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DER NISTER'S FROM MY ESTATES:
SYMBOLISM -- AND MORE?

From My Estates gives the appearance of a combination of dark fairy tale, twentieth century psychological probe and ironic morality play -- autobiographical, one might say, since the name of the main character, Der Nister, is also the name of the author. The tale forms a tidy loop. At the beginning, a narrator obtains a book, "The Writings of a Madman," by Der Nister, and proceeds to relate the contents of the book. At the end of the tale, the narrator finishes his retelling of the book -- whose last scene takes place in a madhouse. Yet the end of the narrated book leads back to the beginning of the entire tale, because at its beginning the reader learned that the narrator discovered on his forehead a mud-patch that turned to gold. This same phenomenon happened to Der Nister in the book, so the character in the book and the narrator of the tale have either merged into the same person, or are pursuing each other in an endless cycle. To paraphrase I.B. Singer's conclusion of The Mirror, what the reader finds is a myriad of mirrors. ✓

An outstanding element of From My Estates is to take a variety of themes from folk tales and other sources and to twist them, for unclear purposes, without rendering them unrecognizable. At the opening of "The Writings of a Madman," Der Nister complains that he has ten bears boarding with him. In a reversal of the Goldilocks story, the bears have come to him and demand to be fed. Der Nister's cupboards are bare, so he gives them, literally, finger-food: his own fingers. Yet the bears are polite; unlike the demanding bears in the Goldilocks story, who demand to know who has invaded their house, Der Nister's bears politely wait for the host to offer himself for their consumption. But before they finish him off, he begs their indulgence to tell them how he arrived at this pass.

Der Nister presents the bears with a rags-to-riches-to-rags story, the purpose of which seem to be that life is an endless cycle. Those who are up today may be down tomorrow, and vice-versa. Der Nister had a ladder on which he climbed up and down. At a certain point, after sating himself with beautiful places, he went to a squalid town. This was Mudville (could Der Nister have known the poem "Casey at the Bat?"), a town full of mud, and the townspeople pelted him with it. But upon leaving, Der Nister found that alchemy does happen, and the mud was transformed to gold, and he was changed from a mud-spattered outcast to a golden prince. He enters another town -- and, in an Oz-comes-to-Kansas scenario -- dazzles the inhabitants.

At this point, Der Nister, using the gold from his body, buys up the town and the surrounding countryside. He becomes a combination of a Monopoly player who has cornered all the money and buys hotels, and Joseph in Egypt who enslaves the land and the people for Pharaoh. What goes up the ladder, however, must come down. True to the form of the classic fairy tale and morality tale, Der Nister reaches too far. Like the fisherman's wife who wanted to be lord of the universe, he finally oversteps himself. Not content with the submission of the paramount ruler, the Lord of all, he summons the Great Bear out of his constellation. ✓

Der Nister ignores God's rebuke to Job --

Can you tie cords to Pleiades
Or undo the reins of Orion
Can you lead out Mazzaroth in its season
Conduct the Bear with her sons? (Job 38:31-32) --

good
proof text!

and is requited for his pride. He dances with the bear, and at first he conducts, but then the bear leads. In a frightful and touching scene, roles reverse and Ginger Rogers takes Fred Astaire around the dance floor. The bear ends the madcap ballroom episode by hurling Der Nister back down the ladder, and Der Nister is left with neither with his gold nor his mud. The prince is pauper once again.

The once-again pauper, however, cannot readjust to his former status. He still believes himself to be rich. "I have got a lot of estates up there," he says, but they do him no good in his new condition, and his protestations land him in a madhouse.

At this point, his head emptied, Der Nister begins an interior journey through chambers which become kingdoms, all lit by candles in candlesticks. In his realm of madness, Der Nister -- the hidden one -- seeks light. But the light eludes him, for the end of the journey is a palace where now not one but ten bears have appeared. In a variation on the kabbalistic parable of the shattered vessel and captive light, Der Nister must sell the candlesticks and candles to feed the bears:

A good many I have sold, and many more I have left as pledges, as hostages in alien and unworthy hands.

Der Nister had reached for the stars, but ended by extinguishing his lights. And when all the lights went dark, he was all that remained to satisfy the bears, and thus he returns to the beginning of his story.

From My Estates concludes not with a beginning of a repetition of the cycle, as might be expected, but a pause in midair. Der Nister, after consulting with the other patients in the madhouse, writes a letter in his own blood (the bears have by now eaten all his fingers) to the doctor of the madhouse, complaining about the visits of the bears. As the story ends, Der Nister is still waiting for an answer. From My Estates is devoid of human or divine redemption. Peretz's quirky devils have been replaced by dour and insatiable bears.

Delphine Bechtel's comments on Der Nister's symbolism can apply to a critique of From My Estates. (1) Both types of symbolism that Bechtel attributes to Der Nister are found in this story: vertical vs. horizontal and light vs. darkness. In From My Estates, the ladder serves as the symbol of upward aspiration, but also the downward path when the seeker becomes arrogant. In this tale, it was Der Nister's megalomania when he became rich that sent him back down the ladder. There is also an element of horizontal wandering, such as when Der Nister, in the madhouse scene, journeys to the palace where he meets the bears. ✓

The light and darkness images appear in several forms. First, there is the mud that is transformed to gold and then to mud again. Then, more explicitly, the madhouse scene contains, as described above, the image of candles and their eventual extinction.

Bechtel ascribes a different interpretation to Der Nister's sojourn in the kingdom of mud: it symbolizes the role of the artist that he experienced as he experienced it in the Soviet Union. (2) Der Nister's failure to adapt to the mud-culture becomes, in this reading, the artist's inability to identify with the proletarian mass culture. Yet when the artist embraces elitism, as exemplified by the story Der Nister's conduct in the kingdom of gold, he goes on the road to his downfall.

Bechtel comments that Der Nister's heroes seek an unattainable ideal; she also notes that Der Nister defined the role of the writer as a spiritual leader akin to the High Priest in the Temple. If the writer and the hero are one -- and in From My Estates, at least, they certainly seem to be -- then these two concepts are hard to reconcile.

The Nister of the story does seek an unattainable ideal; more than that, he, like the artist in the Soviet Union, belongs neither in the kingdom of mud nor the kingdom of gold. He is caught between two worlds, which is exactly where the hero of this story is at its conclusion. In contrast, a High Priest knows exactly where he stands; his spiritual goal might be unattainable, but his place in the world is defined. As Bechtel notes, in Der Nister's later tales, there is no meaning or goal for the tests the hero meets and no mention of quests. Yet, it can be argued, even concerning From My Estates, that there is a quest and there are meanings, but they are hidden.

As Bechtel puts it, the reader of Der Nister's stories, like their heroes, search for a system of interpretation, but lost among the symbols, cannot find one. There are parables, but no *nimshal*; the reader finds a morality tale, but no moral. (3)

If From My Estates is not a morality tale, is it a folktale? In spite of sharing themes and characters from folk tales, Der Nister's story departs from the genre. Bechtel quotes Vladimir Propp's notion of the "functions" (elements of progression in a story) and characters in a folktale. (4) From My Estates does not follow the typical progression of functions in a folktale, beginning with an initial setting of the hero and concluding with his arrival, recognition and marriage. To a certain extent, the story does follow Bechtel's reformulation of the Propp structure; it does begin with a frame story and end with displacement, if not in space, then in time. But From My Estates lacks even an initial situation. The reader doesn't know who the narrator or Der Nister is, or where they are from.

Similarly, Propp's outline of the seven typical figures in a folktale ~~also~~ breaks down. Der Nister can be considered the hero; but unfamiliar figures populate the rest of the stage. There is neither donor, nor auxiliary, nor princess or father, nor sender nor false hero. The bears come closest to the role of aggressor, but they are too passive -- Der Nister characterizes them as respectable -- to fit the part.


It is also difficult to trace this tale of Der Nister to the tradition of Hassidic stories, as exemplified by the Nakhman tales. As Bechtel explains, one element of these tales is the Lurianic Kabbalah theory of the exile of the *shekhinah* after the breaking of the vessels and the creation of evil. (5) But again, the analogy breaks down. A Nakhman tale contains a messianic element, in which the pieces of

the broken vessel are brought together so that the *shekhinah* may be redeemed from exile. In From My Estates, as discussed above, the candles, which might have been seen as a luminous presence of the *shekhinah*, are sent into exile, not redeemed from it. Not only that, but Der Nister's tale lacks an identifiable evil. Neither the bears nor the mud people nor the madhouse warder fit the bill. The hero, through his arrogance, brings about his own downfall, and he contends not with evil, but meaninglessness. *

Perhaps, then, From My Estates ^{is} an allegory, containing (in Coleridge's formulation, as noted by Bechtel (6)) a set of agents conveying moral qualities or conceptions of the mind and forming a consistent whole. The moral qualities, as noted above, seem absent. As for conceptions of the mind, they, too, are hard to locate. Der Nister at the conclusion of the tale is in a madhouse, where his mind has been emptied. The allegorical structure appears not to fit here, and neither do standard allegorical characters. Bechtel comments that stock allegorical elements, such as the constellation Ursa Major, may lead the wanderer in Der Nister's Gedakht stories; here, however, the bear leads Der Nister neither for good, nor as demonic double. The bear is simply present, and reluctantly answers Der Nister's summons when the latter is in his megalomaniac phase.

It is by now clear what kind of tale From My Estates is not. Although it combines element from several types of tale, it cannot be fitted neatly into any category. Its purposes are unclear; its characters, obscure. Perhaps this itself is the goal of the tale, if indeed that word can be applied: to illustrate the principle of *nistar*, the hidden. The hero, by taking on the name, becomes the personified example of that principle.

NOTES

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1. Bechtel, Delphine, Der Nister's Work 1907-1929: A Study of a Yiddish Symbolist, Berne 1990, p.p. 195-196.
 2. *ibid*, pp. 262-264
 3. *ibid*, pp. 266
 4. *ibid*, pp. 112-122
 5. *ibid*, p. 124
 6. *ibid* p. 148

I think Bechtel's major interpretive insight is that everything in this story is interchangeable; spiritual goods are unmodifiable; that, it strikes me, is the meaning of "Der Nister's" madness.