

CRITICISM AND VISION IN  
BA-LAILAH BA-SHUK HA-YASHAN

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The works of I.L. Peretz reveal an author struggling with the tensions of a society in crisis. Throughout his career, Peretz can be understood as searching for the literary form that would best capture his dissatisfaction with the status quo and convey his desire for change. From the use of the internal monologue to represent the injustices suffered by those who are marginal in society, to the straight narrative portraying the vicissitudes of married life among other problems, to an experiment with the hassidic folktale as a parable for the crisis facing Eastern European Jewish society in the late nineteenth century, Peretz tries to perfect his message and his medium as two inextricably intertwined elements of his art. If viewed in such a framework, ~~as such a search~~, Peretz's struggle to express his concerns and offer a new vision can be seen as culminating in his last literary creation, a work in which critic and visionary merge as Peretz intertwines stylistic and contextual elements of past works: Ba-lailah Ba-shuk Ha-yashan.

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In his article "The Stage Design of Peretz' Bay Nacht Oyfn Altn Mark," Chone Shmeruk holds that the protagonist of Ba-lailah is the Jester. In such a complex work it is, perhaps, simplistic to label characters in such a conventional manner, enabling the reader to comfortably schematize a complicated web of images. Nonetheless, it is clear merely from the frequent speech and presence of the Jester that he is a major character, one of those who provides a sense of continuity and unity to an abstract symbolic tapestry. In examining the Jester in Ba-lailah, then, it becomes possible to examine the play itself as an interweaving of the criticism and hope, mentioned above, that pervades Peretz's work. (Peretz, himself,

uses the word "weaving" frequently within the play.) Two stylistic elements in particular characterize the Jester in a manner that reflects back upon earlier works of Peretz. Following from these stylistic elements, the Jester serves as a sort of fulcrum, a centerpoint around which the various criticisms and hopes that Peretz presents in the play revolve. Thus, an examination of the Jester as he figures into the play's form and content will reveal Ba-lallah to be a final collage in which Peretz attempts to embody (and thus resolve) the struggles which pervade his work.

On the stylistic level the Jester voices social criticism in a manner reminiscent of earlier works where a character, in stream-of-consciousness style, attacks the status quo. Through the mouth of the "idiot", an old man, the poor, a starved student, and others, Peretz shows a flawed social mentality in the guise of a flawed mind which, in fact, speaks the "truth" (i.e., voices Peretz's criticism). This technique, of course, is not specific to Peretz's work. The Jester, traditionally, is the one who speaks the truth, who, because of his marginal position in society, is allowed to say or do what is forbidden to others. In Ba-lallah, then, the Jester plays such a role. Through his continual speech one can read either mental instability or a serious criticism of the the order of things, either insanity or lucidity. And, caught within this double play, one may read a multitude of criticisms and dissatisfactions as well as a yearning for a better world.

Before examining more specifically how the Jester presents such tension and yearning in the context of the play, a second stylistic element may be seen which also reflects back on Peretz's earlier work. When Peretz attempted to create the Hassidic folktale, he had greater success when stepping away from a direct, first person narrative.

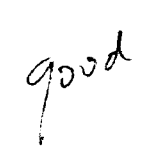
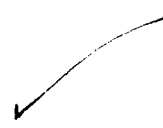
For example, in Ho'Ofot V'ha-g'villim, Peretz creates a first person narrator who tells of once hearing a tale which he then recounts in first person. By once removing himself from the narrative in this way, Peretz is less accountable for the narrator's words, for the polemics of the tale. Through this literary form he had less of a tendency to infuse the speaker with his own social criticism and ideology; he was able to explore new ideologies and possibilities. Ba-lailah can be seen as a similar example of such a distancing. On the one hand, the audience actually meets the playwright on stage in the form of the Poet. Thus, Peretz's identity is established as separate from that of the Lector, the Director, and the Wanderer, just as the Hassidic Rebbe's identity was distinct from that of the narrator in the Hassidic folktale. Furthermore, there is an incredibly complex, five-step removal from playwright to the character of the Jester in Ba-lailah: the Jester is a character in the Wanderer's dream which is told by the Lector as written by the Poet as created by Peretz. The audience, thus, cannot place the Jester in a clear ideological slot. Whatever he may say has been filtered through four perspectives before it reaches the reader, blurring its meaning within the play. Thus, through such a blurring process, the polemics and criticism of the play are left open to interpretation. Peretz avoids placing himself and maintains the complexity of the problems he is expressing.

What, then, are the criticisms and visions Peretz presents in Ba-Lailah? As said, past themes recur in the work. Thus, Peretz offers criticism on a variety of levels. Cosmic/theological questions are raised along side political criticisms about Jewish/non-Jewish relations. On the societal level, questions range from the sexual (male-female relations), to the psychological, to issues of class relations. An analysis of the Jester's

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role in Ba-lallah will reveal the various criticisms Peretz launches as culminating in a new vision at the end of the play; it will not only provide insight into the Jester's role, but will offer one possible framework by which to understand the play as a whole.

Woven throughout Ba-lallah is a dissatisfaction with the cosmic order of the universe. The Jester is a sort of prophet in that he challenges the status quo, insisting that change is necessary. Thus, while trying to remember something he wanted to say but forgot, the Jester says, "In the end, words like this will have in them the ability to reverse everything, to renew everything..."(171-2) The Jester, then, speaks of "ends", of ultimate change. And yet, while prophetic in one sense, he is antithetical to the prophet in another sense. Rather than being the "mouthpiece" of God, an extension of God's will, he is the defier of God. God, it seems, is to blame for the flawed order of the universe. Thus, while again speaking of change at the end of time ("sof kol sof"), the Jester calls on darkness using language directly oppositional to that used by God in Genesis chapter one, when God proclaims light. He says, "Let there be darkness as in the wells/And silence as in the wells!"(pg. 181) The Jester further places himself in opposition to God. He refers to "The holy illusion of the Holy one Blessed be He."(pg. 193) At the end of Act one he defiantly raises his fist to the skies, calling out accusingly "It's in your image the the world is created!"(pg. 203) And, even more blatantly, the Jester insults God and proclaims himself master of the world. He claims, "I am the commander here today,/I and not Him!/Why do you listen to him, an old idiot?"(193) And further: "The world of the creator I will direct/I and no other..."(pg. 193) Only in the guise of the madman can Peretz express possibilities so antithetical to traditional Judaism, so broad in their refusal of the world



order, of the Jewish God.

On the one hand, it seems that the Jester serves as critic of the world order by defying God and God's world, and by insisting on change. More specifically, however, the character of the Jester develops as a sort of existential hero, defying not only God but also death, and insisting of the power of the mind. The denial of death is portrayed, most obviously, in the raising of the dead to life. In Act two, after bringing on darkness, he calls out "From every place in which you rest,/All who are dead but believe that they live!/Come to me and you will be like the living!"(193) And toward the end of the play, as day breaks, the Jester beseeches the dead not to return to their graves. He calls out: "What you believe in---that will live and exist!/And what you deny---that will be wind and smoke!/Deny death, believe in life,/believe strongly---and you will remain!"(pg. 243) As the Jester here refuses the human condition, refuses death, so he affirms the ability of the mind to create reality. At the end of Act two, this philosophy is stated blatantly when the Jester <sup>claims</sup>claims, "Everything is possible and will be planned?If someone says: Let it be so!"(pg. 213) In the Jester, then, Peretz has his existential complaint---the broadest criticism and challenge to the tradition that he can offer.

While the Jester himself directly voices some of the more cosmic questions in Ba-lallah, it is through his interaction with others, in his role as a sort of mediator, that societal criticisms are voiced. In Act two this role is most apparent in the Jester. He serves to mediate and respond to the comments of various characters who suffer in some way in society. In the interaction between these character and the Jester, then, various tensions of a social nature are expressed, as an examination of this interaction will indicate.

This section, then, begins with the Jester asking the Water Carrier, "What do you want here?" (193) What exactly does "here" mean? While it might mean in this physical place, it might also have the broader, more interesting connotation of this world. The Water Carrier, however, is unable to respond to this question. Rather than indication what he *wants*, the Water Carrier tells the Jester what he *must* do, what his societal role is: he must bring water to the Yeshiva students, "the students of Torah are bathing in sweat." (pg. 193) Following this interaction, the Tree Cutter tells the Jester that he brings wood to the Yeshiva students to keep them warm ("Talmud Torah is not heated"--pg. 193). Both of these characters, then, define their importance in terms of their contribution to the Yeshiva students, to Talmud Torah. They subject their own desires to the needs of the students. Similarly, Ha'tsnuah, who speaks after the Tree Cutter, loses all personal desires because of her inability to fulfill the function society has proscribed for her. She says, "I have no desire at all,/Heaven Forbid!/Not even for my husband/on a night like this,/on a morning like this,/I will cleanse my body.../Thus, my father in heaven, May it be your will to redeem/and bless my womb and the loins/of my husband Yoel..." (194-5) To these three characters, the Water Carrier, the Tree Cutter, and Ha'tsnua, the Jester responds in kind. In a somewhat ironic tone, he promises them all that their fulfillment of their duties will bring the Messiah. All three characters are comforted, appeased, with the conventional explanation of their situation: because of their humble acceptance of their situation the Messiah will come.\* And through his ironic tone, the Jester expresses a cynicism, a criticism of the Messianic ideal, of the belief in ultimate redemption as a crutch that enables people to remain complacent, that prevents cosmic, religious, and social rebellion.

\* You are absolutely right. Each of these character's actions is divorced from real life and is performed in the name of some otherworldly goal. 8

In other areas of the play, also, dissatisfaction with the social order is expressed. Class issues and Jewish/Christian relations serve as two examples. At various points in the play, then, the Jester challenges the class injustices of an industrial society. When, for example, the Landowner enters and boasts of his possessions to the poor, the Jester simply kills him by declaring, "Die, Die!" (199) The Landowner then falls to the ground and one of the Poor calls for the prayer of mourning. So abrupt is this event that it is almost comic. But underlying such brutal humor is sharp criticism. Furthermore, it is the Jester who listens to the Typesetter's story. She tells of her work underground in a printing press for many years: "In the dust of the lead/there is a lethal poison..." (pg. 200) She has gone blind. The Jester, in his silence, in his provocation of her story of sadness, criticizes the conditions of the workers of, of industrialization at large. As the workers say, "This factory here/sucks dry and robs the body!" (pg. 199) In addition to criticisms of an industrial society, the Jester points out tensions between Jews and Christians. Thus, in the scene involving the Water Carrier and the others, discussed above, the Jester's role is twofold. On the one hand, as said, his assertion that the Messiah will come because of the characters' work is an attack on traditional Judaism. On the other hand, it can also be read in contrast to Christianity as an affirmation of the tradition. The Priest, then, claims that the Jester's affirmation that the Messiah will come is "Empty words, words of nonsense/The horn of redemption blew long ago/The world was already redeemed long ago" (195) Clearly Christian Messianism is being opposed to Jewish Messianism in this exchange. Thus, the Jester also presents tensions that exist between Judaism and Christianity.

It is clear, thusfar, that on a theological and a social level the Jester



serves, in some way, to voice human complaints. In the third Act, however, these criticisms begin to merge with a new vision. Most clearly, as Act three opens the dead rise to life, symbolizing the end of days. But the fuller vision of change, of the resolution of the tensions Peretz has set up, begins when the young children remind the Jester of one of the words he had forgotten. (The first word he had forgotten had been "dust", establishing the insignificance of the human condition, the concept of people as playthings of God. The second word will direct the play toward its new vision, will serve as a response to this first word.) The context in which this new word is uttered, notably, is one of social criticism. The children sing: "...when father beats mother/society dances..."(234) Suddenly the Jester remembers: "'Dancing' the children say.../...Was this the word that I was waiting for?"(pg. 235) At which point the dance begins. What, then is the meaning of this wild, orgiastic dance that the Jester prompts? Within the framework of tensions set up thusfar, the dance may be seen as a sort of merging, a dissolution of oppositions into one frenzied affirmation of and insistence upon life. An examination of the final Act of the play will prove this point.

Act four opens with a question already encountered in the play, that of suffering. The Zimray <sup>Brody</sup> ~~Barod~~, for example, after telling of their sufferings, ask, presumably of God, "Why did you punish the Zimray ~~Barod~~?"(243-4) The answer they receive is simply, "Don't ask! Don't Ask!...Dance! Dance!"(244) There are, then, no answers to questions of injustice. As the Jester says, "Live what you were not able to live/Feel what you were not able to feel"(pg. 244) Do not ask. Rather, assert your vitality, your ability to feel. This proclamation is followed by various debates as to whether one should, in fact, live in this way. Thus, the Second Researcher <sup>Scholar</sup>

says, "Kohelet says:/all is vanity and evil spirits..." To which the Hassid responds "Just dance!" And later, the Hassidim, in a song about the merits of dance, claim: "If you danced and were redeemed/you didn't argue, you didn't ask.../You blazed up, you were moved/ and you moved up a step!"(248) So it is that slowly everyone begins to dance, to be caught up in a denial of death and suffering, in an affirmation of life. As the Jester notes, even the Maskilim begin to dance. He cries out, "They are dancing! Really, they are dancing!/They feel!"(250) The women are adorned and their hair flies about immodestly in defiance of their traditional position in society, the statues on the Town Hall, representative of the non-Jewish community join in the wild dancing, a woman invites a man to dance with her, to be her king... All social and intellectual inhibitions are broken down as the Jester conducts a delirious dance, attempting to bring the antagonistic elements of society, men and women, Jews and non-Jews, Maskilim and Hassidim, together into one moving organism.

Day breaks. The dance ends, for in daylight, the world of distinctions, of the accepted order, the dead refuse to fight to remain in the world, but return to their graves. Again, the Jester tries to assert the power of human will. He cries out, "Want!---and your eyes will still charm!/Only want, and your blood will flame!"(256-7) But the dead cannot or will not desire strongly enough. The return to their graves, the Jester goes off alone, the Wanderer awakes.

Where, then, is Peretz left at the end of Ba-lailah? What has been created, affirmed? On first reading it might seem that futility is all that remains as the play concludes. For after the vision of the night, the dance ends, the Wanderer awakes, and the status quo is reinstituted. But such is not the case. As said, the Jester is a sort of extension of the Wanderer as

a main character in the Wanderer's dream. By looking at the Wanderer in the Epilogue, then, an extension of the Jester's philosophy can be seen. In the Epilogue, then, it is clear that some hope remains. As the Wanderer speaks hopefully of the day, "The sun weaves her rays.../She weaves red fog.../they make holy the newly woven day!"(pg. 268) He further affirms the potential latent in human life: "And on the edges of the stormy heart.../...a new desire awakens..."(pg. 269) Yet, how is the Wanderer to develop this potential? The Ascetic tells him that he must "Wander, wander, and do not rest..."(pg. 269) But the Wanderer is still uneasy. He asks, "Where is the goal and end of the reaching?"(pg. 270) He inquires of the Ascetic, "You don't know?" "No!" is the response. There is no answer, no final response or resolution to his yearning, his dis-ease. But Wandering itself, searching, seems to be the solution, the answer to the questions that plague him. For Ba-lailah ends in affirmation as the Jester calls out, "Rise to the work of creation!.../Rise..."(pg. 270) Creation is possible. If one only Wanders, searches, dreams, it is possible for the dead, again, to rise.

My reading of the play is not quite so up-beat,  
but you did an excellent job developing your reading.

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