SCRIPTA JUDAICA CRACOVIENSIA
Vol. 19 (2021) pp. 15–28
https://doi.org/10.4467/20843925SJ.21.002.16411
www.ejournals.eu/Scripta-Judaica-Cracoviensia

Facing down the watershed: The drama *Bay nakht afn altn mark* (*A Night in the Old Marketplace*) by I.L. Peretz as a carnival mystery play[1]

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Keywords: Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, Isaac Leib Peretz, Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival, Jewish modernism

Abstract: The author analyses Isaac Leib Peretz's play *Bay nakht afn altn mark* (*A Night in the Old Marketplace*) through the lens of the ambivalences of the carnival, which give rise to various transgressions of socio-political and cultural, as well as metaphysical and existential, orders. The carnival category positions Peretz's drama in the dialectic of beginning and end, and it suggests the violation of the existing normative order in order to expose the tension between the traditional world of the shtetl and the modernity that is impinging on it. Moreover, the carnival spectacle reveals metaphysical and historiosophic dimensions, since it tackles the question of the human condition, which is defined by the opposition of life and death and is entangled in the course of history.

Isaac Leib Peretz's play *Bay nakht afn altn mark* (*A Night in the Old Marketplace*),[2] published in 1907, is a product of the author's artistic, ideational, and existential questioning. Peretz revisits questions, issues, and motifs that are central to the whole body of his work, and these combine to produce a complex, multi-vectoral constellation of symbols and meanings. As such, it occupies a unique place in his output, as a summary and distillation of his entire literary legacy, which itself has a strong claim to the status of a founding oeuvre for Jewish writers' experiments in modernism.[3]

[1] Artykuł powstał przy wsparciu finansowym POB Heritage w ramach Programu ID.UJ (edycja specjalna I).

[2] Peretz 1972: 221–318. The final version of the play was published in 1907, but Peretz continued to work on it and make alterations even after its publication, as evidenced by the several surviving variants of the text. The years of work he devoted to this play reflect the great importance that he attributed to it. The English translation of the play from which the quotations in this paper are taken is: I.L. Peretz (1992), *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, transl. H. Halkin, *Prooftexts* 12(1): 1–70, at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20689324?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents (accessed: 3 October 2022).

[3] Shmeruk 2007: 93. *Cf*. Shmeruk 1971: V.

One of the contexts in which this work may be viewed has a self-reflexive dimension connected with Peretz's proposal for interpretation of Jewish literature as a forum for a range of cultural interferences. In his essay "Vos felt undzer literatur?" ("What Our Literature Needs"), he stresses: "I am not proposing that we lock ourselves in a spiritual ghetto. We must leave it – but with our own soul, our own spiritual wealth. We must make exchanges. Give and take. Not beg. Ghetto is impotence. Interchange of culture is the only hope for human growth."[4] Peretz believed that the way for Yiddish literature to develop was by exchange, which would involve on the one hand leaving the cultural ghetto by drawing on European literary currents and modes of thought, and on the other retaining and preserving the cultural uniqueness of *yidishkayt*, which he understood as a reflection of the Jewish soul, or as a cultural bond with Jewish religious and folk tradition. Peretz's self-reflexive musings are testimony to the tendency of peripheral literatures to negotiate their identities and forms in relation to trends developed by the centre, as described by Franco Moretti in his profile of world literature (*Weltliteratur*). Moretti notes that it is almost tantamount to a law that peripheral literature evolves "not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence [...] and local materials."[5] Thinking of world literature as a kind of constellation of texts, issues, and themes also helps to justify the interrelatedness of certain literary texts, and above all of ways of processing and expressing particular themes and issues, and of conveying the atmosphere and the prevailing moods of the time of writing those works. This enables us to speak not so much of 'influence,' which implies a hierarchical understanding of the mutual relations between literatures, but of 'interferences,' which emphasizes both the autonomous and the heterogeneous nature of culture or literature.[6]

The drama *Bay nakht…* may be seen as an exposition of the conception of Yiddish culture as a domain of such cultural interferences. It features references to other artists, including Stanisław Wyspiański,[7] Maurice Maeterlinck, and Henrik Ibsen, and to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche,[8] all of which are creatively processed and realigned to correspond with Jewish tradition. At the same time, with its symbolism and elements of mysticism, Peretz's work lies squarely within the main current of neo-romanticist thought, which combined "a departure from the ideal of rationalization of the world and a criticism of claims to the objectivity of scientific knowledge [...]; a desire to find the 'natural human' and real, lived experience, and to discover an active, constructive role for the cognizant subject."[9] In this context, the play *Bay nakht…* may also be interpreted as an anticipation of a Jewish modernism that is anchored not so much in a specific historical literary period with rigid chronological boundaries as in its writer's creative

[4] Peretz 1972: 27.

[5] Moretti 2014: 58.

[6] Prokop-Janiec 2013: 18.

[7] The interferences between Peretz and Wyspiański were analysed by Victor Erlich (1946), who argued that the dramatic output of both writers is very close to the experiments and achievements of the western European literature of this period. The symbolism and Nietzschean philosophy of individualism common to both were in Wyspiański's work bound to the Polish national tradition, and in Peretz's to messianism and Hasidism (Erlich 1946: 82). Erlich demonstrates Wyspiański's influence on Peretz using the examples of three works: *Wesele*, *Wyzwolenie*, and *Akropolis*.

[8] *Cf*. Belis-Legis 1997: 7–28.

[9] Nycz 2013: 39–40.

approach.[10] As Karolina Szymaniak writes, "We can speak of Yiddish modernism when Yiddish writers join the mainstream of European culture, when their work can be evaluated as an element of one European artistic movement or another (neo-romanticism, naturalism, symbolism, or the avant-garde)."[11]

The drama *Bay nakht…* not only takes the form of a recapitulation of its author's entire creative and ideational oeuvre, but it also betrays his ambition to offer a synthetic overview of the turn of the century in its historiosophic and metaphysical dimensions (it is this latter aspect that will be of greatest interest to me in this article). In a paper published in the 1930s, Ignacy Schiper wrote of Peretz that he was a child of his time, "and the time in which he lived and worked was revolutionary, turbulent, capricious, polyphonic, without an established line."[12] The rapid changes in the economic structure of the shtetl and the emergence of a Jewish proletariat in the Kingdom of Poland had precipitated socio-political tensions between the need to adapt to the evolving environment and open up to issues of politics and capitalism on the one hand, and to safeguard Jewish tradition and religion on the other.[13] At the turn of the twentieth century, then, the Jews faced the challenge of defining the character and vector of their national culture, and also the issue of the extent to which it would be possible to combine modernity with their traditional lifestyle, as epitomized by the shtetl. The question of the condition of Jewish society on the threshold of these epochal changes is the main theme of the play addressed in this text. Peretz's response to it is to conjure a holistic vision of Jewish society in which the existing order is upset and the world is turned upside down.[14]

Previous analyses have drawn attention to the oneiric, phantasmagorical, even grotesque image of Jewish society purveyed by Peretz in this work. In this text I propose to examine it through the lens of the ambivalences of the carnival, which give rise to all manner of transgressions and contaminations of conceptions, values, and orders. Referencing Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of carnival and carnivalization offers cognitively promising potential.[15] The phantasmagorical vision of the shtetl understood as a carnival spectacle reveals an oppositional attitude to official culture, and it emerges as a result of the violation or processing of a normative order which imposes a predefined (and hence restricted) view of the world. In Peretz's drama, the carnival element does not set out to overturn or abolish official culture (indeed, it draws on that culture and employs elements of it), but it does propose another dimension of construing reality, one in which the irrational and that which escapes human cognition is afforded a rightful place. Carnival creates a utopian sphere of freedom and equality, and in so doing offers liberation

[10] Abraham Novershtern investigates Peretz's drama as a possible cornerstone of Yiddish modernism (Novershtern 1992: 71).

[11] Szymaniak 2006: 174. I touch on the issue of Yiddish modernism after Karolina Szymaniak 2006: 169–222.

[12] Schiper 2010: 10.

[13] Mark 1958: VIII–IX.

[14] The image of the shtetl is a well-researched motif of the Jewish literary imagination. David Roskies considers it "a key to modern Jewish self-understanding" (Roskies 1999: 41). The shtetl also plays an important role in the modern poetic of Peretz's works. Dan Miron, for instance, analyzes the apocalyptic images of the shtetl in Peretz's *Di toyte shtot* (*The Dead Town*) as well as in his drama *Bay nakht…* (*cf.* Miron 2000: 1–48).

[15] Gardiner 1993: 30–38.

from formal social hierarchies and dependencies.[16] The carnivalesque vision of Jewish society in Peretz's drama aligns itself in opposition to a number of centres of the normative order: the sphere of the Jewish religion and tradition, which imposes moral law and regulates social relations; Christian culture, connected with the dominant segment of society (as reflected in the spatial arrangement on the stage); and also – in the universal dimension – to the metaphysical order and the question of human existence in a world defined by the supreme opposition of life and death.

Outside place and time

The play begins with an unexpected violation of the standard pattern of the play-within-a-play scene, which features the Director, the Stage Manager, the Narrator, and the Poet. The introduction to the play proper, by the Narrator and the Poet (with the Narrator describing the set and the Poet the plot), is interrupted during the prologue by the appearance of the Wanderer, "an unfamiliar face," ostensibly not mentioned in the script ("DIRECTOR [*leafing through his notebook*]: I can't find him anyplace"). Though he comes from the world outside, beyond the theatre, and does not belong to the dramatic space, he has a crucial influence on the form of the play. From the metatheatrical perspective, his arrival signals a doubling of the stage reality and a violation of the established order of the theatre and of life, causing the theatre personnel to lose control of how the events play out over the four acts. The Narrator says of the Wanderer: "As if in some deep fog. / The things that happen in the theater!" This suggests that the original script has been abandoned and that there is uncertainty as to how the action will play out. The appearance of the character of the Wanderer lends a different symbolic form to the plot outlined by the Poet. The prologue ends with the Poet speaking these words: "(suddenly inspired): Hold on! / I've just glimpsed one of his dreams: / That's the play we'll put on!" This announcement of the transposition of one of the Wanderer's dreams into a stage play places the subsequent scenes in an oneiric context, causing the blurring of the boundaries between what is real and what is fantastical. It not only describes the manner of representation of the world, but also invites philosophical reflection centred around the figure of the Wanderer.[17] He is a personification of the *homo viator* topos: "But I myself / have grown older but hardly wise [...] / Nowhere a stranger and nowhere at home." His monologue in the prologue introduces the fundamental question of the nature of human existence, the problem of the individual's immense struggles, and the constant longing for perfection and transcendence.[18]

This doubling of the means of representation also explains the syncretic conception of time and place defining the carnival spectacle that is the object of the play. Both the place and the time are realistic in character, but they are at once fantastical, precisely defined, and symbolic. From the stage directions we learn that the play is set on an old

[16] *Cf.* Eco 1984: 1–100.

[17] For more on the subject of the figure of the Wanderer in this drama and its evolution throughout the oeuvre of Peretz, see Shmeruk 1971: 7–11.

[18] Belis-Legis 1997: 19.

market square between sunset and an autumn dawn. The minute details of place, and even the inclusion of a map showing the relative positioning of the various buildings, suggests that the author was keen to concretize the space. It is designed to resemble a typical Jewish shtetl, with its characteristic landmarks and places (researchers have perceived in its layout a similarity to Zamość, the writer's native town).[19] At the same time, Peretz also lends this space a symbolic dimension and a valuative character, addressing the issue of the coexistence of the Jewish and Christian communities in the town. In Peretz's conception, the shtetl is clearly divided into two parts: the Christian and the Jewish, and they are united by the marketplace in the middle. As in the typical shtetl layout, his synagogue is situated opposite the church, and the cemetery at some distance from the town centre. This symmetrical division of the space, and the oppositions that become clear between the various buildings (e.g. the synagogue and the church; the tavern on the Christian side and the *kloys*, the Jewish prayer and study house; also of significance is the positioning of the town hall, as the seat of power and authority, on the Christian side) reflect the separateness and mutual isolation of the two communities, which arise out of their religious, political, and cultural differences. The Narrator, describing the appearance of the town, says:

> In that street on the left, you see the church. [...]
> Commanding the whole square [...]
> [The synagogue is] just a shul like any shul,
> Peering out through cracked old spectacles... [...]
> Stooped beneath a heavy roof,
> From which it glances at the church in fear:
> Look here,
> I hardly take up any room,
> I'm colorless, I make no sound,
> My steps go down into the ground –
> And you're so dazzlingly tall and bright!
> Why don't you let my windows have the light
> Your shadow takes from them
> And stop your poking in my soul…!

The attempt on the part of the Polish community to control the space and manifest its dominance, expressed in the majestic character and size of the church, are an indication that the division of the town is not an equal one. It reflects the relationship of dependence and domination that binds the two communities and in itself elicits the Jews' fear of restrictions or persecution from their non-Jewish neighbours. This is also the reason behind the layout of the town, which is organized according to a valuating classification; it is no coincidence that the space falls into right (the Jewish side) and left (the Christian side), which echoes the culturally entrenched symbolic model.

The eponymous "old marketplace" occupies a special status in the dramatic space; through Peretz's lens it is portrayed not only as a meeting-place and forum for contact and exchange, but above all as the setting for a carnival spectacle, a plane for the creation of a new community. The old marketplace is depicted as an unreal space, existing between two worlds, enveloped in a sinister, unsettling atmosphere of mystery and threat

[19] Mark 1958: LXII.

(the attributes evoking this state are the time at which the play is set – night – and the fog, which acts like a curtain). These feelings emanate above all from the ruins in the town; according to Jewish tradition, such places are inhabited by demons and dark forces (indeed, a similar motif is employed in Peretz's first epic poem, *Monish*). This thoroughly neo-romantic method of setting the scene is designed not only to evoke a sense of unease and alienness, but also to suggest a prophetic element: it invites the prediction that something incredible is about to happen on the marketplace. The carnival spectacle is initiated by the Jester, who moves the hands of the clock to midnight to summon the ghosts to come forth. In accordance with the rules of carnival, time "as if stops, to allow the revellers to appear to 'step outside of time,' to be 'beyond time,' but then to return to it without the consequence of the elapse of the 'halted' days and the loss of anything that might have happened in the interim."[20]

On the Jewish marketplace

Carnival creates an egalitarian space within which social relations are marked by familiarization. As Bakhtin wrote, "The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival. [...] All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*."[21] The carnival portrayed in Peretz's drama takes over the worlds of both the living and the dead, and thus its primary function is to do away with the division between the present-day residents of the town and the dybbuks and ghosts returning from *olam ha-tohu* (wandering souls that cannot find peace), the enlivened stone statues, and the dead, who rise from their graves.

The mass of characters representing various dimensions of reality produces a cross-sectional snapshot of the Jewish society of the shtetl (the living and the non-living) which shows its heterogeneity and complexity. Among the characters that come from the unearthly world and the town's current residents there are representatives of a range of cultural, social, and political strata and movements: Talmudists, Cabalists, Maskilim (proponents of the Haskalah, the idea of Jewish enlightenment), revolutionaries, Zionists, and assimilators. The image of the community also incorporates members of a range of professions and vocations, e.g. the Beadle, the Cantor, the Stocking Knitter, the Night Watchman, and the Hungry Worker. In addition to individual figures, there are also groups, such as Small Boys and Girls, and Shopkeepers. Most of the characters have episodic roles, or are even present only as voices:

A YOUNG VOICE FROM THE STUDY HOUSE:
…If she's a *mukas-ets*, the rabbis think…[22]
A HOARSE VOICE FROM THE TAVERN:
Drink, you bastard, drink!

[20] Dudzik 2005: 44.
[21] Bakhtin 1984: 122–123 [italics in original].
[22] A reference to the Talmudic term *mukas-ets*, which in Hebrew means 'injured by wood,' and is used to refer to a girl who has lost her hymen as a result of an accident (i.e. not through having had sexual intercourse).

A LOUD VOICE FROM THE BALCONY (*shouting across the marketplace to the public meeting*):

There's no two ways about it!

A SHOPKEEPER CALLING UP FROM BELOW:

You still don't have to shout it!

A SECOND SHOPKEEPER:

Cut out that racket overhead!

A HOUSEWIFE ON THE BALCONY:

It's you down there who'll wake the dead!

These brief exclamations and isolated utterances, which do not combine to form full dialogues but build an impression of chaos, lend the scenes (particularly those in the first act) their dynamism. Compiled to reflect the cacophony of the town, they suggest the fast pace, volatility, and ephemerality of "existence on the streets." The polyphony that they produce directs attention away from the portraits of the individual characters towards their words, which describe and diagnose the condition of the traditional shtetl, and from interpersonal relations on a broader plane. In this context the role played by the 'non-living' and their position in respect of the world of the living is a key issue. In his article on the subject of Wyspiański's influence on the dramatic oeuvre of this Yiddish writer, Victor Erlich emphasizes that the perspective on the meeting of the earthly and unearthly worlds in *Bay nakht…* is different than that adopted by the Polish Wyspiański in his *Wesele* (*The Wedding*).[23] In Peretz's work, the 'shades of the past' are not individual visions projected in direct encounters with various 'living' characters, but so many component elements of a fantastical collective scene. The connections between the earthly world and the other world are drawn by means of parallelisms between scenes, characters, and issues addressed in the successive acts. This reveals the role of the apparitions and the dead in exposing the inauthenticity of the emotions expressed by the 'living,' and the conventionality of the behaviours of characters, such as those in love.[24] They also lay bare the superficiality of values and the outward falsities in the functioning of the Jewish community. In their accusations, the dead bring to light the hypocrisies of the Jewish community's institutions. The Angry Poor Dead Folk emphasize the self-interest and egotism of the members of the Khevra Kadisha, the funeral fraternity, membership in which was considered a good deed (*mitzvah*) and proof of righteousness and worthiness:

ANGRY DEAD POOR FOLK

– You'd think they cheated us enough when we were living!

– Look at the shrouds that we've been given!

– They gave us smaller graves than they ought to!

– When our corpses were washed they scrimped on water!

[23] Erlich 1946: 86.

[24] The theme of the 'inauthenticity of the erotic sphere' is stressed by Chone Shmeruk in his book on this play. He reaches the conclusion that the 'living' conceal their true emotions behind conventions, but the 'dead' express them openly; Shmeruk 1971: 68–70.

DEAD WOMEN
– I wasn't given a bridal veil!
– Or a manicure for my fingernails!
– They don't treat you like that when you're famous!

Given the role of the dead as those who call the living to account, their return from the other world may be interpreted as a subversion of the official order, and thus it takes on the characteristics of carnival. The confrontation between the principles sanctioned by tradition and the actual actions of the people enacting them lays bare in ironic fashion the reasons why people fulfil their religious obligations: observation of laws and directions imposed by religious doctrine is merely a superficiality and no indication of true values or profound spiritual experience.

It is not only the boundary between the earthly and the unearthly worlds that is lifted in this play; the oppositions between the sacred and the profane, and between the refined and the ordinary, are also effaced. Carnival combines elements of weddings and funerals, merrymaking and death, laughter and despair. These carnivalesque ambivalences are exemplified in the scenes of the weddings of two couples: Noson the Drunk with his dead beloved Sheyndele, who comes to him in the person of the Bride (in Act Three), and the Fiancé and Fiancée from Act One, whose wedding guests are the Dead (in Act Four). The first nuptials end in the death of Noson the Drunk, and the second in the forced separation of the Fiancés. Nonetheless, the forging of a connection between wedding and funeral is not a complete aberration of Jewish tradition; there is a strong suggestion of the 'black wedding' (*shvartse khasene*) tradition, in which a wedding is celebrated in a cemetery to ward off or bring an end to an epidemic. The inauspicious end to both wedding ceremonies in the play calls into question the value and power of love, as depicted in such an ironic, grotesque form. Any genuine feelings are veiled by the lovers' delusions and their notions of love, which are limited to the model of romantic love (treated ironically by Peretz). The following snippet of conversation between Noson the Drunk and his dead beloved offers one such travesty of the motif of love lasting even beyond the death of one of the lovers:

NOSON THE DRUNK
Your breath is like frost.
(*He notices a hole in her cheek and recoils in fright.*)
What's that you've got in your cheek?

BRIDE
I thought you knew:
A little worm ate its way through.

The culmination of the 'familiarization' invited by the carnival comes in Act Four, with the scene of the dance of the living with the apparitions, the dead, and the animated statutes of the town hall. The portrayal of dance as a means to abandonment and transgression of all boundaries is a reference to the Hasidic religion, which is reinforced by the presence of Hasidim in the scene. Their words describe the nature of Hasidic dance:

FIRST HASID
Dancing is a mighty thing!
You don't have to think!
You don't have to know!
Just step out of your body and leave it below! [...]

SECOND HASID
Dancing is a mighty thing,
It has every advantage!
I ask no questions when I dance,
Because right off I'm in a trance…

Dance is depicted as ecstatic, mystical, a way of eliciting a sense of transcending one's own corporeality and spiritually 'clinging to' (*devekut*) the transcendental sphere. It is also a means of raising the dead and bringing them fully back to the world of the living. As the Jester reports enthusiastically: "They're dancing! They really are! / They feel! / Their dead faces almost look alive. / There is desire, even lust, in those dead eyes." Hasidism occupies a special place in Peretz's work; David G. Roskies wrote of it thus:

> Learning is but the outer shell and Hasidism is the soul; all of life is a song and dance before the Lord. The hasidic doctrine of emanation is here transformed into a romantic quest for harmony in nature, music, dance, and the life of the collective. The hasid's faith in the zaddik becomes for Peretz a Nietzschean search for a leader who can bear the world's suffering.[25]

In *Bay nakht…*, Peretz seems to be seeking a way towards such metaphysical oneness.

Who is the carnival king?

The dynamic of Peretz's carnival is regulated by the Jester, who in Jewish tradition is a joker with the task of entertaining wedding guests. In the play he is a complex character who stands out against the other voices; he has an individuality and a central yet distinct role in the plot, spanning and linking the successive acts. As Abraham Novershtern rightly remarks: "The Jester is the only one in the long list of *dramatis personae* who is capable of inner change or unexpected action."[26] It nevertheless seems that the different status of this character is due above all to the attribution to him of categories typical of modernism. The Jester's identity is defined primarily by the liminality determined on the one hand by his madness and sickliness,[27] which are construed as a medium for accessing realms not normally accessible to human cognition, and on the other by his suspension between life and death. In his first entrance he mentions that he has spent too much

[25] Roskies 1996: 118.
[26] Novershtern 1992: 73.
[27] *Cf.* Novershtern 1992: 74–76.

time in ruins with the demons and spectres that inhabit them. He has also witnessed (according to a local rumour) the death of a group of klezmorim, who as punishment for debauched feasting at a goy wedding were sucked down into the well on the marketplace. This branding with death casts the Jester as a link between the earthly and the unearthly worlds: it is he who calls up the ghosts of the past and commands the dead to rise from their graves. He also assumes a function similar to that of the characters from the other world – commenting on the words of the 'living,' laying bare their intentions or the utopian character of the visions they weave:

> YOUNG PEOPLE (*on their way to the meeting, they speak quickly, self-absorbed*):
> – What shall we discuss?
> – The Polish parliament!
> – No, Palestine!
> – A people, like a person, needs a home!
>
> JESTER (*still waving his handkerchief at the second story*):
> Or else a dream!

This singular orientation towards death, evident in the construction of the Jester's character may be explained, I believe, in terms of his melancholy experience of loss and his lack of contact with the concealed order. From this perspective, his assumption of the role of self-anointed carnival king, one who rebels against God, contravenes moral law and calls up demonic forces, paradoxically proves to be an attempt to activate a higher instance and regain a feeling of essence. The symbol of this mystery is the gargoyle, or monster, which plays the role of material demon of the mysterious goings-on. The monster is a product of the societal imagination, an element of folk tradition and the cultural *imaginarium*, a force that influences human life, and an instance of folk justice. The gargoyle is situated between the church and the synagogue, and as such suggests a form of folk religiosity oscillating on the boundary of dogmas and heresies, independent of official religious systems. In view of its presentation as androgynous, the gargoyle invites association with the figure of the sphinx, and as such is a centre of the 'enigmatic arcanum' concealing the mystery of Jewish existence.[28] It holds sway over ultimate meaning, which is beyond human cognitive potential and beyond the sphere of the expressible.

The character of the Jester is also a focal point for the modernistic issue of "looking for the word" – the degradation of the language, which is reduced to cliché or silence. In his reactions to the words of other characters, the Jester uses irony, which is founded on perception of the paradox of language, describing the incommensurability of word and thought, phenomenon and essence, and the inadequacy of the expression in respect of the thing.[29] To the Recluse he says: "What was it that I was about to say? / It was important, that's all I remember…" At the same time, the Jester is convinced of the agency of the word. In the neo-romantic poetics of symbolism, the word, as logos, functions in the form of 'genesic symbol,' a reference to the divine process of creation of the world

[28] *Cf.* Erlich 1946: 90.
[29] Nycz 2012: 47.

through the word.[30] As the carnival Creator, the Jester desires to use the word to reverse, or transform, the existing world order: "There has to be a word / For changing, for remaking everything…" It transpires, however, that the logos is hidden, and the Jester cannot access it. In the Jewish tradition the legend of the golem, also referenced in the play, aside from its associations with the act of the creation of the world also offers persuasive evidence of the agency of the word; the golem was called into being by means of the word '*emet*' (truth). It was a flawed creature – it did not have free will, nor could it speak – because it was created by a human and not by God. Peretz thus seems to suggest that all human conceptions are like the golem in nature: they are doomed to failure and impermanence; ideas disintegrate in confrontation with reality. Yet neither the divine logos nor humanity's future direction as planned by a superior entity are accessible to human cognitive abilities. Thus, the Jester cannot find the right creative word, for it is hulled in silence and mystery. Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, describing the 'genesic symbol,' draws attention to the inseparable bond between word and silence: "The creation of the world involved a presentation of the non-existence preceding the new existence. Creation by the word consistently emphasizes the silence surrounding that word."[31] In his analysis of Peretz's drama, Abraham Novershtern draws attention to the self-reflexive context of the Jester figure, contrasting the unoriginal art of the Jester as improvised at weddings with the poetry of the Poet and the Wanderer, which is original, modern, and individual in its expression. Irrespective of the quality of the literature created by these three characters, however, it would be accurate to say that common to all of them is the modernistic issue of inexpressibility, which ennobles the Jester as a contemporary artist, but one with his roots in Jewish folk literature.[32]

The meaning of the Jester character is connected not only with the philosophical and existential context, but also with its historical and social aspects. The carnival subversion of the world order lays bare the stagnation of Jewish society and the ossification of tradition. This perspective permits a different reading of the motivation behind the Jester's attempts to overturn the existing order and negate the rules organizing the life of the community. His aim is to prove that the laws hitherto in force are ceasing to correspond to modern reality. They are losing their validity in the face of the progressive civilizational, social, and political changes, causing them to become distorted and deformed. But as the carnival king the Jester is doomed to defeat and dethronement; the crazed dance of life that he initiates is interrupted by the morning star and the crowing of the cockerel. The Jester is lost because he has no clear vision for the future. This is confirmed by his words: "I'll be the leader of God's world! / I just hope I remember where to take it." The Jester has no idea what form the world should take once the binding norms and principles are overturned. He urges all the characters to reject their previous delusions, utopian projects, and plans for the future of the Jewish nation, but he has nothing to offer in exchange. His inability to formulate a positive solution, and his frantic, desperate searches for the right word cause him to adopt false idols and grasp at ideas formulated by others:

[30] Podraza-Kwiatkowska 2001: 158–159.
[31] *Ibid*.: 160.
[32] Novershtern 1992: 73.

HUNGRY WORKER (*jumping up*):
[...] Whatever
Won't let us be free
And makes a god
Of robbery!
It must be shattered
And ground to dust!

JESTER
It must?
Is that the word?
Dust?

If no new order can be established, then, the question remains as to what is at stake in the Jester's carnival. Why is it he who is at the centre of events in the drama? In Novershtern's opinion it is due to his connection with Jewish tradition and his role in the religious wedding rites.[33] In this context, Novershtern offers an explanation of the Jester's task as mediation between modernity, represented by the 'living' characters, and Jewish tradition, as embodied by the dead. Although the distinction he draws between the characters in the drama would seem to be too radical, since there are representatives of both traditional and progressive movements among the shtetl's residents current and past, the traditional provenance of the Jester character is indeed significant. This diagnosis leads me in a different direction than that taken by Novershtern, however. Of particular importance in the interpretation of the role of the 'carnival king' is the motivation behind his calling forth the apparitions. His words suggest his desire to call into question the experience of death, in both the universal dimension and in the specific context of the fading of the traditional world of the shtetl. This character's melancholy streak might thus be due to his awareness of the impending end of the old order, which is the only legitimization for the Jester's very existence.

The performative act of negating death, encapsulated in the Jester's words "From this day on death is no more!", suggests a utopian project to prolong the survival of the traditional world or – in the context of modernity – to salvage the vestiges of transcendence. This is why the drama *Bay nakht…* conveys, as Shmeruk wrote, a "vision of despair" and can offer no hope for the formulation of a positive project for history. Nonetheless, this portrait of the Jester as a defender of the transcendental order must not ignore the irony that is inherent in this character. Indeed, this would seem to me to offer the key to the interpretation of the play's ending, when the Jester's repeated call to the Jews to "go to shul!", suggesting his exhortation to follow the path of religion and tradition is drowned out by the sound of the factory whistle, which drives all the characters away. Thus, the problem of tradition and modernity remains unresolved. If we read the Jester's call as ironic, the finale of his carnival activity would be his conviction of the inevitability of the passing of the Jewish world.

[33] Novershtern 1992: 73.

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The carnival category positions Peretz's drama in the dialectic of beginning and end, and it suggests the violation of the existing normative order in order to expose the tension between the traditional world of the shtetl and the modernity that is impinging on it. This adds metaphysical and historiosophic dimensions to the carnival spectacle; it becomes an attempt to call into being a transcendental community that would go beyond religious doctrines. In a certain sense the carnival created by Peretz could be therapeutic in character, called into being with the intention of assimilating the universal experience of death and a course of history in which a bond with a higher order as sanctioned by tradition ceases to be obvious. As Peretz shows, this transcendental void must nonetheless be filled by a 'dream.' In other words, the essence of the human condition is to give meaning to reality. Paradoxically, only formulation of a new project and vision for the future, and belief in this new idea, can offer protection from a sense of total confusion, despair, and hopelessness.

Translated by Jessica Taylor-Kucia

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