Poetics of Incongruity in Itsik Manger's *Khumish-lider*

Shortly before the end of the *Khumesh-lider* cycle of poems, a young and very handsome Yoysef Hatsadik spatsirt afn bulevar (strolls on the boulevard) wearing his famous silk shirt and enjoying the smiles of flirtatious, small town fraylins who affect French airs .They not only wink invitingly at him but whisper about him behind their blue parasols. Although Yosef clearly appreciates the stir he makes, he is far more preoccupied with a puzzing problem,--the hostility he has aroused from in brothers who charge him with being a self-important dreamer and a fool. Naive, favored both by women and his father, the archetypal, romantic artist, Yoysef has as yet little experience in the ways of the world and no knowledge of envy or jealousy. He truly cannot fathom why his brothers should possibly dislike him, though he is aware that his preoccupation with visions,dreams, and symbols separates him from them and from conventional reality

un efsher iz dos a kholim bloyz.
un er zet im nor aleyn,
un zayne bratshikes in der heym
veln es keyn mol nisht farshteyn.

(and perhaps it is merely a dream,
which only he sees,
and his brothers at home
will never be able to understand)

He decides to accept that possibility "Zol zayn a kholum, abi er is sheyn" (Let it be a dream, as long as it is beautiful) and choosing his vision of the world over that of his brothers, he continues his solitary walk in the poetic byway called Star Alley ,treading softly so as not to extingish either his perceptions of the beautiful evening, the smiling young women, or the scent of May. It is a lovely poem which pokes kindly affectionate fun at the artist's other worldliness, narcissim, and the less trodden path his gifts force him to take; and it seems safe to assume Manger, the poet, identified with.Yoysef.

In the two poems which follow,(but written earlier) and which center respectively first upon the Yosef's encounter with Potifar's wife and then on

his final meeting with his brothers in Egypt, the tone changes. The artist disappears and the contemplative gentle humor is replaced with broad irreverent slapstick. The the great Biblical hero is presented in crass realistic detail distinguised by informal language, dialects, vernacular, and metalanguage. .In "Yoysef Hatsadik Un Zlikhe ", (Joseph the Pious and Zlikhe) Yoysef is a stammering, eye-rolling callow youth who recites the Shema in an efforts to resist the provactive sexual lures of a Hollywood style, hot Egyptian seductress. Later, in "Yoysef Hatsadik Zukht Bay Zayne Brider Dem Bekher" (Joseph The Pious Searches The Beaker Among His Brothers) a Yoysef second in power only to Pharaoh,postures grandly before his brothers. His speech, however, is filled with homely idioms (farredsts mir nisht de tseyn) and the flat accents of a Galitsianer . As a measure of respect for him, in turn, his brothers reply in ridiculous "elevated" daytshmerisms, explaining, for example, that their father is a "gotesforkhtiker man," and a "grandrabiner vol".. Yet despite the burlesque, suddenly, in the last line of the poem a shift occurs, and closing in suddenly upon Yosef's face in the shadows, he is transformed before the reader's eyes from a comic character to a figure of stature and humanity.

.It seems to me that the most interesting incongruity associated with Itsik Manger's *Khumish-lider* is the vision of two different realities, binary oppositions,which he presents to his readers. On the one hand, this most outrageous, irreligious, and irreverent of poets, mocks traditional Jewish eschatology and history by grounding the hallowed world of the Bible in a mire of amusing everyday detail which often merges with the comic grotesque. Yet, at the same time, he gives the reader not merely a description <u>of</u>, but an expressionistic experience <u>into</u> a higher lyrical reality that is transcendent and timeless .How he is able to manipulate the reader between the two incongruous realities intrigues me and is the subject of this paper .

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Manger employs contrast, intensification and dislocation to jar his readers into new perceptions of reality. This takes a variety of structural resufflings. In some poems (1) a sudden sharp change in perspective thrusts the reader into a different reality; in other poems (2) a slow disorienting merger of time periods blurs reality which forces the reader to question

what is the "true" reality; in other poems (3) an intensification of attention to detail brings about a sudden heightening of insight into a given reality. In what follows I will discuss each strucutural technique in greater detail.

Many examples of the first method, the sudden sharp change in perspective, abound . In "Khava un der eplboym" [1] (Eve and the Apple Tree)the poem begins in an Eden devoid both of Adam and of a serpent. The former has no interest in Khava and has taken himself off daily to the forests where "Der vald is vild und yeder vild is sheyn" (The forest is wild and everything that is wild is beautiful). .Khava, who is frightened by the forest, seeks comfort under the branches of the apple tree.. An intense mutual attraction exists between her and der epl boym, referred to as "he" since in Yiddish "der boym" possesses male gender. Like a lover, the tree bends over her by day and intrudes into her dreams at night, whispering "bashert" (destined) .Nor is the seduction one-sided,for when the tree does not come to Khava at night in dreams, she goes to him during the day. Her love for the tree is fated, irrestistable, and stronger than her fear of God, "shtarker funm vort,vos vornt mikh far dir"(stronger than the word which warns me against you) And it is presented in positive lights by Manger, for when Khava plucks the apple, she immediately feels strangely light ,animated.,and begins to circle the tree like a butterfly. Though the poetic voice asserts at the beginning of the poem that "der toyt dos is der eplboym", the voice also suggests that Khava is unaware of this

> vos veystu muter Khava zog,
> vos veystu vegn toyt?
> (what yoou know Mother Eve,
> (what do you know about death?)

The fact of her inevitable death is ameliorated by her association with the butterfly who, if its life is limited, lives that life freely and unself-consciously in beauty and in nature, doing what comes naturally. Even God, watching from some distance, finds the scene attractive . Renouncing his role as Father/Judge and functioning instead as The Great Aesthete, He

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[1] [_written London 1941.and added to *Medrish Itsik*in 1951)

pronounces "s'iz sheyn ".and holds back night for a few moments in order better to enjoy the sight.

Khava's situation is thus an interesting contrast to Manger's ballad heroines who chose death over life. She is an affirmative inversion of those pale depressed maidens who never really live and who respond to the seductive fatal lures of impossible dreams, repressed longings, or mysterious strangers by wasting away or fading silently into the black night. .

What is interesting in Manger's drama is that while the traditional God of Judaism has abdicated his moral position, the sensate world of nature has not. The natural world shows concern for Khava, for after she plucks the apple, the tree itself weeps .Khava attempts to comfort him by reassuring him that his song now sings inside her and that she welcomes this. When she moves to underscore her message by freely embracing his full girth with her arms, suddenly the scene shifts in perspective to stars far above the crown of the tree .They have also been watching the affair and now tremble in piety and fear at the scene so fraught with consequences for humankind . Thus, suddenly in the last two lines of the poem, a completely different and transcendent reality confronts the reader. By manipulating perspective and employing a long shot, Manger catapaults the readers from the lower "real" Biblical world of the patriarchs into the lyrical heights of his humanistic Khumish universe.which stands in such bold and ironic contrast to the former . Manger's higher reality is a pagan, pantheistic cosmos made up of natural physical bodies and forces, such as the moon, light, wind, sun, shadows; etc..It is a universe which takes extraordinary delight in people's happiness, yet can also register displeasure when people are cruel or unkind. Generally benign and compassionate, it carefully observes the actions of people but does not interfere . Fate, which appears to rule the action of men and women, functions as an outcome of personal character, myth, and/or history.

Sometimes, instead of standing in dialectical conflict to the demythologized lower Biblical world, Manger's Khumish universe illuminates mundane reality with a transcendent moment of beauty and affirmation... For example in" Di Dray Malokhim Kumn Tsu Avrom Ovinu"(The Three Angels Come to Father Abraham) a very ordinary Avrom sits in his doorway

whittling away at a bone He becomes increasingly annoyed by the sound of Sore (Sarah) weeping inside the house.and calling her beheyme (cow) he yells at her to stop shoyn. While she cries because she has no child, he is insensitive to that and assumes that she is crying (again) because she is reading the *Tsiene urene*. Not long afterwards, he notices three Turks with red beards approaching from the gathering darkness. Though miraculous signals abound--for example, they walk with supernatural quietness and no dust appears on their shoes, --Avrom's suspicions, as in the Biblical myth, are not aroused. He greets them warmly and hospitably and invites them into his home to share the rice with milk and kimlbroyt which Sore has prepared. The Turks enter, eat, and discuss "important" world affairs with Avrom such as first, --problems with children; and then, --grain, wine and money. Sore, in the manner of the Third World women ,is ignored. Distraught, she interrupts their conversation to lament their lack of a child, and therefore, a kaddish. The Turks turn to Avrom, tell him that before the year is over that he will celebrate the bris of a son and then disappear, without a word, to Sore. However, the watching eye of Manger's universe corrects that slight to Sore.with a remarkable annunciation scene right out of a Renaissance painting. .Freyd/joy flutters past the window and striking the gold broach on Sore's blue dress, breaks up into a joyous radiance of light. From the most mundane depiction of a Biblical myth, sensate light from Manger's transcendent poetic universe suddenly illuminates Sore and also thrusts the reader into a moment of intense beauty and mystery.

Manger's Khumish universe possesses an affinity for mothers and underdogs. In "Hagar Auf Der Mit Fun Veg"(Hagar At Midpoint) , a silver half moon hallows the wretched Hagar's head a moment after she learns that her rejected son, Ishmael, will father the Moslem nation. Manger"s universe is also very responsive to poetry , music, beauty. In "Avrom Ovinu Sharft Dos Messer" (Father Abraham Sharpens the Knife) a movement into lyric transcendence occurs as the disturbed father dutifully sharpens the sacrficial knife in the courtyard of his house and hears how a lullaby, which Sore sings to their small son, suddenly becomes alive and embraces/circles the entire world.

Not all poems end in lyrical transcendence, however.. For example, in "Khava Brengt Odemen dem Epl"(Eve Brings Adam the Apple) the poem concludes in a comic discrete silence--sha-- as the first couple ,now sexually aware of one another, move to consumate their union.. In "Odim Is Ayferzikhtik" (Adam is Jealous) the poem concludes in a poignant intensification of mood by focusing very closely upon Odim who suddenly realizes that his love/need for Khava will not always bring him pleasure or freedom. Sometimes the universe is silent, disapproving., and non-transcendent as in "Yitskhok Ovinu Farhert Zayne Bonim Shabes Nokhn Tish" (Father Jacob Listens To His Sons Recite After the Sabbath Table) when sly, calculating Yakovl (Little Jacob) recites the weekly lesson to his father and reveals how much smarter he is than his brother. Although his mother watches with pride, her approval merely foreshadows the manipulative role she will later play in the stolen birthright affair. Far more telling is the moral mood of the universe reflected by the onomatopoeic sounds/images heard in the sabbath quiet, both before and after Yakovl's virtuoso performance . Singularly grotesque and bleak, a fat cat grizshtet (gnaws) at a fish bone and the zshum of a blue fly reverberates in an empty room Both sounds/images intensify the conspicuous lack of approval.Yakovl and Rivke receive from Manger's higher natural reality.

I spoke earlier of two structural techniques which Manger employs to give the reader a different perception of reality. The second method entails a disorienting dislocation of several time periods which blurs traditional distinctions between past and present, heroic and mundane, dream and reality. That occurs vividly in both the first and last poem which frame the entire *Khumish-lider* cycle found in *Medrish Itsik.* In the final poem "Yakov Ovinu Lernt Mit Zayne Zin 'Mekhirus Yoysef' ",(Father Jacob Teaches His Son "The Selling of Yoysef") characters and setting seems at first glance no different from the previous poems. The normal anacronisms appear to exist, which is to say that Biblical heroes live as middle class provincials in a 1930's style Galician shtetl.and speak in a variety of accents and dialects,--Galician or Slavic/low goyish dialects for every day speech, --and German, French, even English accents when they wish to impress others or themselves. Local landmarks scattered through the town include a tavern, a

city hall ,a church , a night club, and everywhere--familiarJewish foods , especially fish, in a variety of preparations, is found on dining tables.

However, as the poem proceeds, it soon appears that although the names are the same, the hero and his family are no longer Biblical figures but ordinary residents of a real 1930's Galician shtetl. Names are the same but minus the appelation of Hatsadik or Ovinu. All are rehearsing for a real purim shpil about the Biblical Yoysef. The father reminds his son Yoysef that he has already played the role many times before .He cautions him against overacting and of crying too hard when he is thrown into the pit again by his brothers.Matters become confused for the reader, however, when the father urges Yoysef to shed real tears as he passes by his mother's grave. Something is awry, for the mother referred to must be the Biblical Rokhl, since Yakov adds that he would again be willing to serve seven years simply to be able to stroke her hair again. The line between reality and play/dream, which was such a problem earlier for Yosef Hatsadik as he strolled the boulevard, now becomes a problem for the dislocated reader as the present merges with the past, and the poem slips back into Pharaohs' time .Yakov continues to give Yoysef now Hatsadik, fatherly instructions on the matter of dreams, interpetations, grain to survive the famine, and the need to resist the alluring wife of Potifar. After the penultimate stanza, the poem pauses as a hyphenated line separates it from the final ninth. In the last stanza, the reader is suddenly pulled back in 1930's and caught in a dispute between Yakov and his sons. The father asks his sons why they stand so still instead of preparing for the spil, and they reply because he, Yakov, has ruined the purim shpil. Suddenly the entire mythological structure is deflated, which of course is what Manger has been working towards through out the cycle.

Like the young Yosef Hatsadik, the reader is also confused and not certain what is real. By merging time periods, Manger draws the reader into his text where the poet plays with reality and dreams, with plays within a play, with characters in search of a play. Time is telescoped, present and future merge and are shaped/informed /understood in terms of the past. Actions are mysteriously fated, initiated as a result of human drives, human limitations, and historical events. The Grand Text written long ago and now de-mythicized by Manger is reinvented as low mimetic domestic comedy. It suggests that Yoysef and the Jews have been thrown into the pit time and

time again,and that what happens now or in the future has happened before It is a prescient reminder from the poet to his readers in the threatened European world of 1935 Certainly a sharp political warning is contained in the remarkable first poem of the book, "Akeydes Itsik" (The Sacrifice of Isaac) written in 1937 and placed as the opening poem to *Khumish-lider* when it was re-issued as part of the larger *Medrish Itsik* in 1951 .

. Timely warnings of impending disasters make up only a part of the themes conveyed in the poem cycle. *Khumish-lider* suggests also that life is often driven by a variety of desires both negative and positive; love entails longings but can exist beyond death; and personal pain and vision can give rise to greatness; even --as in Yoyself's Hatsadik's case --to loving forgiveness. The comic, the grotesque and the everyday co-exist with their binary opposites, the poignant, the lyrical and the transcendent. .As in Greek myths, Biblical heroes and heroines have many foibles and often sin but a generous Manger forgives them which tends to let the rest of us ordinary people off the traditional religious guilt hook. On the whole, Manger isn't really interested in Great Men or Great Moments and finds both ridiculous. His attention is caught by the small interesting dramas that occur to lesser folk before and after Great Moments. Thus we never see the akeyda, but we observe Eliezer as he waits dutifully at the bottom of the mountain. . Or we watch an adolescent Dina before the terrible consequences of her night on the town. By demythicizing the figures of the Bible Manger is able to posit a secular humanistic neo-romantic vision of reality filled with moments of extraordinary intensities, sensitivies, poignancies, dreams By manipulating the structure of some of his poems Manger, like the expressionists, is able to give his readers a direct experience into his vision of an alternate higher secular reality. In his reappropriated Khumish, Manger rejects both Terekh's ridiculous tribal god replete with dangling penis and potato nose, made in primitive man's image, as well as Abraham's vengeful God, who in contemporary Eastern Europe of the thirties wants to replay the akeyde over again. He also finds no place either for chaos or for the devil, interestingly enough. Perhaps, however, there is room, over in a distant corner, for Khava's aesthetically oriented God...