BETWEEN JESUS AND THE BESHT¹

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Abstract

Two particular groups of poems from Itzik Manger’s largely unpublished early work (1921–1929), those about Jesus and those about the Baal Shem Tov, form a poetical polarity in his work; at the same time they act as complementary forces in the psychological unfolding of Manger’s creative process.

As an itinerant poet travelling on Romanian back roads, Manger encountered many wayside crosses with scenes of crucifixion, and found in the image of Jesus a tragic companion, who embodied homelessness, helplessness, and human pain. From 1921 to 1928 this companion mirrors in Manger’s work the shadows of the poet’s soul and also engages his fascination; in the figure of Christ Manger was able to name the unbearable in his own life, experimenting in that process with symbolist and expressionist forms and models.

In 1927, Manger discovered his deep connection to the Besht. Childhood memories of travelling with his grandfather in the Carpathian Mountains reinforced the connection. Mesmerized by the figure of the Besht, Manger then developed in a new group of poems a healing counter-world to the one depicted in the Christ poems, a world that is tangibly inhabited by the sacred.

Manger thus moved from Golgotha into the open space between Kosev (Kosov) and Kitev (Kuty), and in so doing created poems with a new sonority, poignantly evocative of Yiddish folk songs. The Christ figure disappears once Manger becomes aware of this poetic and psychological fault line in himself, though Christian motifs remain part of his poetic vocabulary.

Keywords
Yiddish literature, Itzik Manger, Manger’s early writings, Besht, Christian imagery

Itzik Manger’s early work (1921–1929) is well documented. A large number of texts from the 1920s reflect his powerful creativity, seeking expression in an array of literary forms: lyric poetry, ballads,

¹ This is a chapter from the biography in progress: Niemandssprache: Itzik Manger – Ein europäischer Dichter, which will be published by Suhrkamp Verlag. Writing this chapter has been inspired and helped by the following (in alphabetical order): Marion Aptroot, Annelen Kranefuss, Lawrence Rosenwald, Akiñcano M. Weber, Gisela Wilkending, to all of whom I am grateful. Special thanks go to Shlomo Goldberg, Rivka Plesser and Rafael Weiser who generously supported my research in The National Library of Israel.
stories for children, aphorisms, fragments of dramas, prose and translations. The young Manger wrote with great perseverance. He cast aside, revised, tried anew, modified verses he thought usable and repeatedly copied the ones he considered valid. Those poems that satisfied his criteria he copied out and put together into collections, which in the course of time contained less old and more recent lyric material. In between, he again and again wrote lists of his poems, as if he wanted to make sure of what his poetic inventory was. In 1929, Manger chose from this huge treasure trove 96 poems for his first published volume shtern oyfn dakh [Stars on the Roof]. The oldest is from 1921, the most recent was written shortly before printing in April 1929.

In his preface to shtern oyfn dakh, Manger explains that he did not order the poems either chronologically or in cycles. Rather they are “scattered chaotically with a special joy across the book: ballads, Christ poems, poems of Baal Shem,” which in the poet’s words indicates three thematic foci. Two of them form a poetic polarity in Manger’s early work, while psychologically they function complementary: the Christ poems and the Baal Shem Tov poems. But what is a Christ poem?

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3 balade fun gosn meydln [Ballad of a Street Girl] (ShoD: 130) was first published in 1921, balade fun dem altn hayduk [Ballad of the Old Hajduk] (ShoD: 96) is dated in the booklet ma 2: 16. Five other undated poems from this booklet were probably also written in April 1929 (ShoD: 2, 32, 36, 38, 42). The orthography of quotations in this article corresponds with the respective original regardless of discrepancies from standard Yiddish orthography.

4 ShoD: unpaginated. This decision differs from Manger’s usual approach as is evident in the handwritten poetry collections preceding the printed edition, which are ordered into cycles or by themes, with corresponding titles: including בלאדנ [[Ballads], ma 2: 5; עם ברקום נודקה [Dark Bells], [Autumnal Eyes], נוף באון [Cross in the Wind], ליטסערער [Light Trembling], שירטערער טונקל [Snow in Shimmer], ma 2: 10; אוסטערער [[Autumn Poems], ma 2: 11; מסטרקען קירן, [[Masks, Cross, Darkness], שטוקל פֿון וויס טון [The Poems of the Holy Baal Shem Tov], ma 2: 31; ולעטערקס [Cycle of Light], ma 2: 91. In his early publications, Manger also indicated the cycles the poems originated from: תוהו [Abyss], [[Autumn Poems] (Markus Krämer (ed.), Jüdischer Almanach für Gross-Rumänien [Czernowitz: Verlag Orient, 1922], 8).