Meital Orr

The Spectre of Decadence and its Smoldering Ember

Staring despondently into the dying fire of Jewish Literature, B. Charney Vladeck regrets – "The cornerstones of our past have begun to tremble, spreading a moldy smell of death"(Novershtern, 70). Yet in I. L. Peretz's play, *A Night in the Old Market Place*, a smoldering ember of hope remains despite the overwhelming decadence sweeping the Jewish intelligencia after the failure of the 1905 Revolution. This last hope comes in the form of the Janus-faced Jester that is Peretz - the cynic who knows that idealism is worthless, and yet cannot abandon his ideals. Dreams must be played out – if only to be destroyed, because total darkness is unthinkable. The play is a decadent one not because of the Jester's character or his aspirations, but because of his total failure in achieving his ultimate vision of revival for his people. It is decadent *reality* not the Jester's aspiration which is "grotesque in its futility"(82)[1] – eventually destroying the Jester himself (its last hope), as it has all other chances for survival. While despair and death infiltrate the play's every crevice - of which the Jester, like every other character, is an inevitable part - he is the only one with sufficient intelligence, strength, and depth to refuse remaining a nameless, passive accomplice to it. Far from a leader of "demonic nihilism"(76), the Jester embodies the "utmost *rejection* of the reality of death"(81) – and a flickering remnant of Peretz's cultural heritage in rationalism and positivism. The play is a diagnosis and prescription at a time when the crucial medicine is nowhere to be found. Yet while the collective, external reality is the epitome of blackness, the very fact that we have witnessed a smoldering ember from the individual, visionary world – is testimony to the *possibility* of hope.

Peretz' decadent play is able to house such paradoxical hope because it is built of multiple dualities. The play itself is the paradox of a dead fire stoked temporarily into a flicker by the existence of the Jester who is the paradox of a darkened coal able to nonetheless burst into flame. While as part of a decadent world, the Jester is necessarily also somewhat decadent himself, he is of a clearly different nature – more dynamic and coherent throughout than the other characters, and ultimately he is a visionary - an idealistic revolutionary who defies the existing "order". As Novershtern suggests, Peretz's Jester may well have been influenced by friend A. Vayter's depiction of the Yiddish actor as a Janus-faced Jester, "one face imitating the play's hero, the other, his own face"(89). Thus the Jester is both the play's "hero" and the actor-artist Peretz himself - both of which are cynics *and* idealists. As Novershtern reveals, the duality of the Jester's character can be traced to a merging of two characters found in previous versions of the play but

[1] For convenience, any citation without an author belongs to the author of the preceding quote, and any citation without a page number can be found on the page number of the preceding quote.

nonexistent in the last version: The Prankster (a demonic character) and the Young Heretic (full of impassioned slogans and defiance against the Master of the Universe).

Though in his insightful article, "Between Dust and Dance: Peretz's Drama and the Rise of Yiddish Modernism", Abraham Novershtern carefully attempts to balance the Jester's decadence and his idealism, the Jester is actually a symbol far more of the latter. The Jester is far more the young Optimistic Revolutionary than the Master of the Demonic because a careful analysis of the Jester's lines reveals them most often to be those of the Young Heretic - full of Maskilic calls to action, anti-religious sentiment and cynical, though loving, mockery of his people. This analysis will show that the Jester brings night and resurrects the dead from a firm conviction of the possibility of their revival and not from a demonic or nihilistic urge, and that the Dance of the Dead - while *resulting* in the grotesque - was not orchestrated by the Jester to this end, but as a tool for his vision of revival. The grotesque results from the incompatibility between his reality and his vision - not from the nature of the Jester or his *agenda.*

In most of his appearances, the Jester is really the Maskilic Peretz at heart, fighting against his people's passivity. Though he was a witness to the destruction of his *klezmer* friends - driven into the pagan well by shameful *goyish* revelry - the Jester rebels against the death his people have brought upon themselves and most importantly, against his own role as a passive accomplice to that crime. Though he was only a bystander, it is clear that the Jester keenly feels implicit guilt in the affair and that his passivity is deemed guilty by those around him. Relating the tale of the musician's deaths, the Folk Poet breaks off with an angry glance at the Jester. When a boy looks at the Jester in fright and asks "Was he there too?" a second answers, "You bet he was...and saw it all..."(Peretz, 380). Ashamed and flustered at such disclosure, the Jester then angrily pulls a red handkerchief from his pocket and chases them away. Thus in a world of decay, passivity in itself is a crime. In a foreshadowing of the Jester's impassioned call to arms later, the Folk Poet attempts to move the lost community to action: "It's now or never - / Take life by storm!"(378). Noson's response ("But I'm already where I like to be: / Flat on my back") is the epitome of Jewish passivity which the Jester will actively fight against with meaningful action, just as he will oppose Noson's (and his people's) grotesque longing for death.

Constantly, religious belief (and every overarching redemptive ideology) is treated by the Jester as passivity, for it relies on the Master of the Universe or the Messiah for what should be individual and community action. Most revealing, are the Jester's first meaningful words which define his entire purpose in the play: "There has to be a word / For changing, for remaking everything..."(376). In complete contrast to his people, the Jester attempts to take the ultimate and most revolutionary action – to play God himself. Thus when the Recluse answers that the "word"

is, "His [God's] handiwork!" the Jester and he exchange defiant glances and remain standing away from each other – the gap between faith and non-belief unbreachable.

It may be tempting to see decadence in the Jester's hastening of a death-like night: "Ah, that's better now... all eyes are blind.../ With this cloth I make a wind / that blows the lights out in each home. / Let it be darker than the grave, / More silent than the tomb"(381). While as Jester of a Decadent world, his medium is grotesque, we must scrutinize the Jester's goals. Having witnessed the senseless babble and chaos of the waking community, its passivity and its doom, it is no wonder that the Jester bursts with anticipation for Dusk, when the present is temporarily silenced, when "blind" eyes may yield revealing dreams and when he can attempt to revive the present though its past. Moreover, the Jester is able to extinguish all of the town's lights except those of the Zionist meeting, *even though* he mocks the meeting's goal as a dream. This is because the Jester must also admit - as with his own aspirations to defy Death - that such hopeful dreams are necessary. While the chattering homes must be "darker than the grave" he and a few others capable of materializing his vision of revival must remain the beacons of light.

As much as he welcomes the darkness for his vision, the Jester is also wise enough to know that a revival of the decadent dead is dangerous – that "There's horror in the air"(385) – and for this reason he is also obsessed with wakefulness. The Jester's joy in blind houses is that for the elimination of further impediments to his dream, but those who are *not* blind – those whose role it is, like him, to protect the community – must remain wide awake this night. Enraged at the sleeping watchman, the Jester shakes a fist at the sky, and ends the first act with a desperate cry to the God of his blind flock: "And in your image You created man!". Soon he will take the same whistle abandoned by the weak watchman, and with it call the dead from the cemetery – taking action into his own hands, and entering the decadent realm he must revive. Having despaired of the living – who are as good as dead – the Jester attempts to reverse time in order to fight his nation's decay at its roots – to fight the decadence of the past in order to reconfigure the present.

"Heaven's shut down; / The night is our own!"(386) cries the Jester, but while he proceeds to achieve his vision of the "word" as a demi-god at night, his glee is not for the destructive forces of darkness, but in his own power to revive the forces of Light: "Come, one and all, to the old marketplace / To do my will!"(387). He uses the watchman's whistle to wake the gargoyle but not for nefarious purposes – for he orders it to spout *light*, and soon the Jester begins to also spout his Maskilic anti-religious views. "His beloved Name's a sacred swindle... To be alive you must believe and kill", he shouts – and thus if life yields only death, then death must yield life; if

religious belief leads to death, then to truly live we must resurrect the dead in a world without religion.

Later in the night when Noson, called up to the Torah by a spirit, dies at his own wedding, the Jester laughs a wooden laugh, echoed by the rest of the dead, yet his laugh is not sincere merriment - not decadent guffaws - but the bitterness of the cynic, the helpless visionary, who has seen all along (through Noson) that his nation's passivity would only result in their death – their inability to achieve normality – in love as in life, and their failure to rediscover their identity. It is especially revealing that the Jester laughs after the Invisible Soul's grotesque rhyme which has counseled in utter passivity and meaninglessness to "try to forget" that "death is the trial"(414). Instead of forgetfulness, the Jester chooses action against this ever-present Death – flouting the overwhelmingly decadent world in which he exists.

The Jester proclaims himself the leader of God's world, and despite his claims to have forgotten where to lead it, his destination is far from Hell. The Jester's goal, like Peretz's, is neither Heaven nor Hell – for Hell is the study house, suffocatingly hot with tortured, panting students – and Heaven is unthinkable in Peretz's anti-religious, anti-sentimentalist world. Just as his goal is neither Heaven nor Hell, the Jester's means are neither the Divine nor the human – the Divine is helpless, as in the next few pages he cynically mocks everyone's trust in the coming of the Messiah, but so is mankind, whose New Man and Martyrs are ridiculous in Peretz's somber, rational world. As we shall see, Peretz's vision is one of practical and realistic self-revival – a destination far from Death in this decadent world.[2]

For the Jester *revival*, not redemption, will come from *humans*, not the Divine or supermen. "Great heroes and great doings" are, as the Jester points out, "stranded in the ruin" (397). He mocks the Martyrs, revealing the uselessness of their sufferings: "But can you tell me what it's been for?... And God? / What did he have in mind / When he chose you for His people? / Was that His punishment? / Has he run out of miracles? / Why doesn't he say: Stop!?"(398). As in his *Di Dray Matones,* Peretz (through the Jester) criticizes the futility and utter worthlessness of his nation's (and humankind's) sacrifices because they are born of man's impractical beliefs. It is due to such blindness that the Jester prepares to lead his flock to higher ground. When the Recluse marvels that he sees daily the wonders of God, the Jester makes clear that the real possibility of hope comes from a very different reality: "As well you may! / All things are possible / When what must be is my own will!"(401). Though his plan requires the unearthly resurrection of the dead, they themselves are *humans*, not the former apparitions for heavenly angels.

[2] Only once does the Jester actually bring death - for his vision of revival, as the passionate young revolutionary striking down a wealthy Jewish parasite boasting of his riches. Yet throughout, the Jester has only compassion for his people, and eventually relies on the dead only as his means and not his end.

"Why don't you learn to help yourself?"(404) the Jester shouts to the Recluse. Through the Narrator's vision of a disappearing Truth pitted against a deathly Faith, Peretz molds the ideology of his Jester – who for all his seeming irrationality is – more coherent than anyone else in his vision of practical, physical "redemption" – of salvation by the force of will, through which man must learn to help himself, and to *shape* his reality instead of letting it smother him. When the Hungry Worker shouts ecstatically for the destruction of the old world order, and the necessity of its being ground to dust, the Jester questions him: "It must? / Is that the word? / Dust?" – ordering his apparitions to *reject* "that imbecile"(395) and insisting that they follow him as he prepares to provide them with "weapons" to fight the dusty demons of the old world – the true "enemy at hand"(396).

As he led the apparitions toward active revival, so the Jester will lead his dead. Just as his previous actions were motivated by Peretz's Maskilic practicality and secularism, so too the Jester's dance derives (paradoxically) from the same. Though Novershtern emphasizes "the destructive force of the Dance of Death"(89), it is a dance motivated by the Jester's vision of revival and life, joy and freedom! It is not the force of the dance itself which is destructive, but the unbreachable gap between the dancers and their director's dream. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the idea of dancing is not the Jester's, but the children's – whose youthful singing (however disconnected) instills in the Jester a new idea for reviving his night community, for it is the most powerful way of *negating* death. Thus the "Dance of Death" is really the final Dance of Life. "Feel what you've never let yourself feel! / Live what you've never lived before!"(417) the Jester exclaims. While it is true that, with its limping dead, the scene reaches the macabre, the dance is actually the only coherent and unified action that the characters exhibit throughout the entire play – the only activity in which they all understand both each other and their purpose, and the only one even remotely resembling joy or freedom. While the scattered phrases of the dancers are meaningless and unrelated, their movements are unified, both in their chaos (ironically) and in the circles and lines which they form.

The Jester tries to persuade himself that his revival dance has worked: "They hop about with so much zeal, / Their resurrection seems quite real!"(420) – yet he continues to dream of further approximating realistic normality, joy and freedom – "If only the music were a bit more...musical, And the ladies all wore flowers in their hair...". The Jester's situation here becomes grotesque because of the impossible position in which he is placed (that of redemptor of a graveyard), and not because of the reality he has *chosen* to create. As part of Peretz's idealistic multi-culturalism, the Jester invites the stone statues on the Church to join the dancing of the Jewish Dead: "Tonight there are no differences!"(421). At the same time, the Jester instinctively

feels that the absurdity of his dance has increased. After the impassioned revolutionary, the side of the cynic once more resurfaces, viewing the world with unforgiving clarity: "Hug and Kiss.../ Ha ha ha, / What a night this is!", for not only is it absurd to think of such actual co-existence between the Jews and Christians, but here the added absurdity and irony is that they are co-existing in the realm of Death – perhaps, hints the cynical playwright, the only realm they can.

Despite his moments of bitter cynicism, the Jester ultimately refuses to succumb to the grotesque position in which his reality has plunged him. Feverishly cleansing the Decadence from his vision, the Jester desperately attempts the impossible – to deny the physical (and thereby the metaphysical) death of his people. When they hesitate his order to dance through the dawn ("You mean we may?"(424)) the Jester's answer is his ultimate credo: "It's up to you!...Haven't you lain in the ground long enough? / Don't you miss life enough to want more?...Stand up and fight!...Life must be taken by force...". There is no specific change in the Jester to signal that his previous cynicism has ended and his revolutionary idealism begun, for both sides (faces) have been with him all along. In as far as the Jester springs from Peretz himself, he epitomizes the combination of biting cynicism and loving idealism characteristic also of Abramovitch and Sholem Aleichem. Ultimately all three hold out the same message for their people – the final passionate appeal of the Jester to the obstinacy of a nation that claims to be dead: "You are misled / by your own false notions! / Whatever you believe in – that alone exists. / Whatever you deny dissolves in mist. / Say no to death, / Believe in life / with all your might and main - / And you'll remain. / No one can move you from this place!".

In his battle with Death, the Jester attempts to struggle with time in the form of the tin rooster who signals it, but his goal is not only to "freeze time"(Novershtern, 87), but (far more drastically) to permanently reverse it (for his revival of the dead attempts to restore them permanently to life). Though he is alone in his struggle – though he is told "It's not the revolution, friend"(Peretz, 426) - the Jester continues to persist heroically. The extent of Peretz's pessimism about the possibility of his nation's revival reaches its final despairing conclusion only at the very end of the play, when several pages later, his flock gone and his head bloodied by the rooster – the Jester must admit defeat: "I do renounce all things!"(429). Peretz's bitterness descends upon as the Jester confesses, "the loneliness of the individual whose vision is not shared by his surroundings"(Novershtern, 88).

Utter despair and cynicism is sealed with his admittal that the tin rooster (time's) verdict was *just* – and that *it* in fact is "The Symbol / And Word"(Peretz, 430). The Jester has finally understood what he did not before – the overwhelming power of his nation's surrender – and he is deeply hurt and stricken. The Maskil, renounced by his people – defeated in his ideals for them *by*

them – and thus utterly betrayed, has so completely reached rock-bottom that he even denounces his former dreams: "My sin is great; / I won't repeat it. / I'll lay down my life for you if you need it!"(430). The only beauty left in this terrible tragedy, is the Jester's loyalty to the nation that failed him. While he has renounced his former self, he will never turn his back upon his people: "I'll wake the Jews for prayer from now on..."(430). Yet even within this weak consolation lies the final tragedy Peretz offers us – for now the Jester has truly plunged into madness.[3] Accepting a role he would have formerly rejected, despised and mocked, the Jester adopts the role of the Jewish Prayer Crier, knocking weakly on the gates and consoling himself that his action is meaningful. "Soon they'll all know we had a death last night"(430) he tells the scattered few around him, and yet the death he really refers to is his own. While it is Noson who has physically died, it is most importantly the last hope of the idealist-Jester who has passed away forever.[4]

"Nowhere was the uncertainty of the period more manifest than in Peretz's dramatic masterpiece" says Novershtern, noting that Peretz himself, "was often unsure whether his vision was one of 'life' or 'death'"(85). While it is true that the totality of the play is "a vision of night rather than dawn, and of decline rather than revival"(76), it is also true that the spectre of Decadence carries within it a smoldering ember of hope. "While Peretz gives Death a central role in the play, he also makes it less capable of any decisive transformational force"(85) – for the Jester's inverse chronology creates "awareness of the *possibility* of change"(86).

Peretz's work is not only a beautiful and tragic testimony to the possibility of life within death, it is also a valuable contribution to the idealistic aims of the European Expressionists. ~~Like~~ As in Strindberg's dream plays - especially his *Ghost Sonata* (1911) - Peretz's *"Fevered Night's Dream"* poses a reality in which time and space do not exist, and a single consciousness (that of the Dreamer) holds sway over all. While Strindberg's Dreamer is the Sunday Child, Peretz's is the Wanderer (and Jester) - visionaries who attempt to reveal the skeletons in the closet of their communities. In these dream worlds no totally objective perspective or facts appear – ostensible reality is suspended and tangible reality distorted to reflect the subjectivity of the author-main character who, though foul himself, is nevertheless capable of exposing the filth of his brothers – to air the crimes, the lack of consciousness and falsity - to "pull up the weeds so that young people can start afresh"(Strindberg). In a Naturalist vein these plays create a reality in which the past

[3] While Novershtern asserts that the Jester has always been mad, the only point at which the Jester plunges into insanity is after his failure in attaining revival.

[4] There is a striking resemblance here between Peretz's Jester and the visionary from Bille August's film *Pelle the Conquerer* (with Max von Sydow). The visionary is a worker on an estate who rebels against the injustice of the master and dreams of escape for all the workers on the estate-prison, but when an "accident" brings a dumbbell crashing into the visionary's head, he is transformed into a deaf and mute beast, led on a rope by the despised master and obeying only *his* word. Likewise, his nation's fear paralyzes the Jester, transforming him from a revolutionary into a deaf and mute servant of its word and will.

completely dominates the present, so that Strindberg's spooky mummies and Peretz's Jewish Dead are death within life, right on the stage. Though our visionaries have embarked on a losing struggle from which the only release is Death, they must continue to strive for the only other (almost unattainable) option – the ability to use the past in order to reconstruct the self. We are beyond redemption, for there is a curse over mankind, and yet amazingly, the possibility of surrender is unthinkable.

Despite its overwhelming decadence, I. L. Peretz's play, *A Night in the Old Market Place* houses a smoldering ember of hope in the form of the Janus-faced Jester. The play is ultimately a decadent work not because of the Jester's character or goals, but because of the immense gap between dead reality and his vision of its revival – a misfit which results in the ultimate failure of his dream and a final message of almost total despair. The Jester is the only one who actively negates the Decadence around him - the only one who refuses to remain a nameless, passive accomplice to its hopelessness. Peretz creates the Jester as a partial mirror of himself – the cynic who knows that idealism is worthless, and yet who cannot abandon his ideals. They must be played out – if only to be destroyed. Like a Spectre of Death, the play passes through us, but as we tremble in fever we are given a brief glimpse of the glowing ember concealed forever beneath its ghastly black robe. Like this ember, the Jester is virtually worthless for he cannot defy the blackening coals, nor the inevitable darkness to come - yet the very fact that he existed is a spark of smoldering hope from an author who cannot fully swallow the blackness.

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COMMENTS FOR MEITAL ORR

What is so wonderful about this paper is that it is so much you. The play seems to lay bare the issues most dear to you. You read it carefully, and carefully weigh what the critics say. Then you find a life-affirming direction.

Obviously, to flesh it out, you need to do much more work on Decadence, that most elusive of fin-de-siecle movements that Hamutal Bar-Yosef has recently made her own.

And obviously, you cannot dump Mendele, Sholem Aleichhem and Peretz into the same stew, if only because the first two are utterly earth-bound, whilst Peretz, from the start, was busy charting unseen realms.