

ביינאם אונדזער ניטערשטער

In his article "וואָס פעלט אונדזער ניטערשטער" Peretz calls the return to tradition as the central principle necessary for the continued survival and development of Yiddish literature. For him the basis of this principle is a return to the Bible, and in order that he will not be misunderstood he attempts to clarify what he means by a return to the Bible:

"צוריק צו דער ביבלי" הייסט נישט: בליבן שטיין ביי דער ביבלי. ייִדישקייט איז נישט קיין שטייטנדיק וואָסער, קיין זוספּ. "סיס הייט" רופט מען זי, די תורה. אויפן באַרג סיני האָט מען געוויזן "כל מה שעתיד תלמיד ותיק לחפש" - אַלץ וואָס א ייִדישע נפשׂה וועט אויסשפינען. ייִדישקייט סאָר נישט גענוסטען ווערן סאַאַסיש, נאָר דינאַסיש - אין דער אַנטוויקלונג, דאָס הייסט, אוסעסוס, אויף דער גאַנצער ייִדישער וועלט און אין אַלע צייטן; קיין איינציקן עכס-ייִדישן סאַטענעם נישט אויסגעטעקט. ייִדיש איז אונדזער, אונדזער איין-איינציקן וועג צום - טענשאַ. צום געטלעכן טענשאַ, צום טענשאַלעכן גאָט!

Peretz conception of a return to the Bible is actually a journey towards knowledge of the world in all of its aspects. No corner of the world or aspect of knowledge is to left out. For the Jewish people the path along which this journey must lead is the Yiddish language itself and the literature written in that language. The key is that as one learns to understand the world one simultaneously journeys towards oneself through self-knowledge. At the end of this path is a man who has made himself as omniscient as the revealed Biblical God, but this is the goal which is unlikely to be reached, however to be Jewish is to journey along this path. Occasionally one must stop to rest, but only in order to continue on, since to truly live one must wander.

"וואָס פעלט אונדזער ניטערשטער" was written in 1910 during the

¹ י. ב. פּרעק, "וואָס פעלט אונדזער ניטערשטער", ז' 234, דאָסקעס קאָפּיעס.

period in which Peretz was working and revising *נבי נאכס אויפן מלסן סאדק* and in the final version of the play the explicit poetics favored within the article are recognizable. In the prologue to the play a wanderer very similar to the prototype discussed in "וואס" is introduced. As he grows old he continues to wander upon the same earth under the same sky remaining satisfied sensing that the world still contains much that he has not yet had a chance to be perceive. Yet like all wanderers the Wanderer of the play becomes tired and is overcome by sleep. The four acts of the play are the dream of the Wanderer where independent of the outside world the Wanderer has an opportunity to take account of himself in order to see if he is ready to continue on with his journey forward towards greater self-knowledge. As the Poet (דיכטער) explains at the end of the prologue: "האָב איך, הייסט עס, איינעם / פון זיינע חלוֹמוֹת געזען, און דעם" ² "וועט מען שפּינ'ן"

In *נבי נאכס אויפן מלסן סאדק* there is a very large cast which is very difficult to keep track of, but out of this large cast which is completely lacking in proper names there are very few distinctive characters who reappear frequently throughout the work. These recurring figure will be concentrated upon, with primary concentration placed upon the understanding of the place of the *בדחן* (for convenience to be transliterated as *Badkhn*), in attempting to understand the dream world of the Wanderer, and the Wanderer from that world.

Although he is only one among many performance and

². חנה שמערדוק, *פּרעזענט ייִדיש-ווּדזיע* (ניו-יאָרק: ייִדישער וויסנשאַפֿטלעכער אינסטיטוט, 1971), 236.

creative artists within the play, the *Badkhn* can be considered to be the primary figure of the artist present within the work, a fact reflected in his existence as both a creative and as a performance artist. This artist, as we learn from his rival the *Folk Poet* (Folk Poet) despite the *Badkhn*'s angry attempt to deny it, has a dark secret which he is reluctant to have others know. This secret is the fact that he alone remains from a group of musicians who in a state of sexual, artistic, and alcoholic excitation committed suicide. As the *Folk Poet* explains:

גייען די קלעזמער פון פריזישן באָל,
 [קעגן פריצות געזעסן-]
 נסך געסרונקען, פת-טכו"ם געגעסן,
 שיכור פון תאוה, שיכור פון ווייץ . . .
 ס'איז האַלבע נאַכט,
 דער געץ וואַכט,
 נעמט ער און ציט זיי אין ברונעם אַרײַן . . .
 שפּרינגען זיי איינס נאַכן צווייטן כּסדר³

The *Badkhn*'s compatriots crossed the border in multiple ways. They had desire for non-Jewish women, they ate non-kosher food, they drank to excess, and they performed their art for a non-Jewish audience. Whatever the ultimate reason for their death this event has had a traumatic effect upon the *Badkhn* and as the first act of the play begins we find the *Badkhn* leaving the synagogue, in which he is haunted, for the first time after a very long time:

ס'איז סיר עפעס אַראָפּ פון זינטן . . .
 כ'האַב עפעס אַ וויכטיק וואָרט פאַרגעסן . . .

³שמערוק, ז' 247-248.

צו לאנג אין חורבה געזעסן
 צווישן די שפינטן . . .
 און כ'וואַלם עס געפינטן . . .
 אַ דגע שסיל, און ס'וואַלם סיר געראַסן
 איז פול די חורבה סים אַלסע שאַסן,
 עפעס הייליקע אַלערליי . . .
 עפעס וויינען זיי, עפעס זאָגן זיי . . .⁴

Inside of the deserted house of study the Badkhn can attain sanctuary from all of the things which have traumatized him in witnessing the death of his friends. In the house of study there are no women (especially non-Jewish ones), there is no non-kosher food, there is no alcohol, and there is no audience for him to perform for (especially a non-Jewish one). This hiding out in the house of study is difficult upon the Badkhn and the holy environment which resembles the environment which gave birth to him as an artist seems to be calling out to him to change his ways. The Badkhn hears, but he is unwilling to change due to his unflinching pride depriving the whole world of his talents.

Taking a step back from an analysis of the internal characteristics of the Badkhn for a moment, the question arises as to what the place of the Badkhn is in the world of the Wanderer's dream. Building on the assumption that the Wanderer is the literary persona of Peretz the Badkhn can be seen as a dominant but repressed part of the artist's ego. In his struggle with this part of his repressed ego the artist as wanderer has tired himself out and takes a moment to rest since he no longer has the strength to continue on and write. Despite the presence of certain psychic forces which desire to rebel against him in his

embodiment as conscious ego and Creator God, such as the Badkhn, in the world of his own mind the artist is God and there he rules. Yet with the arrival of night and the entrance into the world of dreams the repressed psychic force represented by the Badkhn goes out into the world of the ego in an attempt to seize control when the conscious ego is at its weakest. If the Badkhn can succeed in his revolt and gain control of the Wanderer's mind he will have the ability to threaten the life of the artist himself, but if he is defeated and accepts the rule of the conscious ego the same forces which could be used to destroy the ego can be sublimated in artistic creation. If this occurs the artist as Wanderer will be able to continue onwards on his way towards self-knowledge.

Within the dream world one of the characters which the Badkhn is closest to, despite his expressed feelings of hatred towards him which culminate at the end of the dream itself, is the פרוט (Recluse). The Recluse as one who devotes himself almost exclusively to the study of sacred texts is an individual whose universe is much more limited than the world of the Badkhn would normally be due to the fact that his need to study sacred texts and to pray to God place him naturally in a restricted area which centers around the house of study. However due to the Badkhn's repressed fears that he is unwilling to confront, he has retreated to the house of study and there he can but not find himself in constant conflict with the Recluse who inhabits the same space.

With his fatalistic attitude and his choice of existence the

obvious psychic equivalent for the Recluse in the mind of the Wanderer is that of the superego which is best reflected in the Recluse's reaction when the Badkhn makes an advance upon the Recluse's reaction when the Badkhn makes an advance upon the **נאָכטלידן** (Prostitute or literally lady of the night). The Recluse screams out: "גאָט, דעם שטן פאַרטרייב!"⁵ After the Badkhn loses his opportunity to pick up the Prostitute another character makes his critical first appearance.

This new character's pseudonym is the least specific of almost all the names in the work, but this character is not that difficult to identify. This character is identified as **קעמער** (Somebody) which perhaps not so coincidentally happens to rhyme with **גאָט** (idol) reminding the reader of forces of both death and sexuality in connection with the death of the musicians in the well. Like the artists of the dream world who can be seen as serving a socially useful purpose through their art Somebody can also be seen as serving a socially useful purpose as reflected in the medicine which he is carrying when the Prostitute bumps into him. Unlike the work of the artists however, the usefulness of what Somebody can offer is much more effervescent, a fact symbolized by Somebody's spilling of all of the medicine which he is carrying when the Prostitute bumps into him. Despite the rhetoric of a Don Juan, which camouflages Somebody in the image of a physically striking and charming fellow, Somebody has a physically repellant appearance and a less than charming demeanor. These facts are reflected in Somebody's apparent rape and possible murder of the Prostitute as supported by his

statement that, "אין האב א הייליק לייב פערצערט." ⁶ Somebody's great mobility and power in combination with his sexual appetite and his murderous attitude make him seem to be the most rarefied representative of the id within the dream world of the Wanderer.

In their struggle for influence over the Badkhn who represents a major part of the repressed unconscious ego of the artist, the Recluse and Somebody, or the superego and the id, are fighting for the control of the unconscious ego of the Wanderer. The complete influence of the Recluse, or superego, over the Badkhn will necessarily lead to the need for a return for the waking state and action in accordance with the goals of the superego, while a victory of Somebody, or the id, will lead to death due to the presence of aggression within the unconscious which will have no avenue of release except in an attack upon itself.

At the beginning of the sleep state the Recluse has a more prominent position, as seen in his victory over the Folk Poet in argument. In Act I after somebody has dragged off the Prostitute to do with her as he will the Folk Poet comes out and begins to sermonize upon the beauty of the stars. This positive view of the night, or the world of dreams and the unconscious, is opposed in the Recluses' comment that the stars, "ווערן פון קליפה געפאנגען". ⁷ Immediately after this comment the Folk Poet changes his opinion and begins to view the night as threatening, stating that it is "א

⁶שמערוק, ז' 273.

⁷שמערוק, ז' 252.

נאָכט וואַכער. ⁸ As a working representative of God, or the conscious ego, in the dream world the נאָכט וואַכער (Night Watchman), who is there to protect the inhabitants by night and there to wake them to prayer in the morning, is aligned with the Recluse and as long as he is functioning the Recluse will clearly have the upper hand in his struggle for influence over the Badkhn. As the night progresses however the Night Watchman falls asleep leaving the Recluse to fend for himself.

In the beginning of Act II when the Badkhn takes the whistle which is meant to wake for prayer he shows himself holding the keys to the dream world. As soon as he considers himself to be the master of the night he no longer fears that which he had been repressing during his seclusion in the house of study, and he immediately approaches the idol at the mouth of the well and commands it to give him life giving water as opposed to the death that he so fears otherwise. Once he is in charge though the Badkhn is unable to effectively create because he is working so hard to repress that which he so fears even when he is in charge. His art is not creative, rather it is reactive and weak, such as in his response to the קאַנטור (Cantor). Without any clear plan the Badkhn is unable to free himself of the Recluses' influence despite his desire to be free. When the Recluse begins to pray חצוֹן חִיקוֹן he shows that he can still play an important role in the dream world. The Badkhn reacts by returning his musician friends to life and he has them begin to play, but the musicians which have already shown their weakness in their suicide are not a difficult opponent for the

Recluse who is able to destroy their melody with his chanting of Lamentations and Isaiah. When the Badkhn realizes the failure of his attempt he stops the musicians and the Recluse attempts to explain to him the uselessness of his revolt against God the father:

די שויל וויינס און קלאגט!
 די זאגט:
 ווי צום פאסטער, וויי,
 וואס האט זיך זון פארטריבן,
 און - עלנס געבליבן . . .
 און ווי, וויי
 צום זון, פון פאסטער טיש פאריאגט . . .⁹

As it seems that the Recluse has succeeded in reasserting the control of God, the conscious ego, upon the whole scene the Church bells begin to ring bringing into question the Jewish God's existence and his very right to rule whether directly or through his surrogate the Recluse. Perhaps there is no order to the world and to the mind of the Wanderer. Simultaneously the power of the Badkhn and the whole basis of his art come into question since his art is traditional, having its origins within the Jewish religion and its associated customs. When all of the other aspects of the unconscious Wanderer are placed into question Somebody sees an opportunity to stress his influence and he promptly reappears. Somebody essentially proclaims that the end of days has arrived when he calls for the dead to arise from their graves. The status of Somebody as messiah is possible even if the Jewish God is no longer the real God because he can just as equally be the second coming of the Messiah as he can be the first. Whatever he may be

Somebody takes control of the dream world when the Badkhn accedes to his power, blowing the whistle which emits a shofar call like the one that will signal the arrival of the messiah.

Despite Somebody's desire to be the messiah and the ruler in the dream world with the arrival of the end of days, it is immediately apparent to the dead themselves that Somebody is not the messiah and they have been raised to some unnatural end. As the אגיד (old man) explains:

משיח וועס וועקן ב'ל' האָג
צונד איז נאכס, שסאַק נאַכס,
עסען האָס אַ שוואַרצע קונץ געסאַכס . . .
סען זעס
אויף היסל און ערד קיין צייכן
עס וועס אַיך דערגרייכן
האַסס האָנס . . .
איר גיים בלינד,
איר זיים ווינס,
שניידן וועס איר שאַנד'ן¹⁰

As the Badkhn interacts with the dead and sees how they function he begins to realize that the rebirth which has occurred before him is illusory. The dead continue to complain and they are unable to remember their past living in a continuous present unable to interpret or understand the developing future. A gap is clearly being presented between the world that the Badkhn wanted to rule over, which he wanted to be the perfect world of the messianic age, and the world which he wanted to escape from with the need to fear death. The painful reality of this fact is made abundantly clear with the way Nosn is given the

¹⁰שמערוק, ז' 282.

opportunity to be married to his long lost love who has returned from the dead. Nosh, who lives only to escape from himself in pleasures presented to him by his id, whether they be alcohol or a new bride, is given an opportunity to become one with his desires and he reaches out for that opportunity. The result is Nosh's death cradled in the breast of his beloved. The bride is converted from the a women with a womb able to bring life to the world into a walking and talking grave composed of cold worm-filled earth of which she has been a part for years.

In his pride the Badkhn does not want to confront the fact that if he embraces the new reality suggested to him by Somebody that his fate will be the same as Nosh, yet he is not ready to beg for the return of God, the conscious ego, who will replace him as the ruler of the mind of the artist. The Badkhn's pride places him in a catch-22 and he does not want to face the fact that he must choose between the opposing ideas of dust and dance. In this period of difficulty the Badkhn arrives at the idea of making the dead dance. In this combination the Badkhn is able to show himself in equal opposition to the powers of Somebody and God, the id and the superëgo. As the dead dance the Badkhn attempts to convince himself and all those around him that the dance of the dead, which he has commanded, is a success:

זיי טאַנצן! ווירקליכך זיי טאַנצן!
זיי פילן!
אויף טויסט געזיכטער שפילן
שייטער נישט לעבעדיקע גלאַנצן!
אין טויסט אויגן: ווילן, באַגערן!
הענט זיך שטרעקן, פיס זיך קערן.

שפרינגען אונטער!
טונטער,
אויפגעטויטע גלידערן!¹¹

Despite the attempts at rhetorical flourish the Badkhn knows that he has failed. The initial reason that the Badkhn decided to hide out in the house of study was that he wanted to have the opportunity of not having to face the fear of death, but with the dead before him dancing there is no escape from them except God, the conscious ego. Before more mixed marriages between the dead and the living can multiply the dead in the dream world harkening its destruction the Badkhn is saved from the effects of his own rebellion. The God of the external world has allowed the sun to rise once more and the sun's first rays penetrate even into the unconscious of the sleeping Wanderer. With the sun's arrival the dead know that it is time for them to return to the grave realizing that the time for unnatural tricks has ended. As the sun rises the Wanderer slowly returns to consciousness alerting the Badkhn that it is time to return control to the conscious mind. This sign is the crowing of the tin rooster showing the supremacy of the conscious mind of the refreshed Wanderer which is more powerful than any false resurrection, or any dance of the dead.

As the Badkhn returns to the house of study to hibernate once more until the Wanderer returns to sleep, the Recluse waits there to meet him. Despite his understanding that he has lost once more the Badkhn is slow to return the whistle and the control of the ego to the newly awakened Night Watchman. As the epilogue

opens however the Recluse defeats the Badkhn in a violent argument and when the Badkhn reemerges bloodied and bandaged from the house of study he is carrying the whistle of the Night Watchman in one hand and the door knocker which calls the community to prayer in the other. As the Badkhn calls the Jews to prayer he knocks only twice acknowledging the death of Nosn, who was unwilling to search his own soul to find what was truly within. While sad at Nosn's unfortunate death the Badkhn knows that he must go on, even though he fears death, for his own good and for the good of the whole world represented by the Wanderer's mind. Once the Badkhn understands that he can not defeat the conscious ego and live he ends his opposition to the conscious ego and becomes willing to join forces with it. This understanding converts the Badkhn from a force which must be repressed into a force which can be of service to the mind in the act of creation. As the work closes with the Badkhn moving forward with Recluse and the Wanderer the artist which has struggled with what is in the depths of his soul is ready to move forward towards literary creation with greater self-knowledge which can give rise to more powerful literature.