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BEMPORAD

Perets and His Badkhn: Between Hope and Fear, Between Life and Death

"...Mayn harts iz mit aykh. mayn oyg vert nisht zat fun ayer flamendiker fon; mayn oyer vert nisht mid herndik ayer mekhtik gezang. mayn harts iz mit aykh; zat darf zayn der mentsh, un likhtik darf im zayn...un fray muz er zayn... un dokh... un dokh hob ikh pakhed far aykh. ikh shrek mikh far batsvungene vos zign. es kenen fun zey batsvinger vern, un yeder batsvinger zindikt kegn mentshlekhn gayst... ikh vil, ikh hof tsu ayer zig, nor ikh shrek mikh un tsiter far ayer zig. ir zayt mayn hofenung, ir zayt mayn shrek. (Hofenung un shrek, 1906)

Badkhn: "Veynik nokh in kvorim gelitn? nisht farbenkt zikh nokh tsum lebn?... vilt ir - un ayer oyg nokh blitst - vilt nor, hot ir blut vi shtol! nit ale beyner zenen gol! lebn nemt men mit gvald! fun kraft...

Meysim: "Mir zenen dokh toyt!"

Badkhn: "Fun a narishn gloybn farfirt! in vos men gleybt, eksistirt!... farleyknt dem toyt, on lebn gleybt fest! un - blaybt! (Bay nakht afn altn mark, 1907 [1922])

Already before the turn of the century the modern secular Jew I. L. Perets had begun to express his opposite feelings towards Socialism and its ideological program. As the spirit of the Revolution was fostering the spread of an absolute faith and zealous enthusiasm among large sections of the Jewish progressive intelligentsia in the Russian Empire, Perets was giving voice to an ambivalent attitude vis-a'-vis the revolutionary ideals: the establishment of the new political order aroused in him a mixed sense of awe, admiration and fear. The father of modern Jewish culture conveyed his doubts, hopes and fears, in the political pamphlet "*Hofenung un shrek*", which appeared for the first time in 1906. In this address to Jewish socialists, remarkable for its historical and prophetic insight, not only does Perets reveal his respect and approval of the revolutionary determination of the younger generation, but he also communicates his crisis in

the relationship with the radicals. Thus, at the beginning of the century, the engaged social activist of the 1890s found himself in a state of doubt and disillusion, at the heart of which was the fear that the actual concretization of the political revolution would suppress individual freedom.

During the same years of the political article Perets wrote one of his greatest literary works: the poetic drama "*Bay nakht afn altn mark*". The play, which first appeared in 1907, is a bleak portrait of Polish Jewry, depicted as a corrupt and depraved society, bereft of hope and future, and inexorably plunged in an atmosphere of impending catastrophe. From this decadent world, with its false secular and political ideologies, its false traditional beliefs, and its grotesque gallery of stereotyped and shallow characters, emerges the hero of the play: the *badkhn*. This complex, original and ambivalent figure took the shape of a real protagonist starting with the second version of the drama, published in late 1909 or early 1910. The Jester not only appears as the main character of the play, but, standing on the very limen between life and death, he also becomes Perets' alter ego; that is, both the author of "*Hofenung un shrek*" and the protagonist of "*Bay nakht afn altn mark*" find themselves in a limbo-like condition, in an intermediate and ambiguous state, and what hope and fear represent for the former, life and death symbolize for the latter.

Thus, just as the political activist found himself standing on the brink between acceptance and denial of the ideals of the revolution, between hope and fear, so does the hero of Perets' dramatic masterpiece find himself on the threshold between life and death, creativity and desolation, dawn and dusk, rebirth and defeat, between a dance of life and a dance of death. And just as fear overcomes hope to the point that Perets rejects in toto the ideals of socialism, so does death prevail over life to the point that the Jester is compelled to bring to an end his Promethean attempt with the call "*In shul arayn!...in shul...*".

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Three are the main functions carried out by the Jester. Firstly, by playing the role of the fool and the clown, he serves as an ^① agent of parody and as an unmasking force of the moral corruption of Polish Jewry. Secondly, in his impassioned struggle against death and in his severe critique of Jewish society, he becomes some kind of ^② a hero and prophet: the role played by the *badkhn* is in fact not that of the traditional marrymaker and entertainer at weddings; on the contrary, in this drama the Jester assumes the characteristics and faces the difficulties of a leader, thus symbolizing Perets himself. Thirdly, in his desperate quest for the Word he once possessed, and in his search for a new political and cultural solution, the Jester embodies ^③ the sole positive and anti-nihilistic force of the play: the aim of his attempt is certainly not a destructive and anarchic one. On the contrary, though he inevitably fails, the result towards which his effort is directed definitely appears as a creative and constructive one.

The first function performed by the Jester in "*Bay nakht afn altn mark*" is strongly related to the centrality of his character. The *badkhn* appears as the protagonist of the play thanks to the inner changes he undergoes during the narration: from a god he turns into a *shames*, and from a rebel into a conformist¹. Moreover, the Jester is able to link together the rest of the characters: not only is he the only one to appear in all acts of the play², but also, as a *badkhn*, he symbolically represents the mediator between the different cultural worlds depicted. Ultimately, the passive condition of the other characters, both living and dead alike, their limited and pitiful existence, their puppet-like nature, and their insubstantiality, enhance the centrality of the

¹ If the other characters remain static throughout the drama, showing little or no change (the *poresh* remains a moralist, the poet remains faithful to his lyricism and romanticism, and the hypocrite worker preaches his ideals of brotherhood), the Jester reveals his different feelings and attitudes according to the various circumstances and characters he encounters: "*Khapt tsornik aroys a royte ofitsheyle...*" (p. 248); "*Tsufridn*" (p. 249); "*Tsum nakhtmeydl, tif baremhartsik*" (p. 250); "*Mit bahaltener freyd*" (p. 253); "*Mit der foyst tsum himl*" (ibid.); "*Tsum poresh, mit kharote*" (p. 315).

² A. Novershtern, "Between Dust and Dance: Perets' Drama and the Rise of Yiddish Modernism", in I. L. Perets, *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, 1992, p. 73.

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Jester's figure. Thus, as the main character of the play the Jester can easily fulfil his function of mocker of everyone and everything.

According to the official approach to the Jewish question, adopted both by Jewish and non-Jewish liberals since the second half of the nineteenth century, the Jews had to prove themselves worthy to others by becoming socially and culturally worthy to themselves. With his drama *Bay nakht afn altn mark* Perets is actually deriding and ridiculing this attempt. Through the Jester in fact, the author unmasks the political and moral impotence of Polish Jews, mocks the total absence of a political power and positive moral guide, critiques the decaying religious superstructure and the decline of religious tradition, and enforces ridicule on every single aspect of Jewish society by making fun of its various spokesmen, the characters of the play. The fact that the phantasmagoric vision of despair resulting from this tragic drama is actually a parody of Polish Jewry as a whole, shows the extent to which Perets was equally critical of all Jewish cultural and political trends of the time, be they of traditional, religious or secular nature.

The mocking power exerted by the Jester clearly appears in the second act of the play: here, by means of his ironic comments, the Jester literally deconstructs the existing Jewish society, with its various political, religious and cultural exponents, and parodies Jewish history in general, criticizing both traditional and modern ideologies. One after the other, the Jester unmasks the hypocrisy of each character. To three of the Purgatory souls, the water carrier, the woodcutter and the pious woman, who are insincerely striving to efface their sins, the Jester says respectively, "*Un meshiekhn derlebn inem skhus fun frishn trunk!*" (p. 260), "*Un vil derfar, kumt di tsayt, dem meshiekhs shoyfer hern!*", "*Zol fun zey aroys der goyel!*" (p. 261). In the first part of the second act, while addressing a coachman and a kabalist, the Jester again mocks the traditional Messianic belief ("*Un - meshiekhn akegn!*"; "*Af meshiekhn fregn!*", p. 262). Even the secularized version of the Messianic idea is made fun of through the catalytic and unifying presence of the Jester's character: marching towards the factory, the powerful proletariat is led

by three miserable and grotesque figures, a hanged man, a blind typesetter and a one-legged prisoner.

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It is not only the dead who deserve the mocking critique of the *badkhn*. In the first act, when referring to the new generation of Jewish fighters and idealists, the Jester plays in fact the same "role of unmasker" with regard to the living. During the political debate between the young Zionists and the Seimisty, to the different solutions put forth by the advocates of each party ("Vest redn? vegn seym! -ikh-vegn shekelim! -a folk, vi a mentsh, muz hobn a heym!"), the Jester sarcastically advances his own proposal: "*Oder a kholem!*" (p. 249). The parody *par excellence* of the Messianic ideology takes place in the second act: here, to the boastful certainty and absolute faith in the advent of a New Era voiced by the hungry worker ("*Es geyt der nayer held af ayer got! af ayer velt!*", p. 270), by the blind typesetter ("*Ikh her zayn shtim fun vaytn!*", *ibid.*), and by the folk poet ("*Er geyt der nayer mentsh, er kumt!... groyse heldn- shoyne in veg!*", pp. 270-1), the Jester answers by calling to witness the martyrs and their unavailing sacrifice and suffering: "*Hey, giboyrim! khashmenoim! vert antplekt!... heldn-gor a nayer min!... mir tseykhenen mit blut dem veg... ober vos bashtritm?*" (pp. 271-2).

The instrumental role of mockery and parody performed by the Jester in Perets' play is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the functions carried out by the Clown and the Fool in the novel. As the Russian literary critic points out, "Essential to these...figures is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege - the right to be 'other' in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation"³. Just like the Clown and the Fool, the Jester appears as an outsider and as an antagonist of all conventionally accepted ideologies and traditional beliefs; this enables him to criticize and make

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³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981, p. 159.

fun of the surrounding world, to challenge the fixed reality and to parody all existing belief-systems. Perets' Jester is in fact "opposed to convention and functioning as a force for exposing it,...opposed to greedy falsehood and hypocrisy,...opposed to everything that is conventional and false"⁴.

The Jester is considered by the other characters of the drama as some kind of an outcast, as a fool, as a clown: not only is he explicitly referred to as a "*lets*" (the poet calls him "*vanziniker lets*", p. 231; the narrator alludes to him by saying "*fun zinen arop a lets*", p. 257; the bishop says "*in shayn fun altn gets zigt der lets*", p. 306) and a "*meshuge*" (about the terrible night, the *poresh* says "*un far shigoen!*", p. 253; and again he remarks "*es vert nakht un es togt...un narish iz, oyb emets zogt er hot a nays derlebt*", p. 317; the narrator comments on the Jester's behaviour by saying "*mit der foyst kegn himl geshtrekt shigoen lestert!*", p. 257), but, through his presence, he also arouses in the other characters mixed feelings of fear, scorn and laughter ("*afn badkhn mit shrek onvayzndik*", "*kinder tseloyfn zikh in hayzer...mit a shrekik tsevorfn gelekhter*", p. 248; "*nakhtmeydl... ibergeshrokn, shpringt op*", p. 250). And it is precisely through his role of misunderstood fool and eccentric clown⁵ that the Jester becomes the "centrifugal and dispersing force" in the play: namely, he can parody the accepted conventions of

⁴ Ibid., p. 162. About the characters of the Clown and the Fool, Bakhtin also emphasizes that, "In the struggle against conventions...these masks... grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease..., the right to parody others while talking..., the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage..."; *ibid.*, p. 163. Apropos the last privilege of the Clown-Fool mask mentioned by Bakhtin, the relation with the Jester appears for example clear in his angry attack against God: "*Zayn libn nomens heyliker shvindl...*" (p. 258); "*Un er vos hot dermit gemeynt? der, vos hot aykh oysgeveylt? iz es gevezn zayn shtrof? hobn im vunder farfelt?...*" (p. 272). Moreover, as it is typical of the carnival genre, in the Jester's rage against God, "The word is not spoken, but shouted; it does not persuade, it hawks, profanes, curses"; G. S. Morson & C. Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, 1990, p. 226.

⁵ As Bakhtin points out, "...by his very uncomprehending presence he makes strange the world of social conventionality"; *ibid.*, p. 360. And again, "Like the forms of anticulture, these figures do not belong to social categories, but exist in homeless, defiant opposition to them"; in *Creation of a Prosaics*, p. 352. ✓

the society depicted, criticize its traditional institutions and new ideologies, and, by revealing the hopelessness and bleakness of Polish Jewry, become its "life's unmasker"⁶.

In his severe critique of Jewish society, which resembles that of a prophet⁷, the Jester represents Perets himself. While the rest of the characters in the play are defined as the spokesmen of a certain reality or given ideology, the Jester does not appear as the ~~depository~~^{ts} of a positive alternative to the status quo. Until the very end of his rebellion in fact, he does not seem to possess a concrete political or cultural program. On the contrary, his attempt to discover a new creative solution assumes the characteristics of an improvisation. The Jester is desperately looking for the Word that could enable him to put an end to the political and cultural bankruptcy of Polish Jewry: "*Es iz dokh fort faran aza vort, alts ibertsumakhn, ibertsukern...*" (p. 242). And each time he seems to have found the right Word it is thanks to an accidental prompt coming ^{exactly} from the speech or the action of another character. The word "*shtoyb*" is suggested by the nihilistic outburst of the hungry worker, and the word "*tants*" is introduced by a children's song. In spite of the improvised tone that distinguishes his action, and thanks to his fiery struggle against death and his utter repudiation of passivity, the Jester appears as a hero, as some kind of a leader.

The Jester clearly states his intention to replace God. At the beginning of the second act of the play, as the souls from the Purgatory start appearing in the marketplace, he addresses Him by saying, "*Morgn kenstu shtrofn! nor kol-zman du vest shlofn bin ikh do feldmarshal! un ikh vel firn!*" (p. 258). Again, induced to action by the words of the hungry worker, he inveighs against

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Very often the traditional role of the prophet is performed by the fool, the ^{ts} *qhudak*. As Perets himself points out in one of his stories, "*A mol, dermon ikh zikh plutslung, flegt men haltn meshugoim far neviim, un ikh freg zikh: tsi iz er nisht beemes eyner fun zey? tsi yogt men im nisht vi a novi?*"; I. L. Perets, *Meshiekhs tsaytn*, in *Fun Peretses oytser*, 1952, p. 170. /u o

God and declaims, "*Ikh bin feldmarshal, nisht er! vos hert ir dem narishn altn? ir zayt mayn militer...*" (p. 268). When referring to Bakhtin's literary critique, the Jester can be viewed as the merging of the two characters of the Fool and the Clown; thus, his aspiration to challenge God and rebel against Him [?] results evident. As Bakhtin points out in fact, "The clown and the fool represent a metamorphosis of tsar and god - but the transformed figures are located in the nether world, in death"⁸. In Perets' drama, the nether world is symbolized by the marketplace, where the encounter between dead and living takes place, while death is designated by the night, the traditional time when the dead may rise from their graves.

Before witnessing the terrible death of the *klezmerim*, swallowed by the enchanted well, the activity of the Jester was perhaps that of a political or intellectual leader, rather than that of a traditional *badkhn*. The status of his "previous existence" is conveyed through his attempt to remember the truth he once possessed and to resume the role he once played: "*Gots velt vel ikh firn! loz ikh mikh nor vu ahin dermanen*" (p. 259). Death, which he opposes so fervently in his phantasmagoric struggle to revive the dead, represents his failure as a leader, his disillusionment. The old ruin where he sits in the company of spiders and shadows, is not only the symbol of his condition of marginalized and fool, but also represents the loss of his certainties, of his political, cultural and moral ideals. Thus, the Jester's heroic fight against death, inevitably doomed to fail, becomes a fight against disillusionment. As striving passionately ^t to convince the dead to ^{ye} belief in life and say no to death, right before the grotesque tin rooster shatters his dream of rebirth, the Jester triumphantly says to the dead: "*Iz er fartribn, iz er opgeshaft...iz fun haynt keyn toyt nishto!*" (p. 309).

Thus, in rejecting both the traditional reality of the *shtetl* and the *shul* and the modern reality of the emerging political parties, in facing the difficulties of the "hero of the new

⁸ M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 161.

generation", in struggling to find a positive alternative to the cultural corruption of the Jewish world, the Jester symbolizes Perets himself. At the end of the 1890s, when he had already become the dominant cultural figure of Polish Jewry, in a letter to David Pinsky, Perets expressed his sense of failure and crisis as a leader: "I have reached the conclusion that I lack the powers to attract people to myself; neither can I go serve others, so I wander about among different galaxies around a lone star with an ironic-silly tail and there is no place for me anywhere"⁹. These words may have easily been uttered by the Jester himself¹⁰.

Considering the definition of "nihilism" as "the belief that all existence is senseless and that there is no possibility of an objective basis for truth", or as "nothingness or nonexistence", the protagonist of *Bay nakht afn altn mark* should certainly not be considered as a nihilist¹¹. On the contrary, the Jester represents a strongly anti-nihilistic and creative force within the drama. Leaving aside his grotesque overthrow, the *badkhn*'s character constitutes perhaps the only positive and creative power of the play. By the same token, the mad, fantastic, unifying, boundaryless Dance of Death, becomes in effect a Dance of Life, of creativity, a symbol of creative ^gimagination, a symbol of the Jester's dream. In his desperate attempt to free himself and the surrounding reality from death, as soon as he perceives lively sparkles of life in the dead dancers' eyes, the Jester starts believing in the actual possibility of rationalizing his dream, of

Not the only
one. Must
compete
with Freud
and raw
libido

⁹ Quoted in D. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, 1995, p. 113.

¹⁰ A further similarity between the two heroes results in the parallel between the old ruin, where the Jester sits prior his attempt to revive the dead, and the prison, where Perets sat "after he was arrested in August 1899 for appearing at an illegal meeting called in support of striking workers". In both cases the ruin and the prison represent the leader's failure, his personal and cultural past. Ibid., p. 113-4.

¹¹ Novershtern describes the Jester's impulses as essentially nihilistic (Novershtern, "Between Dust and Dance", p. 76). On the contrary though, his action seems to be first of all directed towards life and towards the finding of a new constructive solution. Both as a fool and as an overthrown leader, the Jester does no longer possess the truth he once did and is therefore compelled to improvise. Nevertheless, he is definitely striving to regain possession of the Word or to find an alternative to the collapse of all traditional and political ideals.

bringing it out into the daylight, of making it come true: "*Zey tantsn! virklekh zey tantsn! zey filn! af toyter gezikhter shpil shyer nisht lebedike glantsn! in toyte oygn: viln, bagern! hent zikh shtrekn, fis zikh kern, shpringen unter! munter, ufgetoyte glider!*" (p. 303-4).

The play *Bay nakht afn altn mark* is thus presented as a terribly bleak comment on Jewish Polish society. In its absence of hope and in its presence of fear, it almost appears as an indictment, as a prophetic rebuke, underscored by the Jester's ridicule and grotesque summon to return to the synagogue, after he has made fun of tradition and overtly challenged God throughout the play. The conclusion is rendered ~~more~~ ^{even} bleaker, desperate and resigned through the Jester's failure to revive the dead and through his metamorphosis into a *shames*: just as the Jews only deserve to go back to *shul*, so does he only deserve to become the *shul*'s guardian. Thus, Perets' dramatic masterpiece becomes a political and cultural indictment of Polish Jewry. By no means though is this an utterly nihilistic indictment. On the contrary, endowed with the regenerative function of theater, it becomes a cathartic work; and, just like Bialik in his poem *In the City of Slaughter*, through the Jester's action and through the description of the corrupt reality, Perets is attempting to arouse the audience's and reader's rage and turn impotence and powerlessness into "rebellion".

"*Vi lang lebn toyte? vi lang lebn toyte?*" (p. 285).



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