A nekhtik-er tog:

The *Badkhn*, Carnival, and Negation in Y.L. Peretz's *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*

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For readers of Yiddish literature, Y.L. Peretz has typically served as a foil to the other two great writers, Sh. Y. Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem, with whom his name is associated. In the broad contours of his work and career, this assessment is useful: unlike his two peers, Peretz never relies on a separate persona, though he does use pseudonyms as a journalist, to generate his literary work. More substantially, his writing is marked generally by an urban perspective, as well as a tone of spatial and often chronological distance from the material it depicts. In contrast, Mendele Moykher-Sforim and Sholem Aleichem, as personae, owe their identities to the shtetl, regardless of where they or their creators reside; their life is with people, regardless of their attitudes toward specific individuals or communities. Peretz's work is also less dependent, for the most part, on an imitation of oral narrative or spoken language effects than the tales of Mendele or Sholem Aleichem, who as personae by definition enact the role of a tale-teller speaking to an audience. Peretz, by contrast, is a story writer--with all that distinction implies--and his work is literary both in its rhetorical effects and its greater restlessness with respect to genre and technique.

One consequence of this distinction is Peretz's individualistic and antagonistic relationship to folk-narrative conventions and representations of the public square. Specifically, Peretz's use of the carnivalistic, the parodic discourse of ritual merriment, physical indulgence, and cyclical regeneration--which, more than other traditional folk forms, such as the romance, the idyll, or the picaresque, has the most complicated and developed relationship with modern literature--is a virtual inversion of the discourse's customary functions. Without indulging in too involved an analysis, one can call attention to the use to which Abramovitsh puts the carnivalistic in, to take the most obvious examples, the tavern scenes of *Fishke der krumer*, the bathhouse episodes of *Benyomin ha-Shlishi*, or the devil's monologues in *Di kliatshe*; in each of these incidents, the conjunction of high and low stations of life, the proximity or comparison of people with animals, and the focus on unrestrained and (relatively) de-euphemized physicality serves to

mock pretensions, unmask hypocrisies, and reverse hierarchies. In the tales of Mendele, the novels of Abramovitsh, the unbridled fullness of existence, the interpenetration of each segment of society with the other, constantly serves to ridicule, confound, or even menace any effort to confine or bracket domains of experience, and thereby control them.

The carnivalistic seldom conveys these implications in Peretz's work. Taking as an example his great drama *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*--not only Peretz's most significant engagement with the carnivalistic, but arguably his most complex work generally--the critical reader observes all the elements of the carnivalistic and related discourses, with none of their customary effects or significance. Despite the protagonist's recurring call for a word *alts ibertsumakhn, ibertsukern,*[1] nothing is remade or overturned at the play's conclusion. If Mendele, the folk speaker, can appear, depending on one's perspective, either as anarchic or nihilistic in his characterization of shtetl society, Peretz, the bourgeois writer, can only summon nihilism or fatalism, a quite different set of associations, from his use of carnival motifs; rather than de-masking his culture, Peretz only exposes the act of de-masking itself as another performance, emptied of meaning in the contemporary crisis of values.

Peretz's resistance to the liberating possibilities of carnivalistic discourse is partly a consequence of his personal temperament, and therefore his cultural agenda in shaping a new and elevated Yiddish theater. As Michael Steinlauf explains:

> If the notion of the carnivalesque has given us a language for discussing a great range of phenomena of early modern popular culture...it should prove especially useful in approaching what we can call the phenomenology of Yiddish popular theater. For Yiddish theater is unique among European theaters precisely in having originated exclusively out of the impulses associated with carnival: the so-called "Jewish carnival," the holiday of Purim. Similar to its counterparts in cultures throughout the world, Purim is about reversal: the high dragged low, the serious mocked, the holy profaned, the forbidden permitted.... Peretz hated Purim. Years before his concern with Yiddish theater, he began a column with the well-known proverb: *Purim iz nisht keyn yontev, un fiber* [sic] *is nisht keyn krenk*...and then interpreted as follows: "Not to be envied is one who shakes in fever, nor a people who have Purim as their comfort".... At the birth of a modern

[1] Y.L. Peretz, *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, in Chone Shmeruk's *Peretses yiesh-vizye*, New York: Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, 1971, p.242.

> Yiddish literary culture, there could be no opening to the carnivalesque; there could be no Jewish counterpart of Rabelais.[2]

Instead of the carnival unmasking society, Peretz uses society to unmask the carnival. *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* is an anti-Purimshpil, adapting the genre's mix of religious reference and low comedy, its dialogical connections between the Jewish past and present--as previous *Haskala* farces had done in quite a different manner, for their own purposes--to present the irreparable rupture between these two epochs, and to resist both the sentimentalization of the past and the valorization of the future.

The focus of the play's revisionist use of the carnival is the protagonist, the *Badkhen*. In keeping with his anti-carnivalistic intentions, the author has selected as the center of his drama one of the few sanctioned trickster figures in traditional Jewish culture; in her chapter on Purim plays, Nahma Sandrow identifies as interrelated trickster types--"brothers" in her felicitous expression--the *lets*, *nar*, *marshelik*, *badkhen*, and *payats*.[3] Chone Shmeruk, in the embarrassment of riches with which he introduces his critical edition of *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, further underscores the connection between the play's main character and the other trickster figures from Jewish lore by writing, "The *Badkhen* appears for the first time in the second version [of the drama]. He is, however, derived from two figures from the first version, the *lets*-figure and the young heretic.... A *lets* in Yiddish has a double meaning. He can be a human jokester [*shpasmakher*], who engages in mockery [*leytsones*], or he can also be a '*nit-guter*,' from the demonic family of devils."[4]

The specific functions of the *badkhen* in traditional culture differentiate him, however, from other kinds of tricksters, and make him uniquely suited to Peretz's purpose in this drama. Fundamentally, a *badkhen*'s wedding speeches involve a mixture of levity

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[2] Michael C. Steinlauf, "Fear of Purim: Y.L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1995, pp.55-56.
[3] See her book *Vagabond Stars*, p.10.

and piety, laughter and tears. As Shmeruk states, "For Jews, a *badkhen* represents marriage, the legitimate and sanctified union of man and wife. His speeches, both the 'moralistic' as well as the entertaining, are a component of the solemn act of matrimony.... The wedding is also perhaps the only occasion in the Jewish tradition in which dancing is not excessively circumscribed. These customary and traditional attributes of the *badkhen* are nonetheless ambivalent at their root because they are based simultaneously on his entertainment and his ethical/moralistic functions. Although in the drama these attributes come to represent two extreme deviations, they are already latent in the figure himself" (Shmeruk, p.94). Moreover, Shmeruk notes that Peretz, despite his apparent antipathy to other manifestations of the carnival and the carnivalistic in Jewish life, explicitly identified himself with the *badkhen*, precisely because of the figure's alternating functions and ambiguous emotional disposition; in a feuilleton published in the first volume of *Di yiddishe bibliotek*, Peretz writes, *bin ikh a lets, a badkhen.... Meynt nor nisht, kholile, az ikh bin a spetsialist fun lakhn. Gor farkert--veynen ken ikh beser!* (Shmeruk, pp.84-85).[5]

Among the paradoxes of the play, the most overt demonstration of its anti-carnivalistic nature is the absence of a traditional performance by the *Badkhen*. Carnival is not something the *Badkhen* creates, it is something that happens to him--he is displaced by the carnivalization of everyday life. Indeed, this displacement is a catalytic force in the drama; immediately following the exchange between *Er* and *Zi*, the first characters to speak individually in the play, the *Badkhen* appears, speaking of his lost word:

> *S'iz mir epes arop fun zinen...*
> *Kh'hob epes a vikhtik vort fargesn...*
> *Tsu lang in khurveh gezesn*
> *Tsvishn di shpinen...*
> *Un kh'volt mir dermant, kh'volt es gefinen...* (Peretz [Shmeruk], p.241).

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[4] Shmeruk, *Der Badkhen un zayne bagleyters*, in *Peretses yiesh-vizye*, pp.75-76. The translations of Shmeruk's analysis are my own--and they constitute the greatest challenge to my abilities as a Yiddishist I have yet encountered. Where is Hillel Halkin when you really need him?

[5] Moreover, one should not overlook the nearly ubiquitous presence of a variety of demons in Peretz's folkloristic stories for further evidence of his identification with trickster figures.

He announces his presence with a loss of speech, the lack of a prepared text. *Er* and *Zi*, fiancé and fiancee, speak not only individually, as opposed to the collective function of previous voices, but *as* individuals, imagining the home they will create together in terms of its furniture, wallpaper, and phonographs, rather than religious or traditional cultural terms. The contiguity between the *Badkhen*'s entrance and the exchange between the fiancé and fiancee calls attention to the loss of his traditional role, and therefore of traditional norms, brought about by the modern conventions of romance, as well as the commodities of the modern, urban household. *Gebitn darfstu, kind, nisht betn,* (Peretz, p.240) the fiancé tells his betrothed, yet this ability to choose (*baytn*) brings about the dislocation of a tradition which depends upon the fixity of social elements, lifestyle, and the relationship between genders and generations. The *Badkhen* can only function as an agent of indeterminacy if every other segment of society is already in place--once other individuals begin to choose for themselves, he loses his identity. His subsequent performances take place in response to the loss of his original role as a performer.

very interesting point

Similarly, the importance of dysfunctional marriage as a theme in *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, foreshadowed through the simultaneous entrance of the fiancé and fiancee with the *Badkhen*--this couple is betrothed, but will never be wed; Noson the drunk dies in trying to reunite with his dead bride; a series of unmarriageable women and prostitutes appear throughout the play--underscores the unproductivity of the culture, and thus the displacement of the *Badkhen* serves as a synecdoche within a synecdoche for the disunity, the incohesiveness, of the society. In another sense, however, the *Badkhen* has become superfluous through the literary style of the play itself: the stream of rhymes through which Peretz constructs his drama continuously draws together free associations of the mundane and the lofty--as when, through the conjunction of two unrelated speeches, he rhymes the name *Yoyl* with *ken kumen der goyl* (Peretz, p.243), or more significantly in the *Poresh*'s interjections during the *Badkhen*'s struggle with the hands of the clock (Peretz, pp.281-282)--in the manner of a *badkhen*'s wedding toast. In *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, the

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yes!

Badkhen's role has dissipated into the larger linguistic interactions of the society. In the absence of a traditional function, he can only call attention to the incoherence of his culture, the lack of significance in its "sound and fury"--or to draw on another Shakespearean analogy, he is the fool transformed into Lear.

More than just a relic of an outmoded tradition, however, the *Badkhen* is literally a survivor of the tragedy involving the drowned *klezmorim* in the marketplace well. This event, itself an extreme repudiation of carnival values, has set him apart from the rest of the community and brought him in proximity with both madness and death. Furthermore, the profaning apostasy of the musicians themselves, who drown, after an unseemly night at a nobleman's ball in the fatal embrace of non-Jewish culture, recalls figurative associations with the immersion in European civilization, and the entry ticket to that culture--previously identified by Heinrich Heine as the waters of baptism.[6] This narrative detail reinforces, and is reinforced by, the significance of the *Badkhen*'s thematic connection, over successive versions, to the young heretic. He has seen the worst consequences of the musicians' engagement with the outside world, and this event has shut him off, in a "ruin [*khurveh*]" (Peretz, p.241), both from the Jewish past and the assimilated future. This state of suspension, in turn, accounts for the contradictory consequences of the protagonist's effort to hasten the redemption: the *Badkhen* pushes the hands of the clock forward--the hours proceed chronologically from one to twelve (Peretz, pp.281-282)--but his action brings back the dead. Time itself becomes suspended; his effort to hasten the future, the coming of the messiah, by raising the dead from their graves only traps the *Badkhen* in time, between the dead and the living, between the past and the present. He becomes a superfluous mediator between modes of existence incapable of communication or interaction.

Nonetheless, however superfluous the *Badkhen* is on a thematic level, on both a dramatic and symbolic level, he is the vital center of the drama. As Avraham Novershtern explains: "Most of the characters speak only a single line each, then fall silent. They do not

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[6] See Renate Schleisier, p.41.

listen or reply to each other's remarks. The play is thus marked by a total lack of communication, in which the main function of the words is to identify the character who utters them, and nothing more. If characters appear only once, no change or internal development can be expected of them. The [*Badkhen*], however, is the exception to this rule: he is the only character to appear in all acts of the play, thus linking the characters together."[7] On a psychological level, as well, the *Badkhen* provides the only convincing means of resolving the contradictory impulses which propel the play, of reconciling its narrative time with real, chronological time. In a separate article, Novershtern elaborates on this concern:

> The *Badkhen* is the only figure in the drama that is capable of performing a reckoning of the soul, and this he truly does in the epilogue. The synagogue, which occupies such an important place in the scene, primarily provides the opportunity for the *Badkhen* to become a "*bal-tshuveh*".... *Davkeh* because the monologue calls to mind various traditional formulations...it becomes all the more evident that the *Badkhen* turns neither to God nor to the Torah, but only to the tin rooster. *Davkeh* to it he concedes the unlimited power of time. The call *in shul arayn!* with its open ideological implications is incomprehensible apart from the overall context of the play. It is the most important sign within a larger cluster of images which signify the complete return to the quotidian.[8]

I don't like the use of Yinglish, though I admit you use this phrase creatively!

It is *davkeh* Novershtern's remark about the "open ideological implications" of the *Badkhen*'s surrender to chronological time, and to futility, that fully articulates the ultimate significance of Peretz's drama. At heart, *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* is anti-ideological play, and this negation reveals the motivation for its anti-carnivalistic, anti-dialogical structure; in placing all elements of society together in motion, on stage--both living and dead, Jewish and Christian, righteous and profane, even animate and inanimate--Peretz demonstrates that, at last, there is no internal cohesion to the culture, that individual characters are unable to even speak with one another, let alone act in service of any common, redemptive purpose. The *Badkhen*'s Promethean acts only underscore the inability of a savior to

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[7] Abraham [sic] Novershtern, "Between Dust and Dance: Peretz's Drama and the Rise of Yiddish Modernism" (Translated by Sharon Neeman), *Prooftexts* (12), 1992, pp.72-73.

reverse the inevitability of the culture's decline. These acts therefore revert to the *Badkhen*'s carnival functions, to perform, to parody, to burlesque even his own ideas and beliefs. The *Badkhen* in *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* is not a false messiah, he is a mock messiah. Thus, if in an earlier story Peretz had portrayed Eliahu ha-Novi as a trickster-figure, here he reverses that happy fantasy by exposing the hopelessness of a trickster who poses as a prophet.[9]

Peretz's ideological fatalism--itself an ideology of fatalism--is all the more remarkable, and instructive, given the political fervor surrounding him, and even following his guidance. As Ruth Wisse notes, each of the utopian Jewish movements of the author's Polish society tried to claim him for its own[10]; Peretz's drama itself, however, rebukes the notion of affiliation, of faith in a social program to answer the philosophical doubts of an artist who drew inspiration from nothing so consistently as paradox, contradiction, irony, and estrangement. Perhaps the most complex and dense parody of political belief in the play occurs when Noson the drunk collapses on the ground and exclaims, *Vi zis, vi fayn/Di faykhtlekhe erd shmekt.../Honik mit milkh!/On hent--vi a mame glet zi.../On loshn--mame-loshn redt zi...* (Peretz, p.245). As a theatrical gesture, the image of a drunk falling to the earth and declaring his love for the soil is in itself grotesque. By literalizing the metaphorical language of nationalism, Peretz exposes the romance of the land for what it really is--rolling in the dirt. The sensuousness of Noson's rhetoric, moreover, is perverse: if the soil is the "mother," then its erotic caresses of the drunk's collapsed body become a kind of incest. Moreover, the overheated imagery of the speech frustrates its own meaning. The language of a land without a tongue, the caresses of a land without hands, are inherently illusions. Most significantly, the ideological implications of this passage cut in all directions. By placing the most clichéd rhetoric of Zionism, *honik mit milkh*!, in the

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[8] ~~Avraham~~ Novershtern, *Tsvishn morgnzun un akhres-hayomim: tsu der apokaliptisher tematik in der yiddisher literatur, Di Goldene Keyt* (135), 1993, pp.122-123. The translations of this article, such as they are, are my own.

[9] See *Der kuntzn makher*, in *Ale verk fun Y.L. Peretz*, Volume 5, New York: "CYCO" Bicher-Farlag, 1947, pp. 147-151.

mouth of a *golus yid*, and a drunk at that, Peretz simultaneously ridicules both the idea of return to Israel and the various ideologies which hoped to build a Jewish nation in the Diaspora, and particularly in his native Poland.

And yet, finally, it is inadequate to use Peretz's words as a rejoinder to the purely political programs that drew moral authority from his work--for the contemporary reader to fashion from this drama an anti-politics to critique the defunct agendas of, for example, Bundism, territorialism, socialism, or autonomism, as much as the successful Zionist project, not only takes advantage of historical realities to score points against mostly dead antagonists, but also calcifies Peretz's writing within an ideological dialectic, when his vision is ultimately ethical and ontological. From an ethical standpoint, perhaps the drama's most succinct means of exposing the limitations of politics occurs in the contrast between the debates of the ideologues of the first act and the other minor characters whose plight these speakers ignore, or exacerbate, even as they appear on stage at the same time. As Shmeruk explains: "Parallel to the episodes that emphasize the male/female problem, Peretz settles the score with everyone and everything.... The young nationalists, who fight amongst themselves about *seym, shkolim, folk, mentsh, un heym* [Peretz, p.249], run away 'frightened' when the prostitute solicits them, saying, *kumt mit mir ver?* None of them is able to detect the 'humanity' in the prostitute. They are so preoccupied with their own debates and seem so strongly connected with the ethic of the marketplace that they are unable to be conscious of or react to another habit of being" (Shmeruk, pp.73-74).

Shmeruk's phrase "the ethic of the marketplace" (*der etik funem mark*) returns the reader to the metaphysical dimensions of Peretz's vision, by means of the carnivalistic--the discourse of the marketplace ethic, and aesthetic. At this moment in the play, Peretz's use of an anti-carnivalistic discourse draws very near to the traditional uses of the carnivalistic itself: to ridicule pretensions to seriousness and meaning by exposing the physical reality that underpins, or undermines, such cerebral indulgences. In both the contrast between the

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[10] See Ruth Wisse, "A Monument to Messianism," *Commentary*, March 1991, pp.37-42.

student-debaters and the prostitute, as well as the previously cited speech of Noson the drunk, the jarring contiguity of the ideological with the erotic recalls traditional uses of the carnivalistic. But where the carnivalistic would expose the hollowness of ideology in light of the fullness of humanity and life, Peretz deflates the grandeur of ideological dreams--the *Badkhen*, in fact, responds to the students' proclamation that *A folk, vi a mentsh, muz hobn a heym!* by saying *Oder a kholm!* (Peretz, p.249)--by contrasting them with the impotence and isolation of their advocates, and the pervasiveness of death and misery surrounding them.

With the characteristics of Peretz's anti-carnivalistic rhetoric, as well as the thematic and dramatic implications of this rhetoric, established, it becomes at last possible to evaluate how the shift from carnivalistic to anti-carnivalistic has evolved--and therefore, a sense of *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*'s ultimate place in the history of the discourse can become clear. Fundamental to this concern is the function of the play's dead characters; in carnivalistic literature generally the extreme, shocking contiguity between death and physical indulgence of all kinds underscores, or makes overt, the mythic association of the carnival with regeneration and cyclical renewal. To understand the extent of Peretz's departure from this tradition, it is useful to contrast again *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* with a "pure" carnivalistic work.

In contemporary literature, one of the works that most closely resembles Peretz's drama is Fyodor Dostoevsky's great short story "Bobok" (1873), which takes place in a cemetery, and which can be classified generically as a "dialogue of the dead," a subgenre of carnivalistic discourse. As Mikhail Bakhtin, the pioneering scholar of the carnivalistic, describes the narrative, "What unfolds is the typical carnivalized nether world of the menippea[n satire]: a rather motley crew of corpses which cannot immediately liberate themselves from their earthly hierarchical positions and relationships, giving rise to comic conflicts, abuse, and scandals; on the other hand, liberties of the carnival type, the awareness of a complete absence of responsibility, open graveyard eroticism, laughter in

the coffins...and so on."[11] One could contend that, in spite of the numerous commonalities of tone, setting, and narrative development between the play and the story, the respective denouements of the two narratives are virtual inversions of one another. The morbid, carnivalistic joy of Dostoevsky's story, the ability "of the corpses to reveal themselves with *full*, absolutely unlimited *freedom*" (Bakhtin, p.140, emphasis in original), ends when the narrator interrupts their dialogue and returns the story to the reality, the finality, of death: "And at this point I sneezed. It happened unexpectedly and unintentionally, but the effect was startling: everything became as silent as the grave, the whole thing vanished like a dream. A real silence of the tomb settled over everything."[12]

In Peretz's drama, however, the protagonist himself--not the corpses--is brought back to reality by the conformity of the dead to the conventions that had imprisoned them in their lifetime. The carnivalistic celebrates the transgression of rules and boundaries; in *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, even the dead adhere to routine and worn-out ritual. The carnivalistic brings the living and the dead into contact in order to emphasize the continuity of birth, death, and renewal implicit both in the fecundity of nature and the circulation, the integration, of people within an organic, pre-industrial society. The living and the dead in Peretz's drama, by contrast, are alike in their sterility and in their immobility within an inorganic, unproductive culture. As Novershtern explains:

> Instead of emphasizing the contrasts between the living and the dead, the final version reflects yet another tendency: the dead who appear on-stage are not significantly different from the living characters, and their lines after their temporary return to life show direct continuity with their roles and attitudes in life. Both kinds of characters exhibit the same narrow-mindedness toward any deviation from their usual system of values. The dead, like the living, are conformists; they rush back to their graves at cockcrow, just as the tradition would dictate. While Peretz gives Death a central role in the play, he also makes it less capable of any decisive transformational force (Novershtern, *Prooftexts*, p.85).

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[11] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. (Edited and Translated by Caryl Emerson.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p.140.

[12] Fyodor Dostoyevsky [sic], *The Gambler/Bobok/A Nasty Story*. (Translated by Jessie Coulson.) New York: Penguin Books, 1966; 1986, p.180.

As throughout the drama, Peretz has taken a premise, the interchangability of the living and the dead, that in "straightforward" carnivalistic discourse would be the material of robust comedy, and has fashioned from it the grimmest and most fatalistic of ironies.

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Taking its cue from the centrality of the *Badkhen* figure, this analysis of *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* has examined the paradoxical, dialectical relationship of Peretz's drama to the tradition of carnivalistic discourse which clearly informs and inspires it. It is useful to examine this "genealogical"--or even "archaeological"--relationship between Peretz and his antecedents *davkeh* because the author himself is so frequently, even unreflectively, referred to as the architect of Yiddish modernism. Understanding Peretz's adaptation of traditional discourse thus becomes a crucial means of establishing the way in which modernism in Yiddish literature generally was configured. More significantly, however, by considering Peretz's antagonistic use of traditional folk materials--the same materials, in fact, as Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem--it becomes possible to recognize that the distinctions which characterize his work arise more from artistic sensibility than literary ideology. Though Peretz's relationship to folk narrative is dialectical, his interaction with his two peers is ultimately dialogical; in this sense, Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem play as determinant a role in the creation of Yiddish modernism as Peretz himself.

The importance of sensibility informs another observation of Steinlauf: "For Peretz...death was another obscenity. This is the aura of Peretz's masterpiece, *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, in which the dead arise in a fruitless attempt to bring the End of Days. Bakhtin is relevant here as well. Having described the 'Renaissance grotesque' of Rabelais, Bakhtin sketches the 'Romantic grotesque' that superseded it. In the latter, death is shorn of its carnivalizing associations and is now encountered from the perspective of the isolated individual whose laughter has lost 'its regenerating power'" (Steinlauf, p.65, n58). The fact that Peretz's modernism, like that of the French Symbolists who were his immediate contemporaries, derives explicitly from a feature of Romantic aesthetics does not diminish

the productive significance of his work any more than the use of unreconstructed folk motifs of Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem--or for that matter, Dostoevsky--diminishes the modernity, the nascent modernism, of their writing. Rather, the integration of Peretz into a larger artistic tradition provides a tentative response to his own despairing vision; it enables the critical reader to identify in Peretz himself, if not his society as a whole, a connection to the past and the future that is organic, creative, and regenerative.

--Marc Caplan

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Wisse, Ruth R. "A Monument to Messianism," *Commentary*, pp.37-42, March 1991

A superb paper; actually exciting to read. You and Phillip might want to publish a joint monograph on the drama. On the comparison front, it's worth reading Victor Ehrlich's essay in YIVO Annual on Wyspianski's The Wedding, even if Shmeruk "proved" that Bay nakht was written first. (A+)