearly depicted within the story itself, is insinuated at the outset to be unhappy, since Golaud is betrayed in Maeterlinck's drama and becomes his brother Pelleas's murderer.

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[19] For a thorough summary of philo-Semitic treatments of Jews in nineteenth-century Polish literature, contrasted with their anti-Semitic counterparts – including in both categories a discussion of Bolesław Prus, to which my own understanding of his writing is indebted – see Magdalena Opalski, "The Concept of Jewish Assimilation in Polish Literature of the Positivist Period," *The Polish Review* 32/4 (1987): 371-383.

[20] Maeterlinck's play debuted in 1893. The most famous adaptation today is Claude Debussy's operatic setting, which premiered in 1902. Preceding Debussy's work is the incidental music that Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) provided for an 1898 production. Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) also provided incidental music for a Finnish production in 1905 and the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) composed a tone poem inspired by the play in the same year. These incidental settings have been collected in a single recording on the Supraphon label, conducted by Serge Baudo with the Czech Philharmonic in 2007. Of the many recordings of Debussy's opera, perhaps the best is Herbert von Karajan's 1978 recording with the Berlin Philharmonic on EMI Classics.

Given the recent death of Philip Roth (1933-2018), it is difficult to dissociate the thematic affinities between Peretz's story and *Portnoy's Complaint*. Although there is never anything sexually prurient in Peretz's fiction, as much as one might wish there were, the taboo of Jewish and non-Jewish erotic relations against which he struggles is more fraught for Peretz than it would be for Roth six decades later. As much as Roth makes explicit the "national allegory" in his novel of Portnoy's desire toward non-Jews as an effort at staking his claim as an American,[21] Peretz's male protagonist also tries to use his more tentative pursuit of a Polish woman to locate himself, if not in a Polish nation-state that in Peretz's lifetime did not exist, at least in an "emancipated" status of European modernity – the status of the flâneur. Both narratives figure the divide between Jews and non-Jews not just in sexual terms, but also in class and linguistic terms. The male protagonist notes, as does Alexander Portnoy of his partner's written English, that the seamstress's Polish is nearly illiterate, so that at issue in their relationship is not just the conflict between Polish and Jewish culture, but a conflict between European high culture, represented by the Jewish writer, and localized low culture, represented by the working-class Polish woman.

Indeed, the first encounter between the two underscores the disparity of their tentative coupling. While the writer takes note of his love interest's hands – the parenthetical description of her "nicked fingers" confirms that she really is a seamstress and not a prostitute – she dwells on physical markers such as his eyes, his hair, his accent, and his nose that identify his Jewishness. Neither of them can escape the social designations that prevent them from behaving or believing themselves to be emancipated subjects; each scrutinizes the other in ways that frustrate the fantasy of the *flâneur* to liberate himself from the past, to merge with the marketplace by remaining aloof from it. With these surface details, the seamstress matches the writer's apprehension about the nature of her work with another stereotype: she is willing to visit his room to hear one of his stories, but she warns him that any effort at taking amorous advantage of the situation would be met with screams of outrage. "And touching me is forbidden," she states. "Not me, I mean. You are so hateful. If you touch me, I'll scream and run away. You understand?"[22] When the seamstress writes these lines, Peretz describes her written Polish as *Noyekh mit zibn grayzn* (Y 463), like writing the name Noah (נח) and making seven mistakes. Even when asserting his literacy in Polish, he does so in a thoroughly Yiddish idiom, thereby underscoring the paradox that while the male protagonist asserts a better command of Polish than his Polish love interest, their dialogue and every other detail in the story is conveyed to the reader in Yiddish. This linguistic strategy forecloses the dramatic tension in the narrative, since the interaction between characters and cultures is depicted in the language that in fact separates Jews from non-Jews in Peretz's society.

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[21] As Roth puts the matter, more explicitly than Peretz would ever dare, in Portnoy's explanation to his psychiatrist, "What I'm saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds – as though through fucking I will discover America. *Conquer* America – that's more like it…" See, of course, *Portnoy's Complaint*, (New York: Vintage International, 1969; 1994), 235-236 [emphasis in original].

In *Portnoy*, the reference that encodes the parameters of the dramatic situation is William Butler Yeats's sonnet "Leda and the Swan"; in Peretz's story, it is a tableau of fairy tales that serves simultaneously to connect and dissociate Jewish folklore from Polish folklore, and also the neo-Romantic strain of Peretz's aesthetic from the urban, modernist circumstance in which he found himself and which he struggled to render in an acceptable aesthetic form over the final decade of his career – never more vividly in narrative than in *Mayses*. The stories that the protagonist in *Mayses* tells himself, ostensibly to rehearse for a recitation to the seamstress, resemble both the fractured fairy tales of Reb Nakhman of Breslov (1772-1810), otherwise a prototypical influence on fantastic narrative in modern

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[22] See Peretz's *Ale verk* in the 1947 CYCO edition, vol. III, 463. In English, see *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, 201. Subsequent references to these editions recorded in text as "Y" and "E," respectively, though translations will be my own.

Yiddish literature, and the stylized romances of late-nineteenth century Symbolism, including his own *folkstimlekhe geshikhtn.*[23] This self-fashioned genre is – like the concept of the *mayse*, held up for comparable critique in the narrative – a term that encodes its own history, a *mayse mit a bord*, to quote the Yiddish expression for a "shaggy dog story." As Yasemin Yildiz notes, in the same era that Peretz began his Yiddish-language literary career, 1888-1889, the German historian Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891) published a *Volkstümliche Geschichte der Juden* ("A People's History of the Jews") in which he refers to Yiddish, or *Jargon* as it was pejoratively known at the time, as *lallendes Kauderwelsch* ("mumbling gibberish).[24]

Peretz's fashioning of a literary pastiche on Yiddish folklore thus parodies Graetz's claims to German respectability by playing on the double meaning of the term *Geschichte*, which like comparable terms in several European languages means simultaneously "history" and "story." By replacing history with legend, written record with (ostensibly) oral traditions, realism with (neo-) romanticism, Peretz creates an alternative to historicism, anticipating analogous strategies in twentieth-century "magical realist" writing. In Peretz's work, as in "magical realism," the apposition of history with fantasy ironizes a political predicament: how a people without territory, institutions, or autonomy, a predicament as much Polish as Jewish during Peretz's lifetime, can lay claim to a "history" of its own. The valorization of legends in lieu of history signifies the politicization of the legendary, and that politicization becomes further ironized, scrutinized, and mobilized when it is set in a context of ostensibly realist narration, as in the example of *Mayses*. The powerlessness of urban, secularizing Jews such as the story's male protagonist is set against the spectacle and scrutiny of what in the moment is an equally powerless yet nonetheless dangerous, potentially menacing non-Jewish Other. The erotic potential of inventing stories as a mode of seduction thereby acquires an immediate political resonance, because their shared ability to invent a story, collaboratively, provides a mode of agency – a power of life or death over his characters – that either he or the woman he would seduce lack in historical, "real" life.[25]

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[23] Peretz first designated a segment of his writing under this term in 1908, referring specifically to a category of his fiction that might more generically be described as "literary fairy tale," a dominant genre in Symbolist literature throughout Europe at the time. It should be noted that the story *Mayses* itself is not included among the *Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn*. For a lively debate on the term *folkstimlekh*, see Shoshke Erlich (credited as Sh. E.) and Mordkhe Schaechter (M. Sh.), *Vos iz taytsh folkstimlekh?* ("What is the meaning of the term *folkstimlekh*?") and *Folkish un Poshet-folkish* ("Popular and Simple-folk," roughly), respectively, in *Yidishe Shprakh*, Vol. XXXIII, 1-3 (1974), 51-55. Although both philologists trace the origin of the term *folkstimlekh* in Yiddish to – or at least through – Peretz, their explanations fail to account for the irony implicit in his importation of a contemporary German term into Yiddish literary discourse. Schaechter, who first spots the word *folkstimlekh* in Alexander Harkavy's 1893 English-Yiddish dictionary, dismisses the term as *daytshmerish* (an unidiomatic importation of German into Yiddish), but he nonetheless doesn't account for the fact that the literary style of Peretz's stories in this genre is anything but *daytshmerish*. With thanks to my friend Sam Spinner for calling my attention to these articles and providing them to me on short notice.

[24] See Yasemin Yildiz's *Beyond the Mother Tongue. The Postmonolingual Condition*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 51. Yildiz relates these remarks as part of a discussion of Franz Kafka's fraught, complicated relationship with Yiddish, noting that Graetz's work was a fundamental part of Kafka's reading lists on Jewish topics. Peretz was well acquainted with Graetz's work, as befits their reciprocal status as leading Jewish intellectuals in their respective languages. As such, it is certain that Peretz would have also been aware of the German author's contempt for Yiddish. A translation of Graetz's volume first appeared in 1926 under the title *A Popular History of the Jews*.

The circumstance of the protagonist's material condition – his hunger, his anxiety, his guilt, his isolation – conspire to undermine the aspirations to enchantment in the stories he imagines, just as they have undermined his aspirations to the empowered anonymity of a *flâneur*. The pretext of elevating both writer and seamstress through fantasy into royal figures, the prince and princess of a fairy tale, constantly collides with the reality of their powerless and impoverished circumstances. In one scenario, the writer imagines himself a prince sent to rescue his princess (Y 465-466; E 203); relying on a crow to guide him through the treacherous terrain, he searches for grain in the field to eat, but is warned that he is lost among bitter, poisoned herbs. These bitter herbs foretell the looming revelation that the story is told at Passover, but the contrast between the writer's quest and his character's is the absence in the frame-narrative of a helper-animal to guide the protagonist through the jungle of the city. But the reality of his own circumstance intrudes even on this treacherously fantastic scenario, because when he leaves the poisoned fields he encounters a peasant woman who will only provide him bread if he will marry her. Should he betray his one true love, the princess, for the sake of bread? The writer in this dilemma presents the choice between devotion and commerce against which all artistic production is measured. His character's acquiescence to the need for material sustenance offers a further clue toward the disenchantment of the designs the writer directs toward the seamstress.

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[25] As Peretz writes, "And if he feels like it, he can throw the queen's daughter into a dungeon in a strange land, while somewhere else, he leads the king's son to the gallows… And then the listener throws herself on her knees before him and catches his hand; or she strokes his face in sheer pity for the unfortunate lovers. Then, for one kiss on the lips, he conjures away the dangers and brings prince and princess together with fanfare and music to the marriage canopy" (Y, 463-464; E, 201).

As he continues to spin this scenario he recasts his protagonist as a teacher, and as such revisits the pedagogical role that in large part constitutes his relationship with the seamstress, cast forward as a parable on his seemingly inevitable fate as a *meshumed*, a convert to Christianity, as any groom of a non-Jewish bride necessarily would become in the Russian Empire. It is when he decides to tell this story to the non-Jewish waitress in the restaurant where he is sitting that the decisive temporal and cultural break structuring the story occurs, because she reminds him that the day is *erev* Pesach (Y 468; E 205). The city thereby becomes a space where Jews such as the protagonist forget Passover, so that the festival is seen, at least in external and social terms, through non-Jewish eyes. Sholem Aleichem performs a similar inversion, with more deliberate comic effect, in *Iber a hitl* (1913), but it may be noted that Peretz's protagonist, unlike Sholem Aleichem's, is already in violation of the prohibition against eating bread on the afternoon of *erev* Pesach.[26] The writer's transgression, nonetheless, is one of custom, rather than religious law, and the distinction reiterates the socio-spatial conflict between the shtetl – a place defined by custom and community – versus the city, a space defined by law and institutions, in which the ostensibly anonymous citizen could cast off the seemingly voluntary obligations of tradition and family.

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[26] Sholem Aleichem, *Fun Peysekh biz peysekh*, vol. 27, (New York: Morgn-frayhayt, 1937): 241-254; in English, "On Account of a Hat" in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe adnd Eliezer Greenberg, (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 111-118.

The dramatic force of *Mayses* demonstrates that the exchange of custom for law and *Gemeinschaft* (community) for *Gesellschaft* (society) is easier said than done. Nonetheless, this critique of *Gesellschaft* and valorization, however ambivalently expressed, of *Gemeinschaft* is indicative of a larger pattern in European thought at the turn of the century.[27] These questions continue to haunt the male protagonist as he walks through Krasinski Park, where he sees a group of four Jewish children – suggestive of the four sons in the Passover *Haggadah* – playing with their non-Jewish nurse while waiting for the start of the festival. The protagonist re-casts the children and their nurse into his fiction, thereby reversing the frame narrative with the interior narratives, and admitting that his identification is with the children, in that they perform his dramatic function with respect to the nurse, recast as the princess and thus standing in for the seamstress. In their pursuit of her, each suffers a different cautionary fate (Y 472-473; E 207-209): the first is distracted in his pursuit of love when a witch offers him food, the second when a magician offers him a book, suggestive of the corruption of faith through secular knowledge. The third is distracted by a serpent offering him wealth, while the fourth suffers the worst fate of all – to continue his pursuit of the princess, who rejects his advances with the same contempt that the seamstress shows the writer. In this sequence, Peretz contrasts the various forms of poverty of the tradition that drives its young men to abandon it and in this way disenchants the fairy tales that the writer has been creating.[28]

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[27] The defining analysis from Peretz's day of how the dissociated life constituted in the modern city disrupts patterns of community passed down through traditional social ties is Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, eds. David Frisby, Mike Featherstone, (London: SAGE Publications, 1997; 2000), 174-185.

[28] Elen Rochlin provocatively suggests an allegorical allusion of these four children to the four sages who entered Pardes (BT Hagigah 14b); of the four sages in this Talmudic *aggadah*, Ben Azzai died, Ben Zoma went mad, Elisha ben Abuye became a heretic, and only Rebbe Akiva emerged unscathed by the experience. So too in Peretz's version three of the four children are ensnared in their pursuit of the Princess, but a fourth survives the ordeal when the Princess rejects his advances. On a metatextual level, the significance of four exegetes entering Pardes poses the additional allegorical complication that Pardes refers simultaneously to "paradise" and the four-pronged exegetical strategy of *Peshat* (plain or contextual meaning), *Remez* (parabolic meaning), *Derash* (comparative meaning), and *Sod* (esoteric meaning): *PaRDeS*. For more on the evolution of these exegetical strategies in Rabbinic culture, see my rabbi David Weiss Halivni's *Peshat and Derash. Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinical Exegesis*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; 1998). My thanks to Elen Rochlin for her suggestion as well as her meticulous editorial review of my work in progress.

By relegating such stories to the realm of childhood, Peretz places the impulse to fantasy in a psychological as well as historical past while underscoring his identification of the present with urban modernity. The paradox in this gesture hinges on the juxtaposition of fairy tales, the task of the writer, with urban modernity, the negation of an enchanted world. This strategy of negation, moreover, characterizes the story as a whole: almost all the personal information one learns of the writer is conveyed in connection with the arrival of a holiday he no longer celebrates. As much as the dynamic between the writer and the seamstress resonates with the Symbolist aesthetics of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the isolation and poverty of the writer calls to mind another proto-modernist literary sensation, Knut Hamsun's 1890 novel *Sult* ("Hunger"). Yet though Hamsun's protagonist, like Peretz's, is an anonymous writer living alone in the capital city – Kristiana or Oslo in Hamsun's novel, Warsaw in Peretz's story – what distinguishes Peretz's writer is the interpenetration of his disembodied status in the modern city with the mythopoetic connotations of Passover that structure his memories and determine his thoughts. Indeed, his poverty causes him to remark that his apartment is at least free of leaven, *hametz*, at the start of the holiday (Y 474; E 210)! This means in a sense that his presence in the city is inextricable from his absence in the shtetl, yet despite his estrangement from tradition, he remains connected to what he no longer observes via the temporal demands of memory, regardless of his professed refusal to observe its rituals.

The structural divisions of the narrative are thus predicated on the rupture between the secular, modern space of the city in contrast with the chthonic, traditional temporality of the protagonist's consciousness. These are the disruptions that simultaneously the protagonist connects and remains trapped between; his presence can be likened to a hyphen, which both links and separates the clauses of a sentence or line of poetry. Passover similarly serves as a temporal hyphen in the story, through which the irreparable divisions between Jews and non-Jews are schematized. In recalling his previous anniversaries of the holiday in Warsaw, the writer notes that his first Passover in the city was consumed with guilt, loneliness, and homesickness for foregoing its celebration. One can fairly infer that his physical hunger during the holiday intensifies his emotional longing for home. In the following year, however, when he returns to the shtetl, his observance of the Passover Seder breaks down at the parts commemorating the plagues of Egypt (Y 469; E 206) – that is, the retribution against the non-Jewish world for their persecution and enslavement of the Children of Israel. The writer has come to the metropolis in order to evade distinctions between Jew and non-Jew, yet cosmology conspires with politics throughout the narrative to foreclose his ecumenicism.

The writer's efforts at reconciliation between these modes, his modern spatiality and his traditional temporality, bring the story to its climax. Abandoning the fairy tale, which had reached its apex in the Krasinski Park when the princess's rejection of the "fourth son" implies the reversal of power relations between the writer and the seamstress, he imagines instead an apocalyptic, rather than erotic, confrontation between Jew and non-Jew. As readers can recall from both *Monish* at the beginning of Peretz's career, and *Ba Nakht afn altn mark* at its end,[29] there is essentially no distinction between Eros and *Thanatos* in Peretz's conceptualization of this dynamic; they each signify an indivisibility between power and desire in his imagination. The particulars of this confrontation are the tale of a blood libel involving the "founder" of modern Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov (c. 1700-1760) – ostensibly a step backwards chronologically from the stories of Reb Nakhman, from which Peretz had cribbed, knowingly, the stories interpolated previously in the narrative. Yet one can also recognize this as a shift in storytelling genre from *Märchen* (*vunder-mayse* or fairy tales) to *Sagen* (*legende*, legends). Like most such "local legends," the supposedly historical and socially rooted stories that the protagonist fashions at the end of *Mayses* are far more prototypical than documentary. The story borrows, obviously and purposefully, from Heinrich Heine's narrative fragment *Der Rabbi von Bacherach*.[30] In this pastiche – part allusion, part acknowledgement – Peretz signifies how connected his protagonist is to the larger history of assimilation and its discontents for European Jews, starting with Heine (1797-1856), the poet laureate of the subject.

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[29] For a critical edition of *Ba Nakht afn altn mark*, see Chone Shmeruk, *Peretses yiesh viziye* [Peretz's Vision of Despair], (New York: YIVO, 1971). For an English translation, see "A Night in the Old Marketplace," in *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, (2002 edition), 361-432.

[30] For an English translation of this fragment, see Heine's *The Rabbi of Bacharach and Other Stories*, translated by Charles Godfrey Leland, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1987), 19-80.

The first vision that Peretz records (Y 475; E 211) – one the protagonist himself acknowledges is beyond his creative powers – imagines a grotesque, perhaps Expressionistic rendering of the blood libel motif in which the guests at the Seder discover the murdered body of the Christian child and in a desperate attempt to avoid being charged with the murder actually consume the corpse: a graphic parody not only of the accusations of cannibalism encoded in the blood libel, but also of the communion ritual consecrated in the New Testament Last Supper. If the dysfunctional prurience toward relations between Jews and non-Jews in *Portnoy's Complaint* is inevitably portrayed in carnal terms, in *Mayses* this dysfunction receives brief but charnel depiction as ritualized violence. Yet soon Peretz recovers the tone of ironic equilibrium characteristic of his writing, which he had momentarily disrupted consciously, by revising the scene to portray a paradoxically miraculous reconciliation between Jews and non-Jews, in which the Baal Shem Tov averts a blood libel by reviving the murdered Christian boy and, in a more sublimated parody of the Easter Passion, promising him Eternal Life if he will bury himself inconspicuously in a Jewish cemetery.

Before the denouement of this salvation of Jew and non-Jew alike can be delivered, the seamstress knocks at the door, dispelling the narrative's fantastic aura, and reducing these tales to the writer's merchandise. Once again, as was perennially the fate of Jews in Peretz's Warsaw, the protagonist is transformed from *flâneur* to salesman. The ultimate act of disenchantment, accordingly, is not to dislodge the role of fantasy from the writer's imagination, but to reveal that imagination itself functions as a commodity in the modern marketplace – for the *flâneur* who fantasizes himself to be emancipated from the logic of capitalism as much as characters such as Peretz's aspiring writer or his seamstress who know from their respective status that they are not. The writer's erotic passion in this sense becomes indistinguishable from his quest for bread, a quest rendered more dissolute for occurring during the festival in which consuming bread is forbidden. This mode of disenchantment, in fact, is identical in means and in mood to the denouement of the earlier stories *Mekubolim* and *Tsvishn tsvey berg*.[31] Where Romanticism had invested faith in the power of Eros to re-enchant a fallen humanity, Peretz recognizes that within the regime of modernity, both Romanticism and Eros have been reduced to the status of a writer's wares, and with the cultivation of this irony he finesses the distinction between Romanticism and Modernism to create a narrative space that is not traditional or modern, shtetl or city, Jewish or Polish, but, somehow, despairingly, neither at the same time.

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[31] See *Ale verk* (CYCO, 1947), vol. IV-V, 20-25 (*Mekubolim*) and 103-117 (*Tsvishn tsvey berg*). In English, "Kabbalists" and "Between Two Mountains," in *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, 152-156, 184-195.

Subsequent generations of Yiddish and Hebrew writers in Europe seem to have made as little use of the *flâneur* as Peretz had. In the Hebrew fiction of writers such as Uri-Nissan Gnessin (1879-1913) or Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921), the dominant character type that emerges is the *talush*, the uprooted or "superfluous" man who perhaps remains in the shtetl, travels to the metropolis, or even emigrates to Palestine, but remains trapped in an inner psychic dysfunction for which the pleasures or adventures of the marketplace offer no solace. The Yiddish-language contemporary of these Hebrew modernists whose writing most resonates with theirs is Dovid Bergelson (1884-1952), whose protagonists, whether male or female, typically remain in the shtetl or return from the big city to lead lives of "quiet desperation," to quote a phrase[32]; significantly, although Bergelson lived in Berlin from 1921 to 1933, during the heyday of that city's fascination with *flânerie* in both print and cinema, his collected fiction about Berlin amounts to less than 100 pages in translation, none of which considers this theme.[33] For Soviet Yiddish writers, the theme remains unavailable because the marketplace as such had been abolished and even the rhetorical figure of an unproductive observer was anathema to the Stalinist strictures of Socialist Realism. In Poland, despite a lively popular press in Yiddish, the most noteworthy depiction of urban life in the interwar era, Yisroel Rabon's novel *Di Gas* ("The Street," 1928), reverts to the earlier genre of the picaresque to chronicle the melancholy adventures of its *Lumpenproletariat* protagonist.[34]

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[32] The best Yiddish source Bergelson's early writings is an edition published in eight volumes by B. Kletskin in Vilna, 1928-1930 (while Bergelson was living in Berlin). In English see, in particular, *Descent* [in Yiddish, *Opgang*, 1919], translated by Joseph Sherman, (New York: MLA Texts and Translations, 1999). Also *The End of Everything* [in Yiddish, *Nokh aleman*, 1913], translated by Joseph Sherman, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). For critical appraisals of Bergelson see *David Bergelson. From Modernism to Socialist Realism*, eds. Joseph Sherman and Gennady Estraikh, (Oxford: Legenda Books, 2007). Also Harriet Murav, *David Bergelson's Strange New World. Untimeliness and Futurity*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

[33] For this collection, see *The Shadows of Berlin. The Berlin Stories of Dovid Bergelson*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2005).

The fate of the *flâneur*, however, is quite different for Yiddish writers in the United States.[35] In particular, Yiddish poets in New York, taking Peretz as a guiding inspiration toward aesthetic trends such as Symbolism and Expressionism,[36] invested in the urban landscape with linguistic verve and the *flâneur*'s characteristic combination of celebration and critique, ironizing both their poetic voice and their new environment while working past – as few of their contemporaries in Europe were able or willing to do – the imprint of the shtetl on their writing, their conception of Jewish culture, and their perception of themselves. In part the emancipation they articulate is attributable to their medium; although Peretz had essentially created modern Yiddish poetry with *Monish*, poetry had lagged conspicuously behind prose both in quantity and quality among European Yiddish writers. The American Yiddish avant-garde's embrace of poetry enabled new perceptions of their surroundings, which came to influence the subsequent development of avant-garde Yiddish verse in Poland and the Soviet Union during the interwar period. But at the same time that American

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[34] Yisroel Rabon, *Di Gas*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1986). Translated into English as *The Street* by Leonard Wolf, (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1985; 1990). For an outstanding critical consideration of the picaresque in modern Jewish literatures, see my friend Miriam Udel's *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

[35] *Flânerie* is a significant motif for many prominent American Yiddish poets, including A. Leyeles (1889-1966), Jacob Glatstein (1896-1971), and perhaps most remarkably Anna Margolin (1887-1952); indeed, the theme is too complex to be discussed in its fullness here, particularly in an essay devoted to the absence of the theme in European Yiddish literature. The most representative poet to use the theme, however, was Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886-1932), particularly in poems such as *Der Gasn-poyker* ("The Street-Drummer"), "Watch Your Step" (title in English), and *Memento Mori* (title in Latin), all included in his first collection, *In Nyu-york* [In New York, 1919]. The particular prominence of the theme in Halpern's work is attributable in part to the demonstrable influence that Charles Baudelaire exerted upon his poetry, which Halpern would have encountered through Stephen George's influential 1889 translations into German. For a wonderful treatment of Baudelaire's presence in Halpern's poetry, see my friend Julian Levinson's "On Some Motifs in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. A Benjaminian Meditation on Yiddish Modernism," *Prooftexts* 32/1 (Winter 2012): 63-88.

[36] Halpern himself comments on the pervasive influence Peretz had on him and among his peers in a memorial poem that mixes Expressionism with Juvenalian satire. See *Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, In Nyu-york*, (New York: Farlag Matones, 1954), 147-149.

Yiddish poets succeeded in changing their literary aesthetics, they were also able to change their relationship to the city itself. As a later Jewish American memoirist was able to express, the Jewish walker in the city[37] was fundamentally different from his or her counterpart in Eastern Europe. The *flâneur*, whom Baudelaire had imported to Europe from a story that Poe had set in London, could only emerge in Yiddish after Yiddish writers had left Europe.

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[37] The reference, of course, is to Alfred Kazin's memoir *A Walker in the City* (1951).