

Mariya Lovishchuk
Professor Roskies
Demons and Dybbuks in the Yiddish Imagination
May 2, 2008
Final Writing Assignment

It was a beautiful spring day amongst the tulips, daffodils and chirping birds. The smells of freshly baked non-kosher cakes tickled the nose. Reflection of cherry blossoms delicately faltered the air. Nathan Finkelstein, a student of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, sat down, at an outside table of a coffee shop, to finish a paper for his favorite class. The paper was about two short stories, "The Pinch of Snuff", by Isaac Leib Peretz and "The Last of the Demons" ("Mayse Tishevits"), by I.B. Singer.

Nathan was very happy. He just got accepted into law school and made the choice to enroll rather than proceed with a Ph.D in Yiddish literature. He was relieved at his practical decision, thrilled at the prospects of gainful employment, happy to stop obsessing about the Ph.D. Additionally, his paper was almost finished and everything that needed to be said almost said. The student discussed the element of fantasy, the styles and sensibilities of the narrators, the psychological and symbolic attributes of the devils and demons, the victim, the plot of seduction, and the problem of evil. Ah...he took a sip of coffee, savoring the combination of cream, cinnamon, and hazelnut converging at the top of the cup, about to look at the writing one more time, about to put on sun glasses, about to break into Louis Armstrong's rendition of "What a Wonderful World". He fought the urge to sing along with the iPod in a crowded place. Things could not possibly be better than they were. Nathan proofread his paper.

"Modernity...Jaded, displaced humanity spent. Sleep walking through brown spectrum dreams of no interest. Too cynical and unmotivated to kill itself, migrating from destruction to safety of meaningless ennui. What is better than bad, not very much. Dark, self deprecating humor posing poorly as gospel of times. Times, indefinite, past washed into present, but only as a parody of itself, drawn by

a depressive who sees the glass as empty, occasionally filled with a few drops of diluted sewage. Singer begins the tale by indicating that “I, a demon, bear witness that there are no more demons left. Why demons when man himself is a demon.”¹ Singer achieves a complete intermingling between the fantastical and the real. The devil exists and does not. The past is the present because the author uses present tense to describe events of the past. The reader is immersed into the story quickly and held strongly, forced to suspend disbelief and continue to engage, oblivious to the presence or lack of magic, the confused mosaic of a nightmare.

The element of fantasy in Peretz is much more divorced from reality. The community of Chelm is a real community. The people of Chelm are real people and are clearly separated from the demons, Satan and God. The clear division between the human and divine worlds is very significant to the message of the story. The interactions between the humanity and the supernatural are governed by set rules, suggesting that there is an order to the world.”

Ah, Nathan turned his head. “Excuse me, young man, I do not have money here, neither do I drink coffee, but I would love to get a cup just to hold. Beautiful, beautiful day isn't it.” The man had a handle-bar mustache, large, noble features, and roared with rugged lavishness. He had full wavy hair styled with pomade. Perhaps a wig, Finkelstein pondered. He wore a vintage looking canvas suit and leaned on a carved wooden cane, which reminded Nathan of Poland, as did his accent. There was something very odd about him. The stranger beamed at Nathan expectingly. “Ahm, you know I don't have any money”, he said and blushed. This was a lie. Nathan had money but thought the situation odd, the request presumptuous. “That's a shame,” the man said. At that awkward moment another stranger emerged. “Of course he does not have any money, or should I say of course he is not going to buy you coffee, this is how the world is now.” The second speaker was an almost bald man, with pointy ears. The man might have been tall and young once but clearly abandoned that state long ago.

1 Singer p 54.

Presently he was hunched over, his entire being seemed to stoop into and project out of his eyes. The eyes were humongous in proportion to his body. His facial expression resembled someone who found a cockroach in labor amidst burnt oatmeal he did not order in a poorly rated restaurant. He looked like an owl, dressed in an old fashioned suit. The suit smelt funny: something like moths, sulfur, and boiled chicken feet.

“Ah, well then I guess we should be on our way, the first man said,” As he spoke, his face stretched simultaneously towards Nathan's computer and coffee. For some reason, Nathan thought of his grandfather and did not want to seem rude. “Here”, he said, “please have some of my coffee and would you like to sit down, it is a very nice day.” The man, delighted, ended up in a chair, too fast for his age and the laws of physics. The owl man appeared more annoyed than before and said something to himself in a familiar sounding language Nathan did not understand. Somehow he imagined that the man was complaining about how hard he has to work. The first man was smelling the coffee, clearly pleased to do so, shrugging at the other man, he beamed. “You can ignore him if you want, so lets see what you are writing, shall we?” All the sudden, there was thunder and lightning, on a perfectly clear day. The street darkened and Nathan found himself lost in the eyes of the owl man, sad, lonely and cold.

Desolate sourness descended pounding slow down horizon, collapsing upon itself and the ocean there nothing lived. Above the ocean loomed a gray precipice, made of letters and words, phrases, faces of characters, tears, and sighs, jokes all written down, tangible cursive of situations and feelings, looking imagined and uncontrollable like dreams. Nathan stood on the precipice with the owl man, silence and silhouettes, dreary on yellow. It seemed like he was about to tempt Nathan to jump off and solve the mystery of encounter. “Do you want to jump”, he asked Nathan. “I am not sure”, he replied. “Good enough for me”, owl man cackled and pushed him.

They landed in a giant book uncomfortably covered in sizzling embers. At a second glance,

Nathan saw a glow inside the book, flame of asphalt color, not hot. The book might have been made of fire. Interesting, he thought, using the language imprecisely, and saw a demon. A demon looked exactly like one would imagine. "So you brought him", the demon said unenthused. "It was not very hard. He wanted to go. You hardly have to lift a finger anymore. They are cooked before you even get there, but the travel! So burdensome! So what should we do to him?" At this question the demon tingled up and ~~seized~~ ^{seized?} looking like someone alone on a bus, traveling for a year through ^{the} desert, stopping for five minutes every hour but only to use the bathroom. "We can do the same thing to him as to you," the demon sang, a surprising soprano.

"Excuse me," Nathan began. The demon glared at him, smirked, and purposely bit his tongue. "Oh he pretends to not know. Please... I will read to you, ^{may be} that will help." The demon reached behind his tail, producing reading glasses. There were no lenses and the frames were made of bone, still bleeding. "Nathan Finkelstein, Demons and Dybbuks in the Yiddish imagination", for some reason both the demon and the owl man hollered bursting into laughter at this phrase. The hysterics would have progressed into crying, rolling, and stomach ~~pains~~ if the essence of both the demon and the owl man was not melancholy and annoyance. The owl man took ^{off} his shoes and scratched his chicken legs. "Please keep going". "What the hell," Nathan thought. "What the hell is right", the demon retorted telepathically and continued to read the paper.

"The narrator of the "Mayse Tishevits", is a depressed demon. He is also the main character of the story. He is bitter and condescending towards himself and the world. He has a low opinion of both ~~the~~ humanity and the race of demons. He is funny and cynical because Singer brilliantly uses humor and irony. The demon is self hating and much too critical of everything completely disallowing himself a fine experience. Furthermore the demon is a racist. "Good thing you are Jewish", the owl man interjected, rather sarcastically. Somehow, Nathan did not think owl man's concept of good was the same as his own.

“The demon is a failed demon with no possibility of success.² Dysfunction and ~~rit~~ permeate the story and there is no hope for redemption.³ The world is completely broken and lacks operating systems, former glory turned to meaningless mediocrity. The demon like Singer lives in the past. At the end of the story, he exists only through books, which are forgotten and read by none. “Well, I guess some still read them”, the owl man winked at Nathan and licked his lips.

The demon continued, “The readers perceive the story through the feelings, experiences, and theology of the demon. The narrator represents Singer's own world view. The demon of Tishevitz and the rabbi of Tishevitz are not interesting and graced with an insignificant amount of lines. They serve as foils showing that the world is void of vibrancy. Everyone moves in a mechanical motion, breathing their own boredom, waiting for nothing, hoping for nothing. The story echoes the reality of Singer's own existence as an individual struggling with surviving the Holocaust⁴, attempting to reconcile the past with the post-modern paradigm, and wrestling with depression. Noversztern beautifully describes the relationship between Singer, the demon, and the world:

The speaker who introduces himself at the beginning of the story-the speaker of this post – Holocaust monologue is a stark metonym for the problematic status of the Yiddish writer. They both see themselves as the last remnant of a world that is no more, continuing to exist under radically altered circumstances in a universe that for them has become an apocalyptic wilderness. Totally isolated in his attic the demon is the last representative of the race of Jewish demons. In the past, in a time before the Holocaust, he had a brother demon who was his companion in the attic...Like a Yiddish author who writes literature that draws its inspiration from memories of the past the narrator demon draws his sustenance not from life but from literature, from novels that have been miraculously preserved from the pre-Holocaust era. Therefore he has no need to leave the narrow confines of the attic. The literary text becomes his whole world.

“Well” the demon said, “Our little world is about to become a little bigger.” “Lets do this quickly”, the owl man retorted. He might resist more than I did, when you found me.”

2 See Noversztern (p 51). “The demon like the Yiddish writer after the Holocaust has been forced to relinquish the essence of his nature and the mission on which that existence is predicated. He has no desire what so ever to tempt or to influence anyone because his target audience no longer exists”

3 It is important to note that demons in very similar circumstances, particularly “Pinch of Snuff”, the story of Joseph De La Reina, and “Zaydelus the Pope” were successful in getting their victims to sin.

4 Singer immigrated and was not in concentration camps, but had to live through the deaths of other Jews and Holocaust none the less.

“No need to hurry,” the demon said, “lets read about the Rabbi. Nathan, ~~the~~ law school is not for you. Please stay with us”.

“The Rabbi created by Singer is not really a character but a ghost of the myriads of rabbis that came before him. The rabbi lacks a congregation. He is not disseminating knowledge and provides no value to his community. The rabbi fails to sin partially because the act would require an outing into the world, and since Singer refuses to create the world that exists, the rabbi can not sin. The demon is stuck in Tishevitz for a similar reason. Lublin, Odessa, the dwelling place of Asmodeus are figments of former days alive only in the imagination of the demon. For all practical purposes they are absent from actuality, further pointing to the fact that the reality and experience of the formerly Jewish world has been reduced to rooms and books and the nostalgic and pathetic inner world of the main character, not living and not dying, the past present and future losing shape and validity through insane and dysfunctional merging, which leaves neither being.”

“Enough, enough”, Nathan broke the uniform drone. The devil looked up from above his glasses. His eyes were red. “So you are the demon...But you, “ Nathan turned to the owl man, “Are you really who I think you are? What are you doing here?” “Here”, the owl man frowned and yawned. “Splendid choice of words. So consistent. I am kidding of course. You are the worse writer I've ever had the misfortune ^{of} hearing. Here! Where else would I be? You said it! There is nothing else left of the world. But we need to continue, to keep alive even if through shady memories, even through bad writing. That's why you will stay with us.” “And you are here alone, all the time?” Nathan asked. “Just with this demon?” “Well occasionally I get to travel”, the owl man obliged. “But you will find out all about it, after you join us. What did you do with the extra chicken feet?” Owl man asked the demon, who was digging through the book with a skull.

At this moment, a dissonance shattered a break. A cloud flew out of nowhere and there was even a breath of wind. The first stranger emerged in a Lazy Boy chair pulled by an ant-eater and a

peacock. "Hello, there," he mused addressing the present company but looked only at the student. "Do you happen to have a warrant and a permit for what you are doing?" The demon sat down, crossed his legs, crossed his arms, crossed his eyes, twisted his horns and did not speak. The owl man looked at the lazy chair and at the peacock, adjusted a button on his sleeve, and said nothing. The first stranger stepped out of the carriage and onto the book, testing it first with his foot. "You might want to move out of here, he said. There are new habitations being created every day, lots of cheap labor showing up with the war, hunger, and that new disease, you know. Anyhow, you can not take him without the permit". The demon juggled embers. The owl man spat and said, "I got him here, didn't I." "Yes", the first stranger laughed, you did. Plagiarizing once again. The precipice, the world of nothingness, very grandiose. What you do is not what Jesus would do." He waved his finger at Nathan. "He did not exactly consent though, which is a legal problem. Also offering people the entire world has not been legal since 200 C.E. I will take it from here. Young man, would you like to come with me and ride in this carriage?" Nathan was not sure but somehow the offer seemed better than the present scenario and said yes. He stepped into the lazy chair and sneezed. In the process, his eyes shut for a split second. He opened them to a world of beings, moving around carrying books, and bricks, babies, loaves of bread, Torah scrolls, musical instruments, important documents. Nathan could hear their voices. They sounded familiar, reminding him of a little feverish forehead being touched by a callused hand, his grandmother's fur coat, someone peeling cucumbers for a birthday dinner. His throat constricted with bunched vacuum. Small lobsters carefully pulled the strings of his heart with fiddle claws and silk ribbons.

"Oh I almost forgot about your writing", said the man. "I wanted to read it." The man straightened his back. "The Narrator in the Pinch of Snuff" is an outside observer, a choice contingent on the presence of a vibrant community and other characters. Unlike the "Mayse Tishvits", who is alone and must draw material only from the past and the rich inner world within himself, the narrator of

the “Pinch of Snuff” is privy to context. The difference between Peretz and Singer is the pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust reality, the mentality and surroundings of a man continuing to live on the soil and within a community in which he was born and an isolated immigrant.

The Rabbi in the “Pinch of Snuff” is an essential part of the cosmic and worldly orders. He is of extreme importance. The demons do not try to seduce him out of habit, ~~like~~^{as} in “Mayse Tishevits”, but because the world, the human condition, possible and impossible, right and wrong, depend on getting him to sin. The devil is working to uphold the laws and principles of the Torah.⁵ The Rabbi is not a muttering lunatic like the Rabbi from Modly Bozyk. The Rabbi of Chelm interacts with people. He helps people, sings, dances, and judges. He is consulted and revered. He has a personality. He is alive.”

Nathan's back sank into the lazy chair, soft and agreeable. The air warm and humid stuck to his skin and eyelids. The peacock and the ant eater trod along merely, joined by a thoughtful donkey. The brownness of the buildings and streets passed beneath them. Red roofs, square concrete roofs, thatched straw roofs, tent polls, sky scraper roofs, came in and out of vision. “Something to drink” the man asked, and Nathan agreed, and they drank vodka together, like people who have a lot to do and know it but need a moment of pleasant, restful nothingness. “Should we talk about seduction now”, the stranger asked Nathan. “How about you do the talking?” Nathan took another sip. “Lets read some more of what you wrote and out loud.” The stranger proceeded with the paper.

“Singer's plot of seduction is haphazard and dreamy, lacking in concreteness, purpose and reliable, competent team who can get the job done. As Noverszterm points out, “The demon like the Yiddish writer after the Holocaust has been forced to relinquish the essence of his nature and the

5 “Whereas we are told in the Holy Script that no man liveth who shall do good and no evil , and there is among the living there is a rabbi of Chelm who stands with one foot in the grave and the debit side of his ledger I blank: therefore in order that the Torah of Moses shall be true and shall remain true, let the Rabbi of Chelm be delivered into the hands of the Evil One”. (p 6)

mission on which that existence is predicated. He has no desire what so ever to tempt or to influence anyone because his target audience no longer exists".⁶

"Peretz's seduction is elaborate involving serious cadres of fully engaged ambitious demons for whom failure is not an option. The existential difficulties which render Singer's demon ineffective do not plague the evil workers of Peretz." Nathan turned his head to see five little men running along the easy chair. One was carrying plates of grapes, chocolate, and cold drinks, the other, Finkelstein's paper with a red letter A, the third a big office with diplomas on the walls and a humongous views of a large university library, the marble accented by cherry trees. The fourth man juggled tall bookshelves, full of volumes created by well revered authors. Some of the books were written by Nathan. The fifth man looked like Nathan's beloved great uncle, the person Nathan missed the most in the whole world. He carried nothing but simply looked at Nathan with big, sad, loving brown eyes. First stranger continued, "The outcome of the seduction is known before the story is over. Peretz's demons are upholding the laws of the Torah and the world. God is practically on their side. At first glance, this seduction is more or less a commentary on the human condition, the impossibility of being sinless. However, analyses of historical circumstances and Peretz's other writings suggests more. In describing "The Pinch of Snuff", Roskies uses expressions "parodic venom" and "creative betrayal"⁷. Peretz applies the irony of the Rabbi's failure to expose the absurdity of the halakhic system and the old ways. Peretz wrote primarily for educated and increasingly secular Jewish youths. Using the amusing and beloved genre of Yiddish folktales, Peretz comments on the ridiculous superstitions of the shtetl. However, he does so in an effort to preserve Yiddish culture, to provide an outlet for his tradition, enabling it to function with relevance in the modern world. The story is not only a critique, but allows one to see how hard it is to maintain cultural integrity, ^{piety} pioussness, and righteousness in the world which

6 See Noveoztern p 51.

7 Roskies p 109.

is always tempting one to sin and to change.

“I do not think the latter is what the author meant”, said the first stranger.

“I also do not think so”, Nathan answered, “But I had to write something. It is so hard sometimes to understand why you and Singer would keep on writing this stuff, recycling the same plots over and over again, having caricatures instead of characters, about as much innovation and originality as hametz on Passover in my grandfather's house”.⁸ “Hametz on Passover in your grandfather's house, Nathan. Interesting choice of words”. The stranger smiled. “Dear Sir, I think I know who you are. ” Nathan said. “Why am I here?” “Because of hametz, Nathan, because of hametz. You can not go to law school Nathan. You must stay with us and become one of us. If it is money you are worried about, do not worry. You will have more fame as a writer than a lawyer. You will make sure we live and you live forever and not perish,” Peretz replied and kissed Nathan on the cheek. Nathan did not think the kiss strange because he found himself sleeping a dream, in a room with wall paper and furniture made from the pages of his paper. Outside of a room was a forest in the forest deer and squirrels ran, made of the pages of his paper. Beyond the forest stood a town, with cars and stores, and streets, made out of the pages of his paper. Above the town was the sky simultaneous with sun, moon, and stars, made from the pages of his paper. Nathan was drooling and what came out was made of the pages of his paper.

“Eastern European Jewry, the shtetl, the red ribbons, the fear of the supernatural within the world, the folktales, the chochmas, sounds of Yiddish language, rumor spreading grandmas, the atmosphere, the landscape of the dearest childhood meaning. What happens to the devils, demons, and dybbuks in the Yiddish imagination as we move from Peretz to Singer? The devils lose power out of context and become reduced to the same thing the culture which bred them is reduced to, essentially

8 Noveoztern expresses the sentiment well. ““Still whether one went back to mocking the impoverished Jewish way of life or mastered the ancient idiom, sought its hidden hidden beauty shaped it and dramatized it-Yiddish literature remained limited in theme, marginal, exceptional. To the pious Jew it contained nothing but mockery. The radical did not understand why it was being cramped with so much paraphrased and distorted piety that no matter where he looked it still seemed distorted and reactionary.” (p 55)

nothing. The fears demons represent evolve into shapes of other fears and stereotypes. Horns and hoofs morph into black men holding guns, oil prices going up, the world running out of rice. The Yiddish demons are still alive in the hearts of the select few who remember in the interest of preserving a connection with the memories of their grandparents and with one of the most delightful and profoundly revealing aspects of the Jewish tradition, ~~the~~ "Yiddish culture".

Nathan looked around. He was sitting in a lazy chair. The peacock and the ant-eater were playing dominoes, the thoughtful donkey grazed the scanty grass, sporadically growing about the flat meadow, surrounded by long sharp polls about twenty feet in length. There were also boulders and rocks, round, square, and oval. Somewhere a wolf howled. Light poured down, vague purple and lettuce green. Nathan was alone in the carriage, the stranger gone. All around him moved animals and people. Some skipped, some ran, some flew, all looked pregnant. The bottle was still there and he took a drink, feeling nothing but a return.

"Finkelstein, Finkelstein, what's happening, how is life, heard you got into law school". Nathan looked out. He was on the Upper West Side of New York, at the corner of Broadway and 112th Street, sitting at an outdoor table, battery of his lap top dead, his coffee half gone and completely cold. His friend Mike, a chubby fellow in a polo shirt, was inquiring about his life. The evening was fresh with shadows. A new crescent silver hung in the sky. There were lilacs and even accordion music waltzing out from the coffee shop speakers, a Ukrainian band, playing gypsy tunes with a modern twist, minor keys over jumping base. Nathan gathered his things and walked down Broadway. A strange taste in his mouth caused him to want to spit. "Tfu", he spat once, "tfu" he spat twice, "t...", but there was not enough saliva to spit for the third time. He noticed a hole in his shoe and a protruding nail, much longer than usual, curved, and sharp, like a bird's.

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