

DAVID G. ROSKIES

The Last of the Purim Players: Itzik Manger

AFTER 1920, THERE WAS ONLY ONE PLACE left on earth where Yiddish storytelling could grow and prosper, and that place was Poland. The pace and political pressures of Jewish life in the Americas, the Soviet "Republics," and Palestine had turned folklore, fantasy, and the stylized folktale either into pablum for progressive children or into the lethal vestige of a petit-bourgeois and reactionary past. In Poland, with poverty so great, the pace of change so gradual, and the vestigial presence of the past so much a part of the living present, ethnography was just about the only thing the Jews were producing in abundance.

In Poland between the two world wars, as in Rumania and the Baltic countries, tradition and modernity could still compete on the open market. Here the folk did not have to be rarefied and reinvented because it was still alive and kicking. Here folklore became the vehicle of Jewish self-determination, the basis for the Jewish claim to normalcy and nationhood, to land and to landscape. Here, when the intellectuals went slumming, they discovered folklore at both ends of the spectrum: among the urban Jewish underworld and in the hundreds of decaying *shtetlekh* where corporate behavior was still governed by Jewish law and lore. While Jewish pimps, prostitutes, and pickpockets made the case for Jewish "normalcy," the surviving culture of the *shtetl* staked the Jewish claim to the "land."

The largest, liveliest, and lewdest collection of Yiddish folklore ever produced came out in Warsaw in 1923. Titled *Bay undz yidn*, it ought to have been followed either by a question mark or exclamation mark; i.e., How could such things ever be found "Among Us Jews?" With unintended irony, the book's publisher (and contributing author), Pinkhes

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Graubard, dedicated this huge collection of underworld songs, sayings, stories, and “philology” to the memory of S. Ansky, including two full-page portraits and a facsimile of Ansky’s last letter to him.¹ If the volume (six years in production) had appeared in Ansky’s lifetime, he would have been appalled to see his Oral Torah dragged through the mud. Could anyone still believe that Jews had cornered the market on monotheism and morality after reading through so many trickster tales and convicts’ songs? Back in 1908, Ignaz Bernstein had shown restraint and good sense by publishing his Yiddish sayings, *Erotica und Rustica*, in a limited edition.² Now the dirty words were printed for all to see.

More shocking, perhaps, than the underworld materials (where one would expect some “loose talk”) was Shmuel Lehman’s pioneering collection of children’s folklore in the same volume: amoral at best, sacrilegious at worst. The parodic rhymes and games of Jewish children (including a rhyme to identify who in the group had just farted) showed how normative and idealized, by contrast, was Sholem Aleichem’s vision of the children’s world. If anything, children enjoyed mixing the sacred and profane, Slavic, Hebrew, and Yiddish even more than did the Hasidim whom Ansky had so recently celebrated. In folklore, parody reigned supreme, and those with the least to lose in Jewish society had the most to gain from spoofing all its sancta.

What thieves and children were to the pious portrait of shtetl society, the Jews of Poland were to the self-image of the newly minted Polish state: a blight and embarrassment. And so the point of *Bay undz yidn* was not to turn the Jews into a nation of parodists but to make a virtue of necessity. There were sound political reasons for the renewed interest in Jewish folklore. The more Jews were excluded from the warp and woof of Polish life, the more important became the claim to Jewish self-sufficiency. Behold the richness of Yiddish culture across the social spectrum! Bawdy, earthy, and irreverent, it was a folklore worthy of the Slavic soil. The discovery of aboveground and especially underground Jewish folk traditions in Poland was closely aligned to *landkentenish*, the study of national customs through hiking and tourism.

The Polish Society for Land Study excluded or severely limited its Jewish membership and granted no status to Jewish historical landmarks. Jewish intellectuals saw their exclusion from the historical landscape as both an attempt to delegitimize the Jews as a people and to exclude them from the enjoyment of nature, and this last was a piece of unfinished business from Enlightenment days. “It is a fact,” began the inaugural issue of *Land un lebn* in December 1927, “that we Jews, especially from Warsaw and also from the other larger cities in Poland, are mostly far removed from nature. There will be many among us who have never in

their lives seen a sunrise or sunset; or ever seen the sea or mountains; who cannot distinguish between the simplest species of trees; who have no idea what stalks of corn or wheat look like, . . . who possess no sentiment whatsoever for nature and her wondrous creations." Emanuel Ringelblum took up the maskilic litany in a more sociological vein: "The centuries of urban life, the remoteness from nature, the living within narrow, stifling ghetto walls have caused the Jew to feel distant and estranged from the beauty and glory of nature." The return to nature was part and parcel of the Jewish call for "productivization."³

There was no felt contradiction between breaking out of the "ghetto" to enjoy nature's bounty and returning to the culture of the "ghetto" so as to commune with the folk. Following through on this double-barreled program, the Jewish Society for Knowledge of the Land in Poland established its own camps and resorts, sponsored lectures, published Yiddish travel guides, worked to train a cadre of amateur ethnographers, and argued for the power of folklore as a unifying force in an age of fragmentation. Since religion was no longer binding, novelist Mikhl Burshtin, a spokesman for the movement, urged his fellow urbanites to tour the Jewish countryside, bringing secular Yiddish culture to the folk and assuring that the folk culture would become theirs.⁴

The Know-Your-Land-and-Return-to-Nature movement contributed a profound sense of place to the stories told by Polish Yiddish writers. Moyshe Kulbak, to cite an obvious example, turned White Russia into the semilegendary meeting ground of Slavic paganism, popular Christianity, Jewish muscle, and Jewish messianic dreams. He did it in a long narrative poem about Jewish rafters on the Nieman River (1922); in an ode to Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania (1926); and most importantly for our purposes, in a stylized folk narrative about a legless bird dealer called Munie (1928).⁵ "Surely songs about Munie were sung in the swamps and in all the remote woods of Byelorussia!" rhapsodized the storyteller (342). And a strange song it is, seeing as Munie at story's end becomes a caged bird himself, choosing a life of utter passivity that culminates in the dissolution of consciousness.

What better way for this revolutionary cadre of East European Jewish writers to radically decenter the universe than to invent a newly grounded landscape? Yes, Kulbak's ode to Vilna began with an allusion to Isa. 62:6 ("Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen"), but it ended with the poet celebrating the more modern sights and sounds of redemption: "The red tunic of the steely bundist. / The blue student who listens to gray Bergelson— / Yiddish is the homely crown of the oak leaf / Over the gates, sacred and profane, into the city." By the same token, Zalmen Szyk's *One Thousand Years of Vilna*, an exemplary Yiddish guidebook, recommended that a tourist with only one day to spend in the city begin at Ostra Brama Street and its famous Catholic shrine and end at

the Ansky Museum. The Jewish quarter, with its renowned synagogue and study houses, was sandwiched into fifth place. Not until after the Holocaust would former rebels like Vilna-born Chaim Grade reclaim the synagogue courtyard for Yiddish literature.⁶

Pour épaté les orthodoxes, Yiddish writers had merely to take a place already hallowed by tradition and turn it to secular ends. For unlike, let us say, American Romantic writer Washington Irving, who had to invent a legendary link to such uncharted regions as the Catskill Mountains, Yiddish writers had a surfeit of local legends from which to choose.⁷ That is how the Carpathian Mountains, birthplace of Hasidism, reappeared on the literary map. And that is why places like Jassy, Rumania, birthplace of the Yiddish theater, figured so prominently on the same tour. As Yiddish storytellers and songsters took up the struggle for Jewish autonomy in the postwar landscape of Europe, they dusted off old myths of origin and found new ones so as to situate their stories and songs in a place at once real and ideal. This was not a literature of exile. It was a literature of homecoming.

There was probably no Yiddish poet with a keener sense of adoptive place than Itzik Manger, and certainly none who had more fun inventing a personal myth of origins. What was wrong with being born Isidore Helfer, in Czernowitz, 1901? Having served as the site for the Czernowitz Language Conference of 1908, the city was to Yiddishism what Basel was to Zionism. In Czernowitz, after stormy debate, Yiddish was finally proclaimed “a national Jewish language.”⁸ Manger remembered all too well that for the Jews (as for the entire bourgeoisie) of Czernowitz, *real* culture was German high culture, and therefore he probably dismissed the Yiddishist claim to the city as so much hype. Besides, German was *his* first love, too, despite being thrown out of the Kaiser-Königlicher Dritter Staats-Gymnasium for behavior problems in his second year. Czernowitz was too ambiguous a birthplace for someone who wanted to be both a modern, secular poet and salt of the earth. So Manger invented a biography for himself (almost) out of whole cloth.⁹

“Born in Berlin as the son of a tailor,” we read in Zalmen Reyzen’s *Leksikon of Yiddish Literature, Press, and Philology* (1927), “an immigrant from Rumania. Came to Jassy at age fourteen where he learned Yiddish and until very recently, worked at his [tailor’s] trade.” Not bad to be both the prodigal son adopting the language of his people, like some Moses-figure, and the card-carrying member (“until very recently”) of the Jewish laboring masses! Berlin was the poet’s shorthand for his profound debt to modern German culture, and especially to Rilke, whom he singled out for special mention in his brief biographical sketch. Manger might also have mentioned that German was the source of all his worldly knowledge,

mostly procured on his own. In his notebooks for 1918–19, he jotted down the titles of seventy-five books he had read in German—from Kant, Kleist, Mann, and Hesse, to Gogol, Turgenyev, Dostoevsky, and Gorky.¹⁰

Luckily for young Isidore, however, the outbreak of world war forced him and his family to move to Jassy. (That much, at least, was true!) Otherwise he might never have known his ancestral Eastern Galician (later Rumanian) landscape and, what's worse, might never have found himself as a Yiddish troubadour. Jassy was a godsend for a young romantic poet in search of inspiration. Here, in "the old city with secluded crooked streets," one could hear a young maiden singing Yiddish love songs from her window, and one could still commune with the spirit of those "nocturnal vagabonds," "hungry, pale, and joyous," who raised their cups and voices in song. Most famous among the latter was Velvl Zbarzher, easily recognized "By his lively large eyes, / By his dusty, dark green cape, / His head rakishly bent to one side." This inspiring figure was "Drunk from the stars, wine, night, and wind."¹¹ Where the "song and sorrow" of troubadours once blossomed, where their living memory still glimmered from every window, lulling the passer-by with longing, here was a place that a budding Yiddish poet could call his own.

Manger spent his real adolescence not as a German-born refugee learning Yiddish while he slaved away all day at the sewing machine, but as a self-conscious poet-apprentice looking to place himself within Yiddish precedent. Besides the old love songs and maskilic parodies, there was a new Yiddish lyric aborning across the Atlantic, and Manger was its avid disciple.¹² The family apparently gave Yiddish poetry pride of place as well. Breaking with tradition, Manger's younger brother Note (pronounced noh-teh) took over the trade instead of him, while the master tailor and amateur rhymster Hillel Manger punned the foreign-sounding *literatur* with the hallowed "Torah" to coin the felicitous term *literatoyre*. No wonder that Manger included his ode to Jassy under the chapter heading of "My Poem—My Portrait—My Home." Though he possessed but one handwritten copy of his poems, never issued by the fictitious Yiddish-Is-Ownerless Publishing House, Manger could boast what no other Yiddish poet before him could: a dotting, loving audience in his own home. For the rest of his adult life Manger would try to find surrogate homes for his poetry as intimate as the one he had known in Jassy.¹³

Confident that his poetic apprenticeship was over, nineteen-year-old Yitskhok headed back to Czernowitz on his own soon after the war was over. He wanted a big-city venue for his lyric verse, one volume of which he called *Kveytn* (*Blossoms*, 1919–20), and the other, *Harbstike oygn* (*Autumnal Eyes*, 1918–25).¹⁴ The local Labor Zionist paper *Di frayhayt*

(Freedom) accepted a few poems for publication, and the young Manger was invited to speak at the fourth anniversary of Sholem Aleichem's death. He spoke so quietly, however, about *Topele Tuturitu* and Sholem Aleichem's other child-heroes, that no one could hear a word he said.¹⁵ Neither volume of his juvenilia was published and anniversary lectures paid no honoraria, yet Manger was insulted when an older *littérateur* offered to find him a job clerking in a store.¹⁶ Yiddish literature was all that Manger lived for and all that he wished to live from. Even being drafted into the Eighth Fusilier Regiment of the newly established Rumanian army did not cramp his style. For one thing, he was stationed in Czernowitz. For another, he gave German lessons to the captain of his regiment. And for still another, there were pretty young things from orthodox homes who loved nothing better than a Yiddish poet in uniform.¹⁷

Manger was on his way toward resurrecting the song, the sweet sorrow, and the bohemian life-style of the hard-drinking Yiddish troubadours of old Galician glory. But he was by no means the only show in town. The Yiddish secular establishment, and especially its pedagogic wing, the Czernowitz Union of Yiddish Schools, was dominated by Eliezer Steinberg, the most exacting stylist and premier fable-writer in the history of Yiddish letters. Steinberg bears out the paradox noted by Ruth Wisse, that "the neo-folk poets are the most refined of all modern Yiddish craftsmen."¹⁸

Manger could not have found a better model. For Steinberg demonstrated, first of all, that if highbrow culture obeyed the strict conventions of oral poetry, it could transcend the limitations of print. Even while Steinberg delayed publication of his fables for decades, waiting until they were letter-perfect, they circulated throughout Rumania by word of mouth. A fair number of his children's lyrics were also set to music.¹⁹ When a high-level delegation of Yiddish cultural activists was invited to Czernowitz in 1928 by the Union of Yiddish Schools to mark the anniversary of the famous conference, Steinberg found a wider audience still. The hit of the program was a *vorkontsert*, a dramatic recitation, by the young actor Hertz Grosbard, whose imitation of animal-talk brought Steinberg's fables alive, and whose training on the German dramatic stage did the same for Manger's ballads. Fables and ballads were henceforth to become an integral part of the modern Yiddish repertoire.²⁰

Steinberg's example, furthermore, taught Manger the staying power of a single genre. Whether Manger's choice of the ballad was inspired by reading such German authors as Goethe, Schiller, or Hugo von Hofmannsthal, or by his reading of Mani Leyb, Zishe Landau, or Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, is still an open question. But it was certainly Steinberg, a name synonymous with the fable, who showed his Rumanian *landsmann*

how an utterly passé form of didactic verse might be turned into a modern classic.

Late in 1928, when Yitskhok Manger made his first and fateful trip to Warsaw, the twenty-seven-year-old poet knew exactly where he was coming from, where he was heading, and what he uniquely had to offer. On the one hand, he compared himself to Tantalus, son of Zeus, punished in the lower world to suffer eternal hunger and thirst. Manger-Tantalus, coming as he did from the provincial backwater of Rumania, could only dream of ever drinking from the Yiddish waters that flowed from across the Soviet border or to ever eat of the fruit that grew on the Polish-Jewish vine.²¹ Warsaw, then, was the longed-for cosmopolitan haven. On the other hand, in interviews and lectures he gave upon arrival, he spoke authoritatively about Yiddish poetry in Rumania (and his own central role therein), about the folksong traditions of Rumanians, Gypsies, and Spaniards, about the fundamental link between folklore and modern lyric poetry, and above all, about the ballad. To critic and *landsman* Shloyme Bickel he pronounced: "My major work will yet be my ballads in the folk-vein (*di folkstimlekhe baladn*), which will encompass the balladistic accents [in Jewish culture] beginning with the Bible until the present day. It will be an attempt to create the second Yiddish folk-epic after Peretz's *Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn*."²² Warsaw may have been Paris, but Rumania was the font of the modern Yiddish "fable, grotesque, and ballad," the home of Goldfaden and Zbarzher, and possibly the site of Peretz's reincarnation.²³

If the ballad was indeed Manger's conduit "back to the Bible" as early as Shloyme Bickel claims it was, the paper trail that Manger left behind shows something else entirely. The ballad, for Manger, was a window to the world, and to the mystical source of all great poetry; the vision of blood and the vision of death; Goethe's "Erlkönig" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven."²⁴ There was also a world of difference between choosing the fable—a time-honored and didactic form of Jewish self-expression—and the ballad, the least developed and least *Jewish* of Yiddish folk genres. Though clearly rooted in oral traditions, the ballad spoke to Manger because it was universal—and closely tied to nature. In the lyrical ballads that Yitskhok Manger wrote during his poetic apprenticeship, landscape was all, and the more suggestively vague, the better: "The Wondrous Ballad of the Old Fisher Woman Who Went Off in Search of Her Dead on a Dark Autumn's Night," "The Ballad of the Ways," "The Ballad of the Smiles," "The Ballad of the Night-Figure with the Blue Lantern," "The Ballad of the Hussar and the Night-Figure," "The Ballad of the Wanderer with the Silver Star," and "The Ballad of the Night." He did well not to publish them.²⁵

Had Manger used the ballad merely as a vehicle for *geshpentster*, gothic, midnight settings, the project would have been stillborn. Instead, he discovered a form of the lyric that was mediated through dialogue, character, symbolic landscape, strict rhythms and rhymes, refrains, and a diction close to that of the folk song. These he fully exploited in the fifteen formal ballads about love and death that he included in his first published volume of verse, *Shtern oyfn dakh* (*Stars on the Roof*, 1929). Manger was no less the *modern* balladeer, free to take the concrete situation and turn it into a symbolic vision, or treat intangibles, like color and sound, as if they were concrete. A dialogue between a Jewish mother and her mournful daughter, a meeting between a verminous man and Jesus on the cross became symbolic tableaux of a new poetic order. Manger enlisted the compressed and conventional format of the ballad to combine the lyric sensibility of a German poet, the ethical sensibility of a modern secular Jew, and the dramatic sensibility of a born storyteller.

The typical ballad tells of tragic loss and unrequited love. Manger's are no exception: "The Ballad of the Bridal Veil," "The Ballad of the Three White Doves," "The Ballad of the Red Ring" and the exquisite "The Ballad of the White Glow" all elaborate the same theme of a maiden whose longing for a mate ends in death or loss of home, or both. To this well-worn plot the modern balladeer adds a color symbolism that plays white (purity, virginity, death) against red (love, passion, life) and renders the outer world as a state of inner consciousness.²⁶

<p>גענוג געיאַמערט, טעכטערל, און אויסגעוויינט דעם פּיין? — זע מאַמע, אויפֿן פֿאָן פֿון נאַכט אַ ווייסן קילן שיין."</p>	<p>"You've grieved enough, my daughter dear, You've mourned enough, your woe." "Mother, see, in the depth of night— A cool white glow."</p>
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The three-stress lines (in the Yiddish) and traditional *a-b-c-b* rhyme scheme obscure the fact that mother and daughter are engaged in a dialogue over the meaning of light. For them, however, it is no abstraction. Try as the mother may to conjure it away with the standard incantation "May it always wander the empty fields / And come here nevermore," the daughter has already internalized the light: "Because my heart, in that cool glow, / Is throbbing with desire." Seduced by that intangible white light, the daughter follows her destiny:

<p>זי כאַפט אויף זיך דאָס שאַלעכל, דאָס שאַלעכל איז רויט. און רויטער נאָך איר אייגן בלוט און ווייס דער שיין פֿון טויט.</p> <p>די מאַמע שטייט ביים פֿענצטערל און קוקט און קוקט זיך איין, און זעט דעם מיידל־סילוועט פֿאַרגיין אין ווייסן שיין.</p>	<p>Quickly, quickly, she takes up Her little crimson shawl. Her own red blood is brighter red— The look of death is pale.</p> <p>Long, long at the windowpane, Her mother sees her go, Until the virgin silhouette Fades in the pallid glow.</p>
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The daughter has turned into a dark and ominous projection of that same light. Later, Manger will add the colors gray, and especially, blue to his palette.

While retaining the ballad's three-part structure and the arrangement of characters in groups of three (mother-daughter-and-the-white-glow), Manger also restored to the Yiddish ballad something it never had: a character-specific dialogue differentiated by gender and age (compare the folksy diction of the mother with the "poetic" diction of her daughter); a landscape at once geographically specific and symbolically charged; and a musical quality both familiar and new. The ballad was a natural for someone like Manger, who composed his poetry out loud, not on paper, and memorized all his own verse.²⁷

The ballad was also a programmatic choice for a Yiddish writer of the postwar generation who viewed folklore as a ticket to the League of Nations. By championing the ballad, Manger threw his weight behind the radical secularists who were trying to sever the umbilical cord that tied Yiddish culture to the synagogue and cast the newborn out of doors, at the Slavic crossroads instead. In eastern Europe, every such crossroad was marked by a crucified Jesus or a shrine to the Virgin Mary. The opening manifesto of Manger's fly-by-night journal *Getseylte verter* (*Measured Words*, 1929–33) painted an apocalyptic landscape in which "the disheveled head of Hamlet hovers through our sleepless nights. The suffering of our generation left bloodstains and scattered crosses over all the byways of the world. The head of Christ weeps symbolically in our dream. . . . The hand of Saint Francis of Assisi lies upon our heart. . . . The golden figure of the Baal Shem Tov stands out clearly against the horizon." In a later issue, Manger castigated the Yiddish classicists for never once noticing "the crucifix that stands in the very middle of the road, and the figure that hangs on said crucifix." By retrieving the Man on the Cross, the modern Yiddish balladeer could add a universal dimension to the theme of tragic suffering and cast an ecumenical net wider than even the fairy-tale marriage of a Jewish male and a gentile princess.²⁸

Modern yet accessible ballads; an emaciated, "poetic" figure offset by a ubiquitous hat perched at the back of a bushy head of hair; an effortless and melodious delivery (no problem hearing him now!); progressive politics—all this and more won Manger the hearts of the Warsaw Yiddish audience. Manger-Tantalus had beaten the odds. To remove the last barrier, Manger changed his name from the formal "Yitskhok" to the folksy "Itzik." Here indeed was a poet for the people, of the people.

Manger's self-transformation into a folk bard was not yet complete. For all that Czernowitz provided an address for the modern Yiddish fable and ballad, and for all that Jassy provided a convenient pseudo-

traditional setting for his verse, there was still something missing. Manger's ballad revival, as we've just seen, was more a statement of aesthetic, than of Jewish ethnic, purpose. His interest in the ballad was sparked by reading modern European poetry, not by direct contact with the "folk." The opposite, in fact, is true: Manger came home to the folk only *after* successfully reinventing himself as a born-again troubadour. It was in Bucharest, no later than 1929, that Manger found his personal link to a living past.

Late one night he was sitting in a tavern with child psychologist Dr. Israel Rubin, then visiting from Berlin.²⁹

Long past midnight an old man in his seventies dropped in. He was really soused. It was the last of the Brody Singers, Old Man Ludvig.

We invited him over to our table. He poured himself a large glass of wine, recited some kind of Yiddishized Kiddush, and then began to sing from his Brody repertoire.

When he finished singing Velvl Zbarzher's song, "The Tombstone Engraver," he improvised a stanza of his own:

Here lie Avrom Goldfaden and Velvele Zbarzher, our brothers dear,
Who, to so many brought cheer
With their songs so sweet.
Today they lie without any heat
Though once their heads, so refined, could do any feat.
And my end will be the same as theirs.

Suddenly, I saw the light: This is it! The figures of the Brody Singers lighted up in my imagination. All the wedding jesters and Purim players who had entertained generations of Jews suddenly came alive. I will become one of them, one of "our brothers dear." What they created and sang was possibly quite primitive, not exalted poetry by any means, but they themselves were poetry.

I recalled the beautiful folk songs that I had heard in my father's workshop. What an orgy of color and sound! A legacy that lay abandoned, gold that lay strewn about at our feet.

And I took in their sound and their sight.

Reliving this epiphany in front of an American Yiddish audience, Manger added the following comparison: "In every shtetl there was one *rov* for every hundred Purim players. Here in America every city has a hundred rabbis and not even one Purim player."

There was never a modern Yiddish writer who came to storytelling and songwriting without a struggle. Manger's is the only honest record of how it happened. At the end of his career, at his sixtieth birthday celebration, he might have claimed always to have cherished the folk songs he heard in his father's workshop, and who would be the wiser? Especially after the Holocaust, it would be comforting to believe that one Jewish survivor, at least, had sprung directly from the folk. Instead,

Manger wanted us to know that even a Yiddish poet predisposed to the ballad, someone who had actually come of age in a town where Goldfaden and Zbarzher were still a living memory, would scarcely look for inspiration to mere rhymsters, wedding jesters, and Brody Singers. A poet was someone who kept company with Goethe, Rilke, and Edgar Allan Poe.

So what exactly was it about Old Man Ludvig's drunken doggerel that so inspired Manger? That here was a usable, if somewhat disreputable, past on his own doorstep? That he made Kiddush in Yiddish? Or was it that Ludvig was the last of the Brody Singers, in which case whoever came after him would be free to recloak—and betray—that legacy in his own image? No other modern Yiddish storyteller had the good fortune to grow up with a father who delighted in his son's Yiddish writings. Not Ansky, not Peretz, not Sholem Aleichem, not Der Nister, and most certainly not Isaac Bashevis Singer. Yet only upon meeting this relic of Yiddish literary lore did Manger really "come home." Like every other first-generation Jewish rebel, he had never considered the old songs as anything more than a quaint or romantic subject. Suddenly, what lay outside, an abandoned and ruined legacy, could become part of what lay inside. Why, his own father's workshop had been an orgy of color and sound, and he, the poet-apprentice, had never even known it! Rather than imagining the spectral figure of Velvl Zbarzher hovering over the streets of Jassy, or rather than inventing an elaborate public relations scheme to "sell" Rumanian-Yiddish literature on the Warsaw market, he could turn his own family into the source of the myth. Forget about being born in Berlin. Now Manger could eat his kugel and have it: Both his poetry and parody, he could henceforth claim, grew directly from native soil. The Brody Singers were dead. Long live the Brody Singers!³⁰

Perhaps it was after meeting Old Man Ludvig that twenty-eight-year-old Manger resolved to someday "create the second Yiddish folk epic after Peretz's *Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn*." To become a Yiddish *klasiker* required that one master the master texts, living and dead. It required a restorative program that would bring the people together by bringing the disparate strands of the culture together. It required that Manger drop his bad-boy image, his persona as a lonely drunk, and become a sober, almost scholastic, Purim player instead. And Manger succeeded, despite the Great Depression, the rise of Stalin and Hitler, and despite the ultimate Destruction, to produce a modern Yiddish classic based, like the *Purimshpil* itself, on the Bible.

Much had happened since Peretz first challenged Yiddish writers to return to the Bible (in 1910). For one thing, there was now a bona fide modern Yiddish translation of the entire Hebrew Bible, the life's work of

an American Yiddish poet who went by the biblical pen name of Yehoash.³¹ For another, Yiddish literary historians since the mid-twenties had been busy discovering a Yiddish Renaissance, complete with free-wheeling biblical epics, bawdy Purim plays, and true romances. What Isaac Schipper, Max Erik, Max Weinreich, and Nokhem Shtif had found, or thought they had found, was a lost secular heritage presumably written and performed by *shpilmener*, wandering Yiddish minstrels. This last was a godsend for someone like Manger, who already claimed Velvl Zbarzher, the Brody Singers, and Avrom Goldfaden as next of kin. Now, as biblical folk bard, Manger could trace his roots back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³²

The 1930s were not, however, an auspicious time for Manger's rescue operation. Retrieving the Bible for secular Yiddish ends in the midst of the Great Depression and the Great Repressions of Stalin and Hitler was viewed as heresy by the right and by the left. Upon the publication of Manger's first *Khumesh-lider* (*Bible Poems*) in the Polish-Yiddish press, Horav Arn Kotler, the head of the Kletsker Yeshiva, issued an "Open Letter" (never mentioning Manger by name) in the Vilna-based organ of the Agudas Yisroel Party. What roused Horav Kotler from his silent disdain for the *hefkeyres*, the wantonness routinely preached by Yiddish writers, is that Manger had enlisted the hallowed patriarchs, the foundation of all that was sublime and sacred, for his nefarious ends. "Sacrilege!" screamed the talmudic sage. So much for Manger's reputation in Vilna.³³

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Polish-Soviet border, Manger was so *treyf* that all mention of him was forbidden. The very idea of transplanting the matriarchs and patriarchs into a turn-of-the-century Galician shtetl was anathema to the architects of a deracinated and de-Hebraicized Yiddish culture. If anything, the Bible belonged to the Zionists, but in the spirit of fin-de-siècle Orientalism and Else Lasker-Schüler's *Hebrew Ballads* (1913), they preferred to reimagine the Bible along Bedouin lines, and in pure, Sephardic Hebrew. A biblical melodrama, *Jacob and Rachel*, performed in Warsaw by the Ohel Theater from Palestine was presumably the foil for Manger's counter-midrash. That left only the Bund, the party for which Manger evinced the greatest sympathy insofar as it alone gave pride of place to Yiddish. This vanguard of Yiddish proletarian culture would perhaps accept the Bible—if properly packaged as folklore and parody.

To disarm potential critics, Manger claimed to be acting out of filial loyalty. "Against the backdrop of this [Eastern Galician] landscape," he wrote in the preface to the *Khumesh-lider*,

my father, as a wandering tailor's apprentice, composed his Purim plays and performed them along with his buddies.

The roguish cap of the Jewish Purim player always hovered before my eyes as I wrote this book.

And the lyric-pious silhouette of my mother bent over her Yiddish Bible.³⁴

What was revolutionary could now pass as normative, as almost genetic in origin. No matter that Manger's interest in reviving Yiddish folk theater owed more to Hugo von Hofmannsthal than to his father, the tailor's apprentice, or that Manger's technique of zany juxtapositions borrowed from German Expressionism as much as it did from the *Purim-shpil*. No matter that on his way through Eastern Galicia Manger stopped over in Bucharest where Old Man Ludvig—no friend of the family—held forth in a somewhat less laudable forum. The impetus for internal renewal always came from the culture at large, and the born-again bard always covered his tracks.

Purim was Manger's cloak and master metaphor for putting Jewish parody, drama, and the Bible back on the map. In "Folklore and Literature," his manifesto published in April 1939, Manger argued that the main sources for an authentic Jewish myth were the Bible, as mediated through Jewish folklore, and drama, as mediated through the ballad. Yiddish literature could only bring solace in these tragic times if it was rooted in folklore. And there were two different strands of the folk tradition from which to choose: the lyrical strand of Peretz and the Jewish neoromantics that drew in turn upon religious and hasidic sources, and the grotesque-realistic strand that Sholem Aleichem had brought to perfection.³⁵ Manger was arguing for an art of creative retexturing, recloaking, and not of betrayal. He wanted the lyric interwoven with the grotesque, his mother with his father, Peretz with Sholem Aleichem. Manger had in fact already sewn the garment himself, and when finished, would call it *Medresh Itzik*.

Itzik's Midrash drew more than formal inspiration from Peretz and from his chief disciple, S. Ansky. Peretz's betrayal of religious and hasidic folklore in the name of secular humanism had reintroduced an ethical dimension into modern Yiddish writing. Manger took these ethical concerns one step further. Manger's midrash, as Ruth Wisse has written, used the mock-biblical epic to suggest "that the present, however puny, is an ethical improvement over the past."³⁶ Shifting the source of Jewish morality from above to below was a stunning reversal of traditional perspective dating back to Ansky's path-breaking essay of 1908. For Ansky, biblical monotheism was still tainted with violence and tribalism, as compared to the principle of *spiritual* struggle characteristic of Jewish folk creation. Manger's Bible folk were the people of the Humanistic Book.³⁷

There was no room in that book for the grand scheme of creation, revelation, and especially, redemption. Moses the Law Giver was

nowhere to be seen. There was neither Exodus nor Sinai. No messianic figures either, not even the Prophet Elijah. Matriarchs, patriarchs, kings, and courtiers were laughable figures, so full of self-importance, while Manger's midrash turned their shtetl offspring into an ethnic and ethical aristocracy. Raiding the Bible for its domestic dramas, Manger took the side of the underdog, or otherwise decentered the hallowed source. Thus Abraham gave a tongue lashing to Lot for his drinking habit but in the end it was the status-conscious patriarch who gave himself away. "Hagar's Last Night in Abraham's House" gave poignant voice to the jilted lover who now had to take her bastard son and go work "in some alien kitchen." It was this implicit mockery of the biblical pantheon that made the orthodox establishment cry sacrilege.

The connection to Sholem Aleichem was equally profound. Sholem Aleichem taught Manger how to distill the raw materials of a living folk into a disciplined art form; how to harmonize with and root his own work in the impersonal and highly conventional folk tradition; how to find the magic in the mundane; and how to give voice to the folk and not merely sing its praises from afar.

The voices that are heard in *Medresh Itzik* are not only the silenced voices of Esau and Hagar; of Mother Sarah who is still childless at age ninety; and of Leah crying her eyes out over a *shundroman*, a potboiler in Yiddish. They are also the voices of Goldfaden; of E. T. A. Hoffmann, who could describe a tear talking to a shadow on the floor; and above all, the voice of the Golden Peacock, the personification of the Yiddish folk song. *Medresh Itzik* bears eloquent testimony to the poetic and emotional range that can be found in Yiddish lullabies and love songs, not to speak of proverbs and maxims (like "az got vil, shist a bezem oykh, If God wills it, even a broom can shoot") and folk similes (like "shiker vi Lot, as drunk as Lot"). In the best of the biblical folk-poems, voices are harmonized within other voices: A stanza from a love song ("How like the smoke of a chimney, / How like the smoke of a train / Is the love of a man, dear mother, / The love of any man") becomes part of Hagar's indirect monologue, as she tries to justify Abraham's cruelty, which in turn is controlled by the seemingly impersonal voice of the poet.

That voice is Manger's great achievement. It is quite unlike the voice of Peretz's folk narrators, so bookish and ironic, and equally distinct from Sholem Aleichem's surrogate storytellers, recorded "live." Manger's folk voice rarely deviates from the four-beat, three-beat rhythm and the *a-b-c-b* rhyme, never goes on for more than eleven stanzas, in the course of which a whole three-act drama plays itself out.

Like the fields where Rachel goes to fetch water, fields that smell of twilight and hay (*fun demerung un hey*), the poems in *Medresh Itzik* are a seamless web of poetic yearning and everyday life. The disparate pieces fit together so well that they seem to match some timeless pattern. With

the help of Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, whose master designs Manger had long since made his own, the poet-storyteller achieved a perfectly modulated voice. What remained for him to master was the Yiddish landscape.

די גראַע מאָרגן־דעמערונג דעמערט איבער דער ערד, דער אַלטער געטרייער אליעזר שפּאַנט אין וואָגן די קאַרע פֿערד.	The gray light of the dawning Touches the earth with dawn. Eliezer, the loyal servant, puts The black team's harness on.
אַברָהם טראָגט אויף זײַנע הענט זײַן בן־זקונים אַרויס, אַ פֿרומער בלאַער שטערן בליצט איבער דעם אַלטן הויז.	Taking the child in his arms, Old Abraham shuts the door. Over his ancient roof, there gleams A blue and pious star.
״הײַדאָ אליעזר!״ — דאָס בײַטשל קנאַלט און אָט זילבערט זיך דער שליאַך. (טרויעריק און שײַן, זאָגט דער פּאַעט, זענען די וועגן פֿון תּנ״ך.)	“Up, Eliezer”—the whip rings out, The road has a silvery look. “Sad and lovely,” the poet says “Are the roads of the Holy Book.”
די גראַע ווערבעס פּאַזע וועג אַנטלײפֿן אויף צוריק אַ קוק טאָן, צי די מאַמע וויינט איבער דער פּוסטער וויג.	The graying willows on the way Run to the house again To see if his mother weeps beside The cradle of her son. ³⁸

The only real landscape, for Manger, is a poetic landscape. *Demerung*, a German loan word that Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Expressionists used to conjure up the Apocalypse, signals for Manger the ideal state of transition, preferably one from darkness to light. The blue morning star shining above Abraham and Sarah's home adds another optimistic touch. At this point, the “sad and lovely” formula comes down in favor of “lovely.” But just then we see the willows rushing back to see who else is weeping. Once the trip has begun, the die is cast.

״וואו פֿאַרן מיר איצטער, טאַטעשי?״ ״קײן לאַשקעוו אויפֿן יריד.״	“Daddy, where are we going now?” “To Lashkev—to the Fair.”
״וואָס וועסטו מיר קויפֿן, טאַטעשי, אין לאַשקעוו אויפֿן יריד?״	“Daddy, what are you going to buy At Lashkev—at the Fair?”
אַ זעלנערל פֿון פּאַרצעליי, אַ פּײַקל און אַ טרומײט און פֿאַר דער מאַמען אין דער היים אַטלעס אויף אַ קלייד.	“A soldier made of porcelain, A trumpet and a drum; A piece of satin to make a dress For mother who waits at home.”
אַברָהםס אויגן ווערן פֿײַכט, ער פֿילט ווי דאָס מעטער ברייט אונטער דער זשופּיצע דאָס לײב: — שױן אײן מאָל אַ יריד . . .	Abraham feels his eyes grow moist And the steel knife pressing, where It scalds the flesh beneath his shirt . . . “It's going to be some Fair.”

Everyone knows the lullaby “Daddy's Away at the Fair,” just as everyone has read the story of Abraham taking Isaac to the Akedah. The one adds

pathos and tension to the other because something has already gone wrong: It's always the mother who stays home with the child, and here the cradle is empty, the innocent child accompanying his father on the fateful journey. "It's going to be some Fair," the father mumbles under his breath.

"אליעזר, ביי דער וועסערמיל דאָרט זאָלטו בלייבן שטיין! פֿון דאָרט וועל איך מיט יצחקלען צו פֿוט שוין ווייטער גיין."	"Eliezer, stop at the water mill. Stop for a while and wait. Isaac, my son, and I will go Alone from there on foot."
אליעזר אויף דער קעלניע ברומט און קוקט אַלץ אויפֿן שליאַך. (טרויעריק און שייך, זאָגט דער פּאָעט, זענען די וועגן פֿון תּנ"ך.)	Eliezer sits on the driver's seat And casts an anxious look. "Sad and lovely," the poet says "Are the roads of the Holy Book."

Now the balance has measurably shifted to the "sad" side of the scale. Sad, but by no means terrifying—either in comparison to the biblical account of the Akedah or in comparison to Goethe's "Erlkönig," the famous ballad of a father driving his only son into the hands of death. Manger's midrash domesticates God's terrible test of faith and Goethe's sexual and supernatural overtones. The modern midrash ends not with the angel staying the executioner's hand or with the Erlking claiming his innocent victim, but with two benign figures: the somewhat apprehensive Eliezer, whom Abraham addresses in Ukrainian, and the poet, who knows that the story will end well.

Eliezer and the Bible-quoting poet are emblematic of Manger's midrash as a whole. The fusion of natural landscape and biblical past is captured in the poem's untranslatable rhyme: *Tanakh* (the Hebrew acronym for the three main divisions of the "Holy Book") rhymes twice with the (resoundingly) Slavic word for "road," *shlyakh*. Poets who operate in the realm of pure lyric begin and end with *demerung*. Poets of a Jewish nationalist bent fill their verse with biblical locutions and historical events. Yiddish poets who wish to lend an earthy, spoken quality to their verse play up the Slavic component in the language. The perfect poet, the sum of all poets who preceded him, the one who from the age of twenty-eight dreamed of becoming a *klasiker*, can make Hebraic past rhyme with Slavic present and transform them both into a lyric-poetic dawning.

Is it any wonder that Manger reserved the most balanced and beautiful of the *Bible Poems* for his namesake, Isaac? In this, he joined a proud line of Jewish writers named Saul (Tchernichowsky), David (Pinsky, Frischmann), and (Yokheved Bat-) Miriam, who at some point or other wrote of their biblical counterlives. But once Manger discovered, after meeting Old Man Ludvig, that the parodists could inherit the past—better than any progeny or self-appointed prophets—he found the door open to a collective memory that was also his own. No need to tread

lightly across the biblical story: He and his father and mother *were* the biblical story. No need to reimagine the ancient Near Eastern setting. Eastern Galicia *was* the biblical setting. No need to study Scripture and midrashic commentary. Yiddish language and folklore *were* the sacred texts.

When the first slim volume of his *Khumesh-lider* appeared, in 1935, followed a year later by a second edition and their sequel, the *Megile-lider* (*Songs of the [Purim] Megillah*), Manger did not suspect that the Bible, rather than the ballad, would become his permanent—and portable—homeland. He had too much going for him. Along with Moyshe Broderzon, he was the most sought-after Yiddish popular songwriter in Poland, and probably the first to write expressly for the Yiddish screen. Through translations of Rumanian, Spanish, and Gypsy ballads and essays thereon, he championed the brotherhood of man and the revival of folklore, and through his own dramatizations he tried to breathe new life into the Yiddish stage. His literary essays, including a brilliant appreciation of Sholem Aleichem, appeared regularly in the *Literarische bleter*. He was the darling of the Yiddish Writer's Club, Tlomacke 13. He was married to (or living with) the Polish-Yiddish journalist Rokhl Auerbach, who made sure his shirts were ironed and his valise was neatly packed. After his own *Getseylte verter* finally folded, he planned to launch a new highbrow journal called *Di svive* with the following editorial lineup: Jankel Adler (plastic arts), Itzik Manger (poetry), Y. M. Neyman (essays), Ephraim Kaganovski and Yitskhok Bashevis (prose). Manger, too, branched out into prose, with a gallery of *Noente geshtaltn* (1938), intimate portraits from Yiddish literary history, and his fantastical *Adventures of Shmuel-Aba Abervo*, or *The Book of Paradise* (1939).³⁹

Allied to the Jewish Labor Bund, the largest Jewish political force in Poland, Manger remained well within the range of its left-of-center politics. That too helped boost his reputation. Manger's *Megillah* was a proletarian midrash on the Purim story, whose unsung hero, the tailor's apprentice Fastrigosse, failed to assassinate King Ahasuerus and was executed for his efforts.⁴⁰ Manger's ecumenicism (expressed in the early ballads about Jesus, the Bible poems in praise of Hagar and later, of Ruth) were of a piece with the Bundist outreach program to the Socialist International. And so long as one disregards how Manger actually treated women, his proto-feminism put him far ahead of his time.

If anything, Manger was a Yiddishist, and if he had to run for office, it would have been as the Prince of Yiddish. His portrait gallery of Yiddish literary figures situated each of its subjects within a clearly defined landscape (Worms, Berlin, Zamość, Odessa, Dubno, Vilna, Brody, Lodz, Przemysl, Kiev, Mezhibozh, New York, and Chelm), each a dramatic

vignette that focused on the subject in old age or in a moment of intense introspection, and all of them united in their love of the mother tongue. Yiddish culture, in Manger's scheme, was a child of the Haskalah, emancipated from Hebrew and (interestingly enough) from Hasidism. Since the Maskilim were progressive by definition, there was no need to doctor the evidence (as Soviet revisionists were busy doing) with class conflict. The only worker-poet Manger portrayed (Yoysef Bovshover) was mad. The longest chapter was on Velvl Zbarzher, portrayed as a purely lyric poet. Manger dedicated the book to the teachers and students of the Yiddish secular school system in Poland.⁴¹

As even the titles of his poetry collections revealed, however, it became ever more difficult for the prince to preside over his kingdom in the face of historical events: *Stars on the Roof* (1929), *Lantern in the Wind* (1933), *Twilight in the Mirror* (1937) and *Clouds over the Roof* (1942). *Baym rand funem opgrunt vert dos gelehkter nokh farshayter*, he wrote in the preface to *The Book of Paradise* (1939). "At the edge of the abyss even laughter becomes desperate." And so Paradise was now divided into three—the Turkish, the Jewish, and the Christian—and one needed passports to get from one to the other. Up there in Paradise Reb Zeydl the Photographer had no takers for his latest Purim play about Noah in the Ark, where, amidst other shenanigans, a delegation of pigs did the Hitler salute as they marched across the stage singing:

Heil, Reb Noah, heil!
 Hear us for a while.
 Indeed, we're flesh you musn't touch
 But your stingy missus
 Your old and stingy missus,
 Is a true-born witch.

While Purim parody was an obvious vehicle for political satire, Zeydl's bravado only masked the bitter reality: that even in heaven, the Jews were at the mercy of the goyim. When our two Jewish angel heroes, Shmuel-Aba and his sidekick Pisherl, entered the Christian paradise in their effort to rescue and redeem the runaway Messiah Ox (the *shor-habor*), they were met by Dmitri *Angel*, a traditional, Jew-hating Ukrainian angel, and only then by *der heyliker Petros*, kindly Saint Peter who spoke Russian and took them under his wing. Luckily, folklore and love were still the great equalizers in heaven as on earth. Shmuel-Aba and Pisherl fused and confused Saint Nicholas with Elijah the Prophet, and Pisherl soon fell head over wings in love with Anyella, a girl angel with blond braids and blue eyes. (Pisherl, for all that, did not marry the *shiksa*-angel; he returned to the Jewish paradise when his mission was over.) Thus Paradise was animated by the same mysteries as all of Manger's earlier verse—by unrequited love, birth, death, longing, melancholy. Not since

Sholem Aleichem had the folk repertoire and the Slavic landscape been used so effectively to argue for an egalitarian humanism.⁴²

And not since Sholem Aleichem had a born-again storyteller invented a life history that matched his new calling with such panache. Paradise, like Kasrilevke, gave the writer a second chance: to live the ideal childhood, to be born with the storyteller's gift, and to never abandon the security of home. Manger's hero, who alone retained total recall of life in Paradise, could regale the shtetl elders down on earth in much the same way as baby Jesus had once inspired the Magi in Bethlehem. By redeeming them with the lost collective memory of Paradise, the fallen angel Shmuel-Aba Abervo also redeemed himself, as his very odd name attests: *Aber-vo* is what the Jews of Czernowitz peppered their speech with to show that they were really native German-speakers, and not *Ostjuden* from Galicia. "Not on your life!" "You couldn't possibly mean it!" are some of its colloquial equivalents. But this time Manger aimed the joke at himself, who so much would have wished to be born in some "authentic" place, like Jassy, instead. "*Aber-vo*, Manger," he seemed to be saying, "once you start inventing a past, you might as well turn it all into myth." To complete the picture, artist Mendel Reif, a close friend of the author's, used Itzik and Note Manger as the real-life models for "two infatuated angels" whom Shmuel-Aba and Pisherl spied walking late one night through the streets of Paradise.⁴³

Then came the war. In the trials and torment that followed—Manger was stranded without a usable passport in Paris, then fled to Marseilles, escaped to Tunis, from there to a hospital in Liverpool and finally found refuge with Margaret Waterhouse in London—he saw all his dreams for a Yiddish renaissance destroyed along with his audience. "Where now? What next?" sang the Jew who found a half-moon in a cornfield (written in London, 1941). "I've become a wanderer through space and time, a restlessness between God and man, a sad and wanton melody swinging from the horn of the moon."⁴⁴ Manger was left with an abiding hatred for the Germans, whose culture he had once so admired, and for the Yiddish literary establishment that treated its great poets so piteously. The worst blow came in March 1944 upon learning of the death of his beloved brother, Note. The news unhinged Manger to such a degree that he wrote an open letter to I. J. Segal and Melech Ravitch resigning not only from Yiddish literature but from the Yiddish language itself.⁴⁵

Note became Manger's dead muse. Since the grotesque reality, as he explained in a saner moment to Melech Ravitch, had made writing ballads superfluous, Manger turned to the sonnet and wrote an exquisite sonnet cycle in memory of his brother. He also went back to the Bible, this time to the Books of Ruth and Job, and to the story of Cain and Abel.

Dost thou sleep, my brother Abel,
That thou art so wonderfully fair?
Never have I seen thee
As beautiful before.

Does the beauty lie in my ax
Or is it, perhaps, in thee?
Before the day is done,
Speak—answer me.

(London, 1941).

"The Tailor's Apprentice Note Manger Studies the Bible" added fifteen *khumesh-lider* based on the Book of Samuel. Thus the Bible became for Manger a book of memorial, of perpetual exile, of expiation. It became a weighty tome that one would rescue from the flames—and that helped its bereaved author to cross the great divide.⁴⁶

His songs survived much better than his psyche. There is no evidence whatsoever of Manger's personal pathology in his poems, or that the war and its aftermath saw Manger at his worst, most cruel and narcissistic. But then again, if Rokhl Auerbach, who miraculously survived the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto and rescued Manger's archive along with other buried treasures after the war, only to be met with Manger's fit of rage upon their reunion in London—if Rokhl Auerbach could pass over everything that happened between them in silence, then who are we to pass judgment? Manger deserved a lot better than the hagiographers who tried to paint his saintly portrait for posterity. But he was fortunate to belong to a literature that upheld a Victorian standard of propriety. Manger's archive (housed in Jerusalem) contains the vilest literary letters in the language. When it came to the writing that really mattered—to his poetry—Manger was and remained a prince.⁴⁷

Manger sought refuge, for a while, in storytelling proper. Boccaccio had always been Manger's favorite, "firstly for his sheer mastery, then for his ability to purify and raise to absolute beauty the instincts that the respectable citizen trivializes."⁴⁸ Manger now planned to write a sequel to *The Decameron* in which ten symbolic survivors of the Holocaust gathered in a bunker to swap stories, but he published only two: "The Adventures of Hershel Summerwind" and "The Squire's Moustaches." The first is a truly fanciful evocation of childhood, worthy of Sholem Aleichem, that ends with young Hershel being carried through the air by flocks of inebriated birds.⁴⁹ The tale "The Squire's Moustaches" is a terrifying parable about what happens when a local despot with a moustache can find no better way to still his raging passions than by murdering a Jew.⁵⁰

Ironically, it was Manger's categorical position of enmity toward the Germans, Lithuanians, Poles, and other Nazi collaborators, which bedeviled his first trip to Israel in 1958 at the age of fifty-seven. Manger gave an interview in which he stressed the need for historical objectivity

as a prerequisite of epic art. Because Jews felt such hatred toward their murderers, Manger argued, and because the catastrophe was too great and too recent, Jewish artists were incapable of fashioning an epic response to the Holocaust. The point was much too subtle for Israeli journalists and (for once) poor Manger got embroiled in a controversy he had not intended.⁵¹

Manger returned on periodic visits to Israel, where he had come to “wallow in his own home.” While he was recuperating from a near-fatal visit in 1965, his *Megile-lider* opened in the Tel Aviv equivalent of off-Broadway. Thanks to Dov Seltzer’s neo-folksy score that recontextualized this proletarian *Purim-shpil* within Israeli popular culture, the *Megile-lider* broke the taboo against Yiddish in the State of Israel. Manger’s popularity peaked during the yearly benefit concerts organized by the indefatigable Sholem Rosenfeld on Manger’s behalf (in 1967 and 1968). These concerts inspired a new generation of Israeli singers to interpret Manger’s songs both in Yiddish and eventually, in Hebrew. Chava Alberstein, for one, in her cabaret-style renditions of Manger’s ballads, captured a haunting and gritty quality in Manger that is lost in Dov Seltzer’s sing-along score.⁵²

Manger already knew that his songs would survive. He was awestruck to learn that his playful and popular *Oyfn veg shteyt a boym* (“There Is a Tree That Stands”) was sung by a young woman fighter in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto.⁵³ He also knew that his life as a poet was spent. What was left was the shaping of his canon. Two retrospective volumes produced on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, one arranged by genre, the other by theme, determined his future status as a *klasiker*. *Lid un balade* (1952), the more inclusive volume, is as close to Manger’s Complete Poems as we are ever likely to come. But the success enjoyed by *Medresh Itsik*, first published in 1951, finally vindicated his dream.

The partly pious, partly playful title, *Itzik’s Midrash*, can only belong to a *modern* classic, which rewrites the past in a way that no rabbi or traditional commentator would ever presume to do. When an augmented edition of these biblically inspired poems was chosen to inaugurate the Hebrew University series of Yiddish texts in 1969, and was then reissued in 1984, editor Khone Shmeruk rearranged the poems in order of their biblical sequence and combed through Manger’s writings to locate everything of biblical import. Thus *Medresh Itsik*, unlike *Lid un balade*, blurred the poet’s chronology and his generic distinctions in the service of literature’s most canonical text. Through this editorial procedure, Manger’s lifelong dream of producing a new Yiddish folk-epic was finally realized. What began in the mid-thirties as a discrete series of *Khumesh*- and *Megile-lider*—a lyric-dramatic genre that Manger invented—became in the fifties and sixties a Yiddish *seyfer*, a *medresh*, a traditional tome that made the poet’s invention and inventiveness into yet another tribute to the immutable past.

The son of “a wandering tailor’s apprentice” who “composed his Purim plays and performed them along with his buddies” was now a long way from home. In his travels, the son had become a master tailor himself who could fashion a garment more perfect than had ever existed before. As the master recloaker of the oldest and the newest literary traditions, Itzik Manger alone produced a Yiddish folk-epic to outlast the living folk, the living language, and the living landscape at once so lovely and so sad. He died in Tel Aviv in 1969.

Department of Jewish Literature
The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

NOTES

1. *Bay undz yidn: zamlung far folklor un filolyge*, ed. M. Vanvild (Warsaw, 1923).
2. See the reprint edition of Ignaz Bernstein, *Jüdische Sprichwörter und Redensarten im Anhang Erotica und Rustica*, ed. Hans Peter Althaus (Hildesheim, 1969), or for the less scholarly inclined, *Yiddish Sayings Mama Never Taught You*, ed. G. Weltman and M. S. Zuckerman (Van Nuys, CA, 1975).
3. [Dr. I. Lejpuner], “Tsu undzere lezer,” *Land un lebn* (Warsaw) 1:1 (December 1927): 1; [Emanuel Ringelblum], “Fun der redaktsye,” *Landkentenish* (Warsaw) 1 (1933): 7. On the exclusion of Jews from the Polish Society, see Ringelblum’s comments on p. 4 of the editorial.
4. M. Burshtin, “A nayer faktor in yidishn lebn,” *Landkentenish*, n.s., 1 (1937): 9–13. The journal carried periodic reports of the Society’s growth and activities, as for instance Burshtin’s “Landkenerische arbet oyf di kolonyes un vanderlagern,” *Landkentenish* 2(20) (June 1935): 3–5. By far the most impressive document I have found, however, was written by my uncle Hirsh Mac (Matz), *Kurerter un turistik in Poyln* [Health Resorts and Tourism in Poland] (Warsaw, 1935), esp. pp. 229–32.
5. See Moyshe Kulbak, “From Byelorussia,” trans. Leonard Wolf, in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (New York, 1987), pp. 388–401; “Vilna,” trans. Nathan Halper, *ibid.*, pp. 406–11; and “Munie the Bird Dealer,” trans. Norbert Guterman, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1989), pp. 342–50. Because the first chapter of Kulbak’s story was accidentally omitted from the translation, even the “revised” version has Munie “walking” about. For the Yiddish original, see *A shpigl oyf a shteyn: antologye*, ed. Khone Shmeruk, 2nd rev. ed. (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 556–66.
6. Zalmen Szyk, *1000 yor Vilne*, part 1 (Vilna, 1939), richly illus. Part 2 never appeared. Szyk conjured up a city in which the Jewish traveler could move effortlessly from one ethnic enclave to another and across religious boundaries. This, of course, was a fictional construct. My father, for one, was beaten up by his fellow Poles for not taking his hat off while passing the Catholic shrine on Ostra Brama. For a much more sobering tour of the same city, see Lucy Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir 1938–1947* (New York, 1989).
7. See, for instance, Michael Davitt Bell’s discussion of “associationism” in his *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago and London, 1980), pp. 16–18, 74.
8. See Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Architects of Yiddishism at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: A Study in Jewish Cultural History* (Rutherford, 1976), chap. 8.

9. See Yitskhok Paner, *Shtrikhn tsum portret fun Itsik Manger* (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 62–63. Though poorly written and not altogether reliable, this is the only unglorified account of Manger's early years I have been able to find.

10. The Manger Archive at the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, has his "Notebook" for 1918–1919; 4°-1357, file 2:22. I assume that the reference to Rilke came from Manger because Reyzen drew his biographical material from questionnaires filled out by the authors themselves.

11. Yitskhok Manger, "Yas," in the MS of *Harbstike oygn* (1919–1925), Manger Archive, 4°-1357, file 2:7.

12. On Manger's great admiration for Mani Leyb, see Ruth R. Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan: Two Yiddish Poets* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), pp. 229–30.

13. For an absurdly idealized portrait of Manger and his family in Jassy, see Yankl Yakir, "Itsik Manger un zayn yikhesh-briv," *Sovetish heymland*, No. 11 (November 1969): 131–42. On *literatoyre*, see p. 140.

14. *Kveytn*, Poesie von J. Manger; his original title, now faded, was *Folks-lider*. Part 2 of the MS is dated 1919–20. Manger Archive 4°-1357, file 2:22.

15. Shloyme Bickel, "Di onheyb-yorn mit Itsik Manger," *Shrayber fun mayn dor* [Writers of My Generation], vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1970): 391–92. In an earlier version of this memoir, published in the *Tog morgn zhurnal* (30 March 1969), Bickel has this lecture occurring in 1919. That is also my source for the audience not hearing a thing.

16. Bickel, "An intsident mit Mangern," *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, pp. 395–96.

17. On this, see Paner, *Shtrikhn tsum portret*, pp. 16–19, 30–32.

18. Ruth R. Wisse, "Introduction to Book II" of *Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets*, ed. Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf (New York, 1980), p. 241. For a small sample of Steinberg's fables, see *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, pp. 114–22.

19. *Eliezer Shteynbargs gezungene lider*, ed. Hersh Segal (Rehovot, 1977), illus.

20. See Paner, *Shtrikhn tsum portret fun Itsik Manger*, p. 76. Elsewhere (pp. 37–42) Paner claims that Steinberg snubbed Manger for his bohemian ways. Yet Manger, who was never one to forgive or forget any slight, real or imagined, made constant reference to Steinberg in the lectures and interviews he gave upon arriving in Warsaw. He even named Steinberg his favorite Yiddish author—after Sholem Aleichem and David Bergelson. See "Mayn balibster shrayber," *Literarische bleter*, No. 17 (April 25, 1930); rpt. in Itzik Manger, *Shriftn in proze* [henceforth: *Shriftn*], ed. Shloyme Shvaytser (Tel Aviv, 1980), p. 326.

21. "A shmues mit Yitskhok Manger," *Literarische bleter* (January, 1929); rpt. *Shriftn*, p. 281.

22. Shloyme Bickel, "Itsik Manger," *Tog morgn zhurnal* (June 11, 1961).

23. See the following essays by Manger originally published in *Literarische bleter* and rpt. in *Shiftn*: "Di yidishe dikhtung in Rumenye" (1929); "Dos rumenische folkslid" (1929), and "Di balade—di vize fun blut" (1929).

24. Manger, "Di balade—di vize fun blut," *Shriftn*, pp. 306–9.

25. All these are to be found in the MS of *Harbstike oygn*. In *Kveytn*, too, he identified the poem "Der kloyznik" as a ballad.

26. "The Ballad of the White Glow," trans. Leonard Wolf in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, pp. 574–77. Reprinted with the permission of Viking Penguin. Eight ballads by Manger were translated by Sacvan Bercovitch with five illustrations by his sister, Sylvia Ary, in *Versus* (Montreal) No. 4 (Winter 1978): 19–26; a bilingual, mimeographed edition of nineteen ballads, also translated by Bercovitch, was put out by the Jewish Public Library of Montreal in 1977. Wherever possible, I have made use of Bercovitch's (unrhymed) versions.

27. "You hack," Manger shouted at Melech Ravitch in Warsaw, circa 1929. "You need to write your silly verse with a pen. I write mine in my memory. *Ikh bin in gantsn lid*, my whole essence is a poem." See Melech Ravitch, *Dos mayse-bukh fun mayn lebn 1921–1934* [The Storybook of My Life], vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1975), p. 286.

28. Itzik Manger, "Ershter briv to X. Y.," *Getseylte verter* (Czernowitz) 1 (August 1929); rpt. *Shriftn*, p. 479; Idem, "Driter briv tsu X. Y.," *Getseylte verter* 4 (Sept. 1929); rpt. *Shriftn*, p. 487; Janet Hadda, "Christian Imagery and Dramatic Impulse in the Poetry of Itzik Manger," *Michigan Germanic Studies* 3:2 (1977): 1–12.

29. Itzik Manger, "Mayn veg in der yidisher literatur," speech delivered at the Statler Hilton Hotel in New York City, June 1961, honoring his sixtieth birthday, *Shriftn*, pp. 364–65. According to the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, Dr. Israel Rubin emigrated to Palestine in 1929.

30. Two examples of Manger turning his father into the direct source for his art are (1) "Nor eyn mol Sholem-Aleykhem" (1929), which begins with Manger reminiscing about his youth in Jassy, seeing the death notice of the great writer in a bookstore window, and hearing his father read and extol Sholem Aleichem's writings; and (2) his introduction to the *Hotsmakh-shpil*, a reworking of Goldfaden's *The Witch*, where Manger credits his father's workshop and his rhymed discourses with instilling a passion for theater in the son. For a lyrical memoir of his father, see "Mayn tate pravet a geburts-tog," in Itzik Manger, *Noente geshtaltn un andere shriftn* (New York, 1961), pp. 480–87. Later, his dead brother Note would serve a similar function.

31. Yehoash [Shloyme Blumgartn, 1871–1927] began translating the Bible into Yiddish in 1910. It appeared in book form in 8 vols.: *The Pentateuch* (vols. 1–2; 1926), *Prophets* (vols. 3–6; 1927–29) and *The Writings* (vols. 7–8; 1936), all in Farlag tanakh, New York.

32. See Chone Shmeruk's important essay, "Medresh Itzik and the Problem of Its Literary Traditions," intro. to Itzik Manger, *Medersh Itzik*, 3rd rev. ed. (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. v–xxix. In a letter from Warsaw to his brother Note (April 15, 1934), Manger asked that a copy of Nokhem Shtif's anthology *Di eltere yidishe literatur* (Kiev, 1929) be sent to Dr. Dvora Fogel for review purposes. Manger Archive, 4°–1357; file 4:109.1. This anthology would later serve as the inspiration for Manger's *Noente geshtaltn*, a fictionalized history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Yiddish literature.

33. "Ofener briv fun kletsker rosh yeshive hagoen rabi Arn Kotler," *Di vokh* (May 1935); a copy in the Manger Archive from Dov Sadan's collection, 8:85. For a summary of the whole controversy engendered by Manger's Bible poems, see Dov Sadan, "A makhloyke un ir videranand," intro. to *Medresh Itzik*, Hebrew pagination.

34. All quotations are from the 3rd rev. ed. of *Medresh Itzik* ed. by Khone Shmeruk (Jerusalem, 1984).

35. Itzik Manger, "Folklor un literatur," *Oyfn sheydveg* (Paris) 1 (April 1939); rpt. *Shriftn*, pp. 327–34. For a partial translation, see "Folklore and Literature," *The Way We Think: A Collection of Essays from the Yiddish*, ed. Joseph Leftwich, 2 vols. (New York, 1969), 2:678–82.

36. Ruth R. Wisse, "Itzik Manger: Poet of the Jewish Folk," *Jewish Heritage* (Spring 1970): 29.

37. See my "Introduction" to *The Dybbuk and Other Writings* by S. Ansky (New York, 1992), pp. xix–xx, xxii–xxiv.

38. Itzik Manger, "Abraham Takes Isaac to the Sacrifice," trans. Leonard Wolf, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York, 1969), pp. 275–76, rpt. with the permission of Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc.; for the Yiddish original, see *Medresh Itzik*, pp. 39–40.

39. See Itzik Manger, *Felker zingen* [Nations Sing] (Warsaw, 1936); idem, *Hotsmakh-shpil: a Goldfaden-motiv in 3 aktn* [Hotsmakh Play: Comedy in Three Acts and Fourteen Tableaux] (London, 1947); Joseph Green, *Yidl mitn fidl* (Poland, 1936), starring Molly Picon, with lyrics by Itzik Manger. On the planned journal, see Rokhl Auerbach's letter of June 26, 1935 to Melech Ravitch, Manger Archive. The plans fell apart because Bashevis Singer left for America and Neyman immigrated to Palestine. On his shirts being neatly packed, see Paner, *Shtrikhn*, pp. 57–58. Paner is our only source on Manger's prior marriage to a beautiful (unnamed) woman from Galicia. On this sordid episode, see *Shtrikhn*, pp. 44–47. In her own

brief but poignant chapter on her years with Manger, Auerbach does not refer to herself as his wife. See her *Baym letstn veg: in geto Varshe un oyf der arisher zayt* [On the Last Road: In the Warsaw Ghetto and on the Aryan Side] (Tel Aviv, 1977), pp. 164–74.

40. For an interpretation of this work against the political backdrop of the late thirties, see Ruth R. Wisse, “1935/6—A Year in the Life of Yiddish Literature,” *Studies in Jewish Culture in Honour of Chone Shmeruk*, ed. Israel Bartal, Ezra Mendelsohn and Chava Turniansky (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 98*–99*.

41. Itzik Manger, *Noente geshtaltn* (Warsaw, 1938); rpt. in *Shriftn*, pp. 11–134.

42. Itzik Manger, *Di vunderlekhe lebns-bashraybung fun Shmuel-Abe Aberoo* (*Dos bukh fun gan-eydn*), rpt. *Noente geshtaltn un andere shriftn*, pp. 131–348; trans. by Leonard Wolf as *The Book of Paradise: The Wonderful Adventures of Shmuel-Aba Aberoo* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965). The *Purim-shpil* quote is on p. 215 of the English ed., except that Wolf missed the reference to the Nazis entirely.

43. The adventure of the stolen goat described in chap. 4 of *The Book of Paradise* is loosely based on an episode from Manger’s childhood. Cf. his “Kinder-yorn in Kolomey (fun mayn togbukh),” *Shriftn*, pp. 442–43.

44. “Di balade fun dem yid vos hot gefunen di halbe levone in a kornfeld,” in Itzik Manger, *Lid un balade* (New York, 1952), p. 424. The translation is by Sacvan Bercovitch.

45. For a cleaned-up version of Manger’s life and letters during the war, see Chaim S. Kazdan’s *Di letste tkufe in Itsik Mangers lebn un shafn* (1939–1969) [The Last Period in Itzik Manger’s Life and Creativity] (Mexico City, 1973), pp. 9–50. These letters caused quite a stir in the American-Yiddish press. Manger’s “Open Letter to I. J. Segal and Melech Ravitch” resigning from Yiddish is dated London, July 11, 1944; Manger Archive 4°–1540, box 95, file 3.

46. Manger to Ravitch “in a saner moment”: letter from London of October 4, 1940, Manger Archive, 4°–1540; “Cain and Abel,” trans. Leonard Wolf, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, pp. 278–79. Reprinted with the permission of Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc.

47. On the rescue of Manger’s archive (which she gives as one reason for her remaining in Warsaw when the war broke out), see Rokhl Auerbach’s two extraordinary memoirs: *Varshever tsavoes: bagegenishn, aktivitetn, goyroles 1933–1943* [Warsaw Testaments: Encounters, Activities, Fates, 1933–1943] (Tel Aviv, 1974), pp. 193–94; and *Baym letstn veg*, p. 169. Historian Chimen Abramsky is my source for the reunion in London.

48. Itzik Manger, “Mayn balibster shrayber,” *Literarische bleter* (25 April, 1930); rpt. *Shriftn*, p. 326.

49. Itzik Manger, “The Adventures of Hershel Summerwind” (1947), trans. Irving Howe, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, pp. 438–46.

50. Itzik Manger, “The Squire’s Moustaches” (1949), trans. Joseph Leftwich in *Yisroel: The First Jewish Omnibus*, rev. ed. (New York, 1963), pp. 650–55. Cf. “Di mayse mitn poritses vontses,” *Shriftn*, pp. 149–59. The story bears a strong resemblance to “Di klole” (The Curse), one of Peretz’s neo-folk tales.

51. On this episode, see Kazdan, *Di letste tkufe in Itsik Mangers lebn un shafn*, pp. 145–58. See also Rivka Rus, *Bemehitsato shel Itsik Manger* [In the Company of Itzik Manger: Encounters with and Letters from the Greatest Yiddish Poet], trans. from the Yiddish by Moyshe Yungman (Tel Aviv, 1983). Manger himself published a rebuttal titled “Catastrophe and Literature” in *Der veker* (October 1, 1958); rpt. *Shriftn*, pp. 387–89.

52. Itzik Manger, “With Closed Eyes” and “Sunset,” in Chava Alberstein, *Hitbaharut / The Skies Are Clearing*, CBS 81906 (1978): Side A, Bands 3–4.

53. Itzik Manger, “Der goyrl fun a lid” (1960), *Shriftn*, pp. 390–96. Translated as “The Destiny of a Poem” by Joseph Leftwich in *The Way We Think*, pp. 506–10. For the lyrics, see *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, pp. 588–91; for the music, see *Mir trogn a gezang: The New Book of Yiddish Songs*, ed. Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1977), pp. 166–67.