

Introduction

The Kaddish is more than a hymn of divine praise and mourning. In a mix of Aramaic and Hebrew, it is the most recited liturgical poem in the Jewish tradition, punctuating prayer services and forming the textual heart of the rituals of Jewish mourning. In Yiddish, *kaddish* is also a term of endearment for sons, who are destined, one day, to recite the Kaddish at the graves of parents, over the course of days and months of prescribed mourning, and, thereafter, whenever called upon. When Yiddish was the everyday language of the majority of Ashkenazic Jews in the world, parents affectionately called their boys “my kaddish” or “darling little kaddish,” a gentle, perhaps barely conscious, reminder of mortality and the sacred obligations of memory and memorialising.

The poet and writer Itzik Manger was born nearly with the dawn of the twentieth century, in the spring of 1901, in what is now Chernivtsi, Ukraine, and was then Czernowitz, capital of Bukovina, the easternmost province of Habsburg Austria-Hungary. He would be kaddish not only unto his mother and father, but, as it would turn out, unto his culture and his mother tongue. Manger’s parents were born in the neighbouring province of Galicia. His mother, Chava Woliner Manger, was the daughter of a family of upholsterers from the city of Kolomea (now Kolomyia). His father, Hillel Helfer-Manger, was a tailor who came from a small town, Stopchet (now Stopchativ), just across the River Prut, about 10 miles to Kolomea’s south. Manger was raised in the multilingual, multiethnic foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, moving between Czernowitz, Kolomea, and Stopchet, where rivers and mountain passes marked out historical, ever-shifting boundaries between empires and nations and cradled a unique hodgepodge of local languages and peoples.

The streets of Manger’s childhood Czernowitz resonated with a polyphony of tongues,

including the official Austrian German (as well as the local Bukovinian dialect of it), Yiddish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Armenian, Polish, Hungarian, and Romani. This diverse provincial capital proved a fertile breeding ground for poets and writers, Jewish ones in particular. In the city's schools, students recited Goethe and Schiller, and absorbed — through study or cultural practice — the Jewish sacred texts and liturgy from antiquity.

Despite being one of the most popular and widely-read Yiddish poets of his day, to date, there are no monuments to Manger in his hometown. There are some, though, to his contemporaries, including the Jewish German-language poets Rose Ausländer (1901–1988) and Paul Celan (1920–1970), who would both go on writing poetry in the former imperial language even after the shift of borders following the First World War. Ausländer and Manger were, in fact, childhood friends. The younger Celan grew up an admirer of Manger. The Czernowitz-born American Yiddish poet Beyle Schaechter-Gottesman (1920–2013) once recalled a strange encounter with Paul Celan in 1947. She remembered how on Vienna's Seegasse, significantly the site of the city's ancient, enormous Jewish cemetery, Celan approached her and — out of the blue — declared, “Itzik Manger is the greatest Yiddish poet” and then disappeared, without a goodbye, “like an apparition.”

Manger's poetic reputation was based on his unique blending of multiple cultural elements in his work, an admixture he called *Literatorah* — an apt portmanteau joining together the two dominant voices that informed his work. On the one hand was *Literature*, the high culture of European letters, and on the other *Torah*, which is far more than the Biblical scripture and includes the oral and written holy law, as well as an entire Jewish way of looking at the world. Manger's *Literatorah* was not a simple amalgam of the literary traditions of Christian Europe and the Jewish people, but rather a deep engagement with the complex interfusion of lives and letters that once flourished in the places Manger lived and wrote.

As Manger began to reach his poetic stride in Romania toward the end of the 1920s (Bukovina had, by then, become part of the Kingdom of Romania), he achieved distinction as a new type of “poet of the people,” who bridged the Jewish folkloric traditions of wandering troubadours and itinerant balladeers with the legacy of restless, rambunctious, and hard-drinking European poets from Anacreon to Villon. Arriving in Warsaw late in 1928, he fashioned himself as a kind of rabbinic Rimbaud; his work staked out a rebellious ground in Jewish poetry, centred around themes of *benkshaft*, profound melancholic longing, and *hefker*, which indicates both a sense of unbridled ownerlessness and abandonment. In the teeming Jewish metropolis, Manger deepened his engagement with particularly Jewish source material in a highly idiosyncratic and modernist manner.

After publishing two sparkling volumes of poetry, Manger more fully embraced the cultural worldview of Warsaw’s preeminent Jewish literary figure, I. L. Peretz (1852–1915), who had died 13 years before Manger’s arrival there. One of the central ideas that Peretz advocated in his influential salon was that all historical strata of Jewish culture accumulated to form a tell, an archeological mound. Digging into this tell offered Jewish culture-makers a historical trove to plunder and draw on for innovative use. This work of excavation carried on an ancient practice, participating in creation *with* these texts in a way that kept them ever present, in every generation. The midrash, the creative exegetical mode of reading holy scripture compiled by rabbinical sages well over a millennium ago, is a striking example of this type of continuous engagement and would serve as Manger’s primary raw material.

On the surface, *aggadah* — the classical rabbinical storytelling mode — may resemble biblical storytelling of a non-Jewish variety. The entire genre of Christian children’s religious literature is based on reworking the Bible’s central characters and themes into easily digestible moralising tales. But aside from some similar names and events, there is

little that connects even the most whimsical classical rabbinical literature with, forgive the comparison, an animated VeggieTales video in which a tomato and asparagus spear riff on “Josh and the Big Wall.”

The sages’ tales, as Dina Stein, scholar of rabbinical literature and folklore has eloquently described, are overtly and intricately intertextual. Aggadic literature is uniquely given to characteristic self-reflexivity because the tales are first and foremost devoted to rhizomal networks of internal literary allusion. As Stein notes: “the seams of the rabbinic cloth are, at least partly, sewn on the outside, making visible the process by which it was made.”¹ Manger mines in the same literary vein, although sacrilegiously, extracting the raw ore of classical tales and their ancient scriptural sources for modern refinement. Like the rabbis of old, Manger proudly points at the textual seams, but rather than sewing them, the mischievous son of a tailor revels in their unravelling.

When Manger began to conceive his first long-form prose work in the mid-1930s, the radical, antisemitic rightwing movement led by Octavian Goga and A. C. Cuza was rising in Romania. Watching in distress from the Polish capital, where the virulently antisemitic *Endecja* movement was also gaining traction, Manger began writing *The Book of Paradise*. His first attempt at setting lyrical poetry in prose, while still including a good number of poems throughout, *The Book of Paradise* was the culmination of seven years of writing his own poetic volumes of “midrash.” His novel was initially serialised throughout the spring and into the summer of 1937 in 28 instalments as *The Marvellous Life Story of Samuel Abba Aberwo* in the popular leftist Warsaw-based newspaper *Naye Folksdaytung*. Excerpts also appeared in Manger’s hometown paper, *Czernowitzer Bletter*, whose editor lauded the new work as a “description of our times in grand style, a reflection of the tragic and the grotesque of our turbulent times.” Turbulent times,

¹ Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 4. Also see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

indeed. With the descent of central Europe into fascism and the accompanying ascent of the violent anti-Jewish political rightwing in Poland and Romania, the world appeared to be on an inexorable, postlapsarian decline. Manger's novel probed the roots of a peculiar, universal type of nostalgia that has us yearn for people and places who aren't all that lovable when recalled in full detail — yet our love for them remains real, immense, and overwhelming nonetheless.

Late in the summer of 1937, as Samuel Abba's adventures were still hitting the newsstands, Manger, together with his partner, Rachela Auerbach, returned to Romania for what would be the last time. They stayed until autumn, visiting his hometown, the Carpathians, as well as his former haunts in Iași, before heading on to Bucharest. Just two months after Manger and Auerbach returned to Warsaw, the Goga-Cuza government came to power and began the process of stripping Jews who were born outside the pre-war borders of the Romanian Kingdom of their basic rights. To extend his Warsaw residency permit, which was set to expire at the end of April 1938, Manger needed to acquire proof of employment and to renew his passport. After getting the requisite credentials from Yiddish newspapers in Romania and the United States, Manger set off to the Romanian Consulate. There, he learned that he was no longer a citizen. With a passport valid for only 10 more days, Manger boarded the overnight train to leave the city he had inhabited for a decade — a time he would describe as the loveliest in his life — to become a stateless person in Paris.

From his Parisian exile, Manger negotiated the contract for the publication of *The Book of Paradise*, which Auerbach signed on his behalf in Warsaw, and revised the work for release as a single volume in February 1939. His precarious state — legal, financial, physical, and psychological — left its stamp on the final draft of the book. The deceptively outlandish and childlike tone, characteristic of all of Manger's work, with its vacillation between elusive joy and melancholy, now intensified the novel's peaks of

delight and troughs of despair. The outbreak of the war also amplified his insecurity and anxiety, leaving him dependent on friends and supporters in France, then England, then the United States and, finally, Israel, where he died in 1969.

Manger returned once, if only briefly, to an entirely different Poland in the spring of 1948, almost exactly ten years after he had left. The real invitation to visit Poland, he said, was not from the official organisations responsible for the dedication of the memorial at the site of the Warsaw Ghetto, for which he had ostensibly come, but rather “from my dead readers in Poland. I was drawn here to visit them. Among the nations of the world, people journey to the graves of their poets, but now the Jewish poet must make the pilgrimage to the graves of his people.”²

As I was finishing work on Manger’s *Book of Paradise*, I spent some time in Bukovina and Galicia, tracing Manger’s youthful footsteps — in Chernivtsi, Stopchativ, and Kolomyia, all found today in Ukraine. This was a few months before the Russian invasion in February 2022 and, although there was a lot of public sabre-rattling, all felt cool and crisp and peaceful. The trees of the Carpathian autumn were vibrant with golds and reds and pools of mist filled the twilight in the towns and country meadows. My thoughts turned to Manger, who never returned here. Perhaps, he wanted to preserve the landscape as it was that last day he saw it, so that it and the throngs of people who crowded the train station to bid him farewell in October 1937 could live on endlessly in memory and in poetry.

For his last two decades, Manger published sporadically, acutely aware of the absence of an audience. A poem published in his final collection, *Stars in the Dust* (1967), is divided into two parts. In one, we encounter the bereft Prophet Elijah beside the ash and bone at the crematorium of Majdanek, where the ancient messianic messenger strokes the ash

² Marian Gid (I. Moskowsky), “Poet Itzik Manger Visits Warsaw,” *Forverts*, 29 May 1948, 6

heap with his sad fingers:

And he will stand here all alone,
With dishevelled beard and *payess*,
An eternal memorial stone.

And against this image is an “Evensong,” in which we find the poet, who sits with a glass of wine, struggling to write, his days endlessly slipping into shadow and shine:

Silent evening. Murky gold.
A grey Jew past his prime
Piously prays away the dust
From fairs of days gone by —
May just a mumble off his tongue
Come to me in rhyme.

Manger’s late poetry remains devoted to a credo he adopted early in his career: that through the transformation of the everyday into poetry, people, objects, and landscapes transcend their earthly trappings to become divine. And the divine, as the Kaddish insists, will be forever magnified, lauded, and exalted.

Translator's Note

The last decade has seen a glut of guidelines, manifestos, and treatises on the translation of Yiddish texts, ranging from the programmatic to the pedantic. In this new translation, I am confident I will disappoint all authors of such statements to a certain degree. Instead of following a variety of newly-established conventions for Yiddish translation and transliteration, I have tried to follow Itzik Manger's own statements on translation and tone to find an idiom suitable to the author's inimitable style. Translations of Manger into English often have an overly quaint, almost ethnographic, feel to them. This is undoubtedly because of Manger's commitment to a neo-folkist, anti-elitist poetics. Although the complexity of his simple-seeming style may have resonated with Yiddish readers, when rendered in English, his modernist folkism can sound flat and folksy.

In a letter to his friend, the New Zealand-born English writer Dan Davin, Manger recommended that Davin read Sholem Aleichem to get a better sense of a great Yiddish writer. "Surely, there are translations of his works in English," Manger wrote, "but very bad ones, because *Yiddish is such an idiomatic language that in taking away the idiom it loses all.*" Manger writes quite a bit about "idiom," meaning both the peculiarities of a given language and also unique expressions, collocations, and linguistic usages. Throughout this translation, I have relied heavily on English's incredible arsenal of idioms with the hopes of giving at least a taste of Manger's richly expressive idiomatic Yiddish.

Following Manger's radical domestication of ancient texts and characters into the Eastern Galician language and landscape, this translation also aims to recreate the homey, familiar quality of Manger's Yiddish so that it reads smoothly in English without the need for a glossary or countless footnotes. This applies not only to the distinctive features of Jewish culture and religious references, but also to the names of characters. Although some may contest that I have run the risk of de-Judaizing the text, I tried to walk a fine line between maintaining accuracy while eschewing obscurantism and pedantry in rendering names that

could make the text unreadable or superfluously foreign.

In general, I have used biblically-allusive names as they are commonly received in English and standardised by the King James Bible. So, rather than using highly idiosyncratic transliterations like *Yankev* or *Shloyme*, for example, I have opted for the more commonplace Jacob and Solomon, which carry with them all of their associations in English. I'll admit that I have gone a step further in anglicising some of the more difficult Yiddish and Slavic names in the text. In the way that an Eastern European nickname like *Syomka* has its roots in the biblical Simon — moving from the Hebrew *Shim'on* and Yiddish *Shimmen* to the Slavic *Semyon*, and then shortened and colloquially diminutivised — I chose to use familiar English versions of some names that may otherwise trip up readers. So, just as members of my own family may have embraced Seymour for Syomka, Simon for Shimmen, or translated Perl as Pearl after settling in New York in the early twentieth century, so did I for a handful of characters in Manger's novel, whose names might cause trouble in pronouncing and hinder reading.

I confess that I did this for our protagonist as well. In Yiddish, Shmul (locally pronounced "Shmil"), Abbe's double-barrelled first name, merges Samuel, like the biblical prophet, with Abba, an ancient Aramaic rabbinical name, and also references Samuel-Abba Soifer, the editor of the *Czernowitzer Bletter* newspaper, a popular figure in Manger's hometown. Samuel Abba's surname, *Aberwo*, is really more an exclamation than an appellation. *Aberwo* is a uniquely Bukovinian German expression of surprise or disbelief. Its particular usage was so widespread in Bukovina that it grated on the ears of metropolitan speakers of Viennese German, and its usage was disparaged in volumes dedicated to the uplift of German dialects in the Habsburg empire. I have rendered his surname, here, Strewth, which captures a similar regional oath of surprise.