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Vos der dikhter vil: Peretz's Seductive Metapoetics

From repressed yeshiva *bochrim* to mesmerized dancers, I.L. Peretz grapples with themes of erotic and literary seduction in his poetry, stories and plays. Can a modern writer narrate Eros in Yiddish? Can a poet use the language of traditional Jewish society to represent a modern narrative of erotic seduction? Peretz's first published poem in Yiddish, "Monish," (1888) broaches these metapoetic questions, as the narrator intrudes on a story of genius and seduction with a harsh critique of Yiddish and the Jewish imagination. While not all of Peretz's works are explicitly metapoetic, Peretz reinscribes and reinterprets authority and Eros in the fragmented, macabre scenes of *Ba nakht afn altn mark* (1907) nearly twenty years later. Both texts depict erotic passion and the writer's struggle to narrate that passion in Yiddish, as Peretz foregrounds the figure of the author and lays bare his literary devices; how to tell the story becomes an integral part of the story that unfolds. In *Ba nakht afn altn mark*, however, Peretz takes elements from Monish's traditional setting and deft narrative and shapes them into a more ambivalent, contested and thoroughly modern world.

The earliest version of "Monish" encompasses themes of piety, seduction and authority that Peretz transforms in later works. The poem, filled with playful rhymes, Yiddish idioms and rabbinic references, tells the story of the *ilui* Monish, whose purity and piety threatens the reign of Sammael and Lilith. Fearing Monish's power to hasten the coming of the Messiah, Lilith concocts a plan to ensure his downfall. A German merchant arrives in the *shtetl* with his beautiful daughter Maria, whose sweet voice captures Monish's heart. In the climactic final

scene, Monish feverishly pledges his body and soul to Maria in a ruin among the bats and spiders, and in the process enslaves himself to his passion and the devil.

This narrative of devilish temptation, with parallels stretching back to the book of Job, is abruptly interrupted mid-ballad. Monish is in the midst of telling his mother about an unknown alluring voice when a different voice intrudes.

אנדערש וואלט מיין ליד געקלונגען,
כ׳זאל פאר גויים גוייש זינגען,
נישט פאר יידן, נישט ״זארגאן״—
קיין רעכטן קלאנג, קיין רעכטן טאן!
ס׳האט פאר ליבע, פאר געפיל
נישט קיין פאסיק ווארט, קיין סטיל..[1]

My poem would have sounded different
If I should have sung it in *goyyish* for *goyyim*
Not for Jews, not "jargon" –
No proper sound, no proper tone
Is there for love, for emotion
No fitting word, no style…[2]

The first-person voice interrupts Monish and substitutes its own self-conscious verse for Maria's captivating bird-song. This authorial persona takes possession of the narrative with the assertion of "mayn lid" in the first line, and defers Monish's looming catastrophe in order to complain about the impossibility of representing love in Yiddish. Peretz blurs the boundary between narrator and implied poet, as the poet speaks as a character in his own narrative, breaking the fictive frame. From this linguistic indictment, the narrator/poet focuses on the cultural constraints of Yiddish by contrasting classical images of love with Jewish reality. His verses mock both the incongruous foreign ideal ("Venus springs up from the foam/In the middle of the sea and without a dress!") and the drearily familiar ("Like peas they spill children"); neither provides sufficient basis for literary expression. Peretz's authorial 'intervention' in the early version of the poem reflects a desire to lay bare the writing process and to foreground modern

[1] I.L. Peretz, "Monish" ll.
[2] My translation – extremely literal, which unfortunately loses Peretz's rhyme and rhythm.

questions of language and representation. Yet he awkwardly interposes his implied author, interrupting the poetic world to critique Yiddish language and Jewish culture.

In *Ba nakht afn altn mark*, Peretz expands upon many of the themes he raises in "Monish" as he fragments and critiques its traditional world. The marketplace, a meeting place for traditional and secular, Jew and Christian, man and woman, replaces Monish's study hall. Crowds of characters reenact the clash between piety and passion, which is reformulated as the conflict between the tradition of the study-house and the modernity of the factory. The seduction of the *ilui* is expanded into nocturnal revelry and transgression, as a mysterious gargoyle, half male and half female, corrupts those who stray too close to its enchanted domain. The gargoyle, however, in contrast to other inanimate objects in the play, never speaks; it remains an object that is narrated by the play's multiple poets and storytellers.

While *Ba nakht* traces a story of erotic seduction similar to "Monish," Peretz introduces a metapoetic level that keeps the production and performance of the text constantly in view. In contrast to Monish's sudden metapoetic interruption, authorial voices fill the play; different potential authors and narrators take turns on stage, and several characters compete for narrative authority. Peretz incorporates a director, stage manager and narrator as characters, setting up a modernist play within a play.

לעקטאר: פון פאר שול און קלויסטער,
א לאנג פארגעסענער גאט...
דירעקטאר: און וועט זיך וועקן און גיסן...
רעזשיסער: א ריוט שנירל וואסער פון מויל
ווי ביין א קו, וואס הייבט דעם קאפ,
אין מיטן טרונק פארטראכט...
און פון ד׳אויגן וועט
שטראלן אויס א צויבערקרייז
א רויטלעך-גיריק ליכט ארום, --
ווי דער דיכטער וויל...
דירעקטאר: (צום לעקטאר) דו רעדסט פאר יעדן אקט,
אבער – קורץ און שארף!
רעזשיסער: אניט, - קורטינע אויפן קאפ! (פארשפיל 12-24)

Narrator: A long forgotten god
From days before the synagogue and church…

Director: ...which will awake and start to spout...
Stage Manager: ...a river of red water from its mouth,
As though it were a cow that dreamily
Lifts up its head from drinking
To cast a magic circle with its eyes
In a zealous, red-beamed light,
Exactly as the stage directions call for.
Director: (*to Narrator*) You'll introduce each act –
Just make it short and snappy!
Stage Manager: Or else it's curtains for you! (367)[3]

The words of the Narrator, Director and Stage Manager are woven together, one character's words lead to the next, to present the first glimpse of the monster. They slide into the magic of the fictional scenario, but their metaphorical reverie is jarred by the intrusion of the authorial frame; this is not 'real' but rather "vi der dikhter vil" ("as the poet wants"). The Director then instructs the Narrator to introduce each act, reminding him to speak "quickly and sharply." The Narrator becomes an independent creative 'agent,' instructed to speak at his own volition, but with the constant threat of the curtain hanging over his head. Thus the beginning of the prologue establishes the dramatic frame that intrudes on each act, reasserting the presence of these characters – each with some degree of creative control – behind the scenes.

Once the Narrator's task has been established, the Poet wanders onstage, again blurring the lines between poet, narrator and character. The stereotypically pale Poet ignores the characters around him and directly addresses his audience. Bowing, he immediately sets the scene and previews the plot.

קיינער וואכט,
א טויב-שטומע פיבערנאכט!
און א וואנזיניקער לץ
פלעכט צופונס אן אלטן גענץ
א נעץ
פון שאטן און שטראלן...(פארשפיל 60-64)

The world is asleep, in a fever of
Silence hushed as a dove,
While a madcap fool
Weaves a net of shadowy beams
At the foot of the old gargoyle. (369)

[3] All translation of *Ba nakht* are from Hillel Halkin's translation, *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, published in *The I.L. Peretz Reader,* ed. Ruth Wisse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 364-432.

With echoes of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, the Poet weaves a modernist spell in uneven rhymed lines in this "toyb-shtume fibernakht." His speech is filled with suggestive metaphors, from the fevered dream in a swamp to dove-mute silence. The Poet, however, quickly relinquishes his narrative power to the Narrator's subsequent description of the set, who in turn prepares to surrender the play to its characters.

This transfer of narrative power, however, is disrupted as the script of the play within the play fails to go as planned. A mysterious Wanderer appears, baffling the Stage Manager, who anxiously looks for this unexpected character in his script, and surprising the Narrator, who watches this character usurp his role. In short, fragmented lines, the Wanderer entreats "Night" to spin him a dream, mixing life, death and in-between (Prologue 168-176). After the Wanderer dozes off – setting his dreams in motion but perplexing the backstage crew – the Poet returns with a statement calculated to further complicate the play's authorship.

דיכטער: (אין פלוצלינגער אויפלייכטונג)
האב איך, הייסט עס, איינעם
פון זיינע חלומות געזען,
און דעם וועט מען שפילן! (פארשפיל 180-181)

Poet (*suddenly inspired*): Hold on!
I've just glimpsed one of his dreams:
That's the play we'll put on!
(*He gathers the Wanderer's things*) (373)

With a characteristic closing twist, Peretz throws any sense of deliberate narration into disarray in the final lines of the prologue. Is the Poet newly inspired to produce a play that follows the Wanderer's dream, renouncing control and letting a phantasmagoric dream unfold on its own accord? Or is his inspiration merely a literary device that reveals the fictionality of the scene? In "Monish," the line between character and narrator/poet was clearly dramatized in the narrator's metapoetic interruption. But in *Ba nakht*'s prologue, the Poet, Narrator and Wanderer each assert their control over pieces of the story that is being told.

As the curtain rises on the first act and the commotion of the *shtetl*, Peretz banishes these modern devices and introduces two new poet-characters. The Jester and, to a lesser extent, the Folk Poet, are entrusted with the play's main narrative, replacing the modern lyricism of the Poet and the Narrator. Both poets are familiar *folkstip* characters, literary 'insiders'; the wedding jester combines bawdy jokes and moral messages in rhyme, while the folk poet memorializes great events or catastrophes in ballads. Outwardly, they both belong to the traditional Jewish milieu, which as Dan Miron illustrates with respect to Abramowitz's Mendele, is critical for the credible portrayal of that traditional world and its cracks.[4] The modern Poet retreats to the wings, and the traditional poets take center stage.

The Folk Poet is the simpler of the two traditional poets, providing local color and a bit of necessary background, then largely disappearing from view.[5] His boisterous voice precedes his entrance, wafting from the tavern declaiming folksy lines with simple rhymes (1:259-263). His message is simple – sing, drink and love – and untroubled by traditional social norms or consequences. This basic approach to life and language enables the Folk Poet to convey the legendary history of the market's gargoyle in full folksy glory. When children recount the gargoyle's magic power, he cannot resist assuming his self-appointed narrative function, declaring, "ikh hob derfun gemakht a lid!" (1:310) ["I even put it into rhyme!" (380)]. Standing on his self-made stage, the balcony, the Folk Poet declaims the gruesome tale of the spellbound musicians who jump to their deaths. He frames his performance in the terms of a typical folk-tale, addressing his onstage audience directly: "hot ir gehert fun shreklekhn fal' / vi s'i' der kapele, der higer dergangen!" (1:311-312) ["Why, haven't you heard of the terrible tale, / Of the

[4] Dan Miron, *Introduction* in S.Y. Abramovitsh *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler* ed. Dan Miron and Ken Frieden (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), lxii. Peretz's Jester is not a perfect parallel to Abramowitz's Mendele, but Miron's model is helpful because suggests reasons why Peretz needed to adopt a protagonist/quasi-narrator who fits into traditional society. Only a character who is convincingly situated within this society can reveal its growing cracks to outsiders, speaking as both insider and outsider.

[5] The Folk Poet reappears in the third act, but the richness and complications of that scene are beyond the bounds of this paper.

terrible tale of our musical band?" (380)]. The traditional poet is in his element, narrating past terrors in rhymed, melodramatic lines.

In *Ba nakht*, the Jester is granted the more ambiguous role of protagonist and master-of-ceremonies. In the confusion of characters that opens the first act, the Jester slithers along the study house wall, edging his way into the center of the scene and the narrative. From his opening rhymed lines, it becomes clear that he is no traditional wedding jester summoned for light entertainment.

ס׳איז מיר עפעס אראפ פון זינען...
כ׳האב עפעס א וויכטיק וואָרט פארגעסן...
צו לאנג אין חורבה געזעסן
צווישן די שפינען...
און כ׳וואלט מיר דערמאנט, כ׳וואלט עס געפינען...
א רגע שטיל, און ס׳וואלט מיר געראטן
איז פול די חורבה מיט אלטע שאטן,
עפעס הייליקע אלעריי...
עפעס וויינען זיי, עפעס זאגן זיי... (207-1:199)

What was it that I was about to say?
It was important, that's all I remember...
I've spent too many days
In that old ruin talking to the spiders.
Why, it's on the tip of my tongue –
If only I could think for a minute!
That ruin had the weirdest shadows in it,
All kinds of holy spooks...
I think I hear them cry and try to speak. (375)

The Jester's speech calls attention to his desire to speak, but despite the rhymes that roll off his tongue, he is unable to find the 'right' word. Language is somehow trapped with the holy spooks in the old ruin that he has escaped. Avraham Novershtern suggests that the Jester's proximity to 'ruin' and 'spiders' establishes him as a symbol of a devitalized past and recalls the ruin in which Maria secures Monish's erotic undoing.[6] Although the Jester incorporates aspects of this 'devitalized past' in his traditional role, his entrance marks his departure from that ruin and his words convey a desire for revitalization. In contrast to Monish, who enters the ruin to consummate his passion in the company of bats and spiders, the Jester leaves the ruin of the

[6] Avraham Novershtern, "Between Dust and Dance: Peretz's Drama and the Rise of Yiddish Modernism," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992), 74.

study-house and its spiders to seek the passions and opportunities of the marketplace. Like Monish's narrator, however, the Jester searches for a language to express the world that he wishes to create.

Struggling with the transition from desolate solitude to communal chaos, the Jester pleads for silence so that he can articulate his desires. Addressing his counterpart and alter-ego, the Recluse, he again wrestles with language:

עס איז דאך פארט
פאראן אזא ווארט,
אלץ איבערצומאכן, איבערצוקערן... (2:217-219)

"There has to be a word
For changing, for remaking everything..." (376)

The Jester seeks a word with transformative power, one which not only represents the world, but effects revolution. The poet's frustration with Yiddish in Monish is replaced by larger questions of language and the power of words. Yet throughout the play, the Jester's words and the upheaval they generate are linked with the erotic powers of seduction and transgression.

The Jester deftly uses his words to manipulate scenes and to incite chaos among the living and the dead. He dramatically deposes God for the feverish night, extinguishing the lights of the living and judging the souls in purgatory who pass before him. As he boasts, "Gots velt vel ikh firn! / loz ikh mikh nor vu ahin dermonen." (2:482-483) ["I'll be the leader of God's world! / I just hope I can remember where to take it." (387)]. Once he awakens the monster at center-stage, the Jester assumes the authority of both God and Author, raising the souls of the dead and directing them on and off stage. At first, the Jester successfully controls the apparitions, judging the suffering souls with sympathy and the wealthy with severity. But as the characters proliferate on stage, their narratives represent an increasingly fragmented modernity: what should he do with ambiguous figures like a blasphemous cantor, or an assassinated hussar and the tanner he murdered? How should he react to the juxtaposition of the midnight prayer of

martyrs and the worker's call to arms? In the pandemonium that ensues, the Jester remains at the center of the action, but his power is eroded by the tumult that surrounds him. Only the supernatural figure of the mysterious *Emets* (Someone), restores order by summoning the dead from their graves. The Jester asserts his will, as divine-figure and as author, but it is conditional on the enigmatic presence of Someone: "alts iz meglekh, / ven ikh vil, vos emets heyst!" (2:821-822) ["All things are possible / When what must be is my own will!" (401)[7]]. The Jester becomes an author, as his powers ("ven ikh vil") evoke those attributed to the poet in the prologue ("vi der dikhter vil"). But just as the Poet relies on the mysterious Wanderer, the Jester depends on a shadowy Someone else.

With the Jester losing his grasp of the fantastic scene, the final acts of the play trace the culmination of the wild dance of the resurrected dead and the ultimate failure of the Jester's language. As dawn breaks and the dance ends, the Jester urges the dead to sustain the feverish night and to defy the natural order. In dramatic lines, the Jester incites the dead to renounce death, to swear in the hopes that their speech act is sufficient to institute this revolutionary, chaotic order (5:1373-1378). Yet language and desire are not enough to sustain the passion of the fevered night; the dead return to their graves and the Jester is subdued into conformity and stripped of his literary and supernatural powers.

As the epilogue restores the natural order above and below ground, the Jester relinquishes his delusions of grandeur and abandons his search for a transformative language. After banishing the apparitions of the musicians to their slimy grave and ordering the stone statues and monster to return to their inanimate perches, he addresses the tin rooster with words that recall his opening speech.

דו ביסט געוועכט...

[7] Halkin's translation omits the complications of the second line, which literally reads, "When I will that which someone commands!"

דיין מישפט איז געוועכט!
דו, אויף דיין הויכן ארט,
ביסט דאס וואוגל,
דער סימבאל
און – די פאראל! (עפילאג 1490-1495)

You were right,
And your verdict was just!
O bird,
You are Symbol
And Word. [8] (430)

The Jester returns to *the* word, the power of traditionalism and divine judgment, which he had rejected at the beginning of the play. In lines redolent with religious references, he abandons his search for innovation, and language is reinstated within traditional bounds – or is it?

The final lines of the play once again confound the authorship and authority of the narrative, suggesting a counter-reading that is simultaneously performed and rejected. The Recluse reappears from one side of the stage, quoting verses from Ecclesiastes, while the Wanderer re-emerges from the other, weaving a new day.

וואנדערער: (צעשראקן) עפעס אין הארץ דאך בליט!
עפעס טרייבט דאך און עפעס ציט
אן א האלט!
וווי איז צוועק, וווי איז ציל!
לעקטאר: (שטרענג) דאס געהער נישט צום שפיל!
רעזשיסער: (באווייזט זיך, וואוגל) דער פארהאנג פאלט!... (עפילאג 1527-1532)

Wanderer: (*startled*) And yet something renews itself in me!
Something draws me out
And drives me on,
Away,
Away...
But to what end?
Narrator: (*firmly*) That isn't in the play!
Director: (*appearing in the wings*) Watch out for the curtain! (431)

This concluding scene opens the door to a renaissance both rising and departing from the chaotic tumult of the nocturnal transgression. But a different level of authorial power is asserted, first by the Narrator, who rejects the Wanderer's unscripted remarks, and then by the Director, who drops the curtain on the Wanderer's musings. The proliferation of voices and the multiplicity of

[8] Halkin omits a Hebrew line from his translation (1495) "un – di parol" I'm not sure how to understand "parol" – as a synonym for "vort" in the Jester's speech, or another word for language with a different shade of meaning.

authors, evident in the epilogue and throughout the play, allow Peretz to suggest and reject, to juxtapose and subvert throughout the narrative.

In both "Monish" and *Ba nakht afn altn mark*, Peretz draws attention to the ways in which the texts are produced by exposing an implied author or would-be-authors as literary devices. The poem features a single authorial persona critiquing his own text and lamenting linguistic and cultural constraints. Yet in later versions of the poem, Peretz omits the metapoetic essay; he no longer emphasizes the self-reflexivity of the Yiddish poet. *Ba nakht*, however, embraces an alternate approach to the problems of authorship and language as it features multiple, shifting and partial authorial figures in a tumultuous literary scene. Instead of foregrounding a single author, Peretz becomes a ventriloquist, fragmenting his poets and narrators to articulate the vitality and madness of a complex modern world.