Mordechai Langer (1894-1943) and the Birth of the Modern Jewish Homosexual

By
Shaun Jacob Halper

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor John M. Efron, Chair
Professor Thomas W. Laqueur
Professor Robert Alter

Spring 2013
Abstract

Mordechai Langer (1894-1943) and the Birth of the Modern Jewish Homosexual

By

Shaun Jacob Halper

Doctor of Philosophy in History
University of California, Berkeley
Professor John M. Efron, Chair

This dissertation takes up the first truly Jewish homosexual identity, which Mordechai Jiří Langer (1894-1943) created in Prague during the 1920s. It is a study of the historical conditions—especially the exclusion of Jews by the masculinist wing of the German homosexual rights movement in the two decades bracketing World War One—that produced the need for the articulation of such an identity in the first place. It enters the cultural and intellectual world of fin de siècle homosexuals where “Jews” and “Judaism” were used as foils, against which some homosexuals were defining themselves politically and culturally. Langer defended the Jewish homosexual from German masculinist attack in the form of two literary projects: his theoretical study Die Erotik der Kabbala (1923) and his first volume of Hebrew poetry, Piyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot (1929). Pushed out by German masculinists, Langer turned inward to the centuries-long Jewish experience to assert a distinctly Jewish homosexual identity. He reconciled homosexuality with Judaism, Hebrew culture, and Zionism and introduced the male homosexual experience to Hebrew poetry for the first time. His reconciliation of homosexuality and Judaism involved five constituent elements: the adumbration of a homosexual Jewish history; a homosexual Jewish theology; a Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew; a sociology of Jewish homosexuality in Hasidism; and a homosexual Jewish politics (a Zionist homosexuality).

Langer’s was not merely a story of exclusion and apologia; he built his specifically Jewish identity in no small measure on his own Hasidic experience and through an exploration of homoerotic Hebrew source material from a time period spanning antiquity to modern times. He combined this material with distinctly German masculinist categories of thought (which included a psychoanalytic and sexological vocabulary). In his theoretical writing, for example, Langer used the Jewish historical record to prove that “male-male Eros” was not only normative, but was the driving motor of its history, which would culminate in a Jewish state.

Although primarily incited by German masculinist ideological considerations, I show too that Langer also absorbed ideas and forms used by a broader range of homosexual writers beyond German masculinism. As a Hebrew poet, for example, Langer was deeply influenced by forms used by homosexual poets within Decadence and Symbolism. In the second half of the dissertation, I use literary-critical methods to prove that Langer employed strategies of representation that were common among a broad range of contemporary homosexual poets, from Stefan George to Arthur Rimbaud. Still, while the content of Langer’s poetry moved beyond apologetic and ideological
considerations, I show that he even conceived his poetic project as a corrective to German masculinist attacks on Jewish aesthetics.

Langer can thus be considered not only a man of Jewish and Hebrew letters, as he is known to a handful of scholars today, but a participant in the burgeoning homosexual public sphere of his day. To tell his story, this study bridges Central European Jewish history and the history of homosexuality as never before. It recovers Langer as the first intellectual in Jewish history to seriously engage with homosexuality as a Jewish issue. Langer also offers scholars an alternative model in which Zionism and homosexuality were conceived as compatible. His story is a case study in the role of religion in the formation of modern homosexual identity.
I watched, I was glad, and I donned pride,

because I am like them, human.

When I die—people will come,

and thread fabric from my clothes for the children.

—Mordechai Langer, from “Dressed in Pride”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Acknowledgments**                                                                                       iv  

**Introduction**                                                                                           1  

Mordechai Jiří Langer as a Homosexual Writer                                                              4  
Interventions in Jewish Historiography, the History of Homosexuality, and Hebrew Criticism                
  An Unexamined Problem                                                                                        5  
  “Jews” and “Judaism” as Critical Categories in Homosexual Self-Definition                               9  
Zionism and Homosexuality                                                                                11  
Homosexuality in Hebrew Literature                                                                        15  
Against Assimilation: Between Identity and Subjectivity                                                   16  
Homosexual Culture from the Center                                                                        20  
Homosexual Coding                                                                                            21  
Chapter Overview                                                                                           22  

**Chapter 1**  
Coming out of the Hasidic Closet: Langer in the Age of Homosexual Emancipation                           24  
  I.  The Bug                                                                                             25  
  II. Jewish Prague on the Eve of WWI                                                                       31  
  III. A “Gay” Hasid at Belze                                                                             33  
  IV. The Homosexual Scene in Prague                                                                      39  
  VI. Jews and the German Homosexual Rights Movement                                                       41  

**Chapter 2**  
Mordechai Langer’s *Jewish* Homosexuality: History, Sociology, Theology, Politics                          53  
  I. A Jewish Homosexuality                                                                             54  
  II. Eros: The Essence of Judaism                                                                         55  
  III. Eros in Context                                                                                   59  
  IV. The “Tragedy” of Homosexuality and Judaism                                                           61  
  V. A Homosexual-Jewish History and The Genre of Homosexual Listing                                      64  
  VI. A Sociology of Jewish Homosexuality: Hasidism as *Männerbund*                                        70  
  VII. Gender, Zionism, and a Homosexual-Jewish Politics                                                  79
Acknowledgements

My graduate career was made possible thanks to the financial support of a number of institutions: first and foremost, the University of California, Berkeley and the Department of History. The Institute for European Studies and Jewish Studies at Berkeley provided a number of invaluable grants for summer support and research trips. I am also very grateful to the Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Quinn Foundation, the Hadassah Brandeis Institute, the Conference Group for Central European History (CGCEH) of the American Historical Association, the Council for European Studies at Columbia University, and the Hellen Diller Foundation for their fellowship aid, without which this dissertation would not have been written. I would also like to thank the Committee on LGBT History of the American Historical Association and the LGBT Religious Archives Network for their kind awards honoring my first preliminary foray into the subject of this dissertation.

I have had the honor to pursue my doctoral degree at UC Berkeley under the supervision of some of the finest scholars in the world. I learned tremendously from Professor John Efron’s vast knowledge and profound insights into the long sweep of Jewish history. Professor Efron’s mastery of the historian’s craft is truly breathtaking. His instruction and his writing will always be a model and inspiration for me. I am thankful to Professor Efron for his patience and support throughout my career at Berkeley. He has taken enthusiastic interest in my education and has been my strong advocate from the moment we met. I thank him also for reading drafts of this project so incisively and for pushing me to do my best work.

I am also incredibly indebted to Professor Thomas Laqueur, a true master of European history. His infectious passion for cultural history, his creativity and brilliance, and his intellectual rigor have made a deep impression on me. I thank him for his careful readings of this dissertation and for providing repeated encouragement along the way. I also wish to express my gratitude to Professor Robert Alter for his enthusiastic support of this project. I thank him for his meticulous readings of my translations and chapters; his rich and stimulating comments have been invaluable. Professor Alter’s teaching and scholarship, which needs no introduction, has made an indelible impression on me and has stimulated my interest in literature and criticism.

I also wish to express my gratitude to Professor David Biale for his generous support and encouragement throughout my doctoral career. Thanks also to Professor David Myers for believing in this project and for helping me to publish an earlier draft of my work in the Jewish Quarterly Review. Special thanks to Rev. Dr. Jane Shaw, in whose wonderful seminar on religion and homosexuality I first began to think about this project. I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Dina Aranoff for her wise council along the way. I would also like to thank Professors Carla Hesse, Aron Rodrigue, and Ronald Hendel for joining my exam for candidacy and for playing a formative role in my doctoral education. Finally, I would also like to thank Michael Stanislawski and the late Professor Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, who first stimulated my interest in Jewish History at Columbia.

I owe an immeasurable debt to my friend, Amos Bitzan. Amos is not only one of the finest scholars I have had the pleasure of getting to know at Berkeley, but one of the most generous friends I could ever ask for. His brilliance is only rivaled by his kindness and sensitivity. His
encouragement and advice helped me at every step of my graduate training and this dissertation would not have been written without his support.

I am also very grateful to have had such wonderful and warm colleagues and friends at Berkeley. I would especially like to thank Sam and Emily Redman, Prof. Noah Strote, Helaine Blumenthal, Sarah Cramsey, Prof. Liora Halperin, Eli Rosenblatt, Nicholas Baer, Shaina Hammerman, David Moshvegh, Sokrat Postoli, Yosef Rosen, and Jacob Haubenreich. I am especially grateful to Norman Underwood and Prof. Eliyahu Stern for reading portions of this study and offering useful advice. Outside of Berkeley, I owe special thanks to Ben Ryan, who generously proofread a substantial portion of this study in its final stage. Thank you also to Seth Anziska and David Jacobson for generously reading and helping with the dissertation.

Many friends and family members beyond the academy have supported me over the course of the many years that it takes to complete a doctoral degree. It would take many pages to acknowledge all of them. Among the many kindnesses shown to me, I would like to single out the tremendous support I have received from Ellen Levine, my dear friend and advocate. Chezky and Aline Fruchter opened their home to me whenever I needed a place in New York. Thank you Cip for your love, friendship, patience, and innumerable kindnesses over the years.

Kareen and Benny, I love you dearly and thank you for everything.

For my mother, to whom I owe everything.
Introduction

This dissertation is the first historical study of the modern homosexual Jewish experience prior to Stonewall, the great turning point in LGBT history that inaugurated the twentieth century’s second gay and lesbian liberation movement in 1969. It is a history of what is the first truly Jewish homosexual identity and of the historical conditions that produced the need for the articulation of such an identity in the first place.

The first truly Jewish homosexual identity was formulated by Mordechai Jiří Langer (1894-1943), a poorly studied but intriguing and eccentric writer most often associated with the Prague circle of German-speaking Jewish figures around Franz Kafka and Max Brod, or with his far-more-famous brother, František Langer, the Czech nationalist and playwright. Langer wrote while living in Prague from 1919 to 1939 and then, after fleeing the Nazis, in Jewish Palestine from 1939 to his untimely death in 1943. Writing in German, Hebrew, and Czech, and in a number of disparate genres, Langer reconciled homosexuality with Judaism, Hebrew culture, and Zionism for the first time in Jewish history. Between the wars, he also introduced the male homosexual experience to Hebrew poetry for the first time.\footnote{Following Langer, when this dissertation speaks of “homosexuality” it refers exclusively to male homosexuality unless otherwise noted.}

Langer’s was the first truly Jewish homosexual identity in three intertwined senses. He was the first to think through the modern language of homosexual subjectivity (the idea that same-sex desire made one a distinct subject) using the internal vocabulary of Judaism and Jewish culture. Second, he was the first to defend same-sex desire as normative to, and as a constituent element of, Judaism, Jewish culture, aesthetics, and nationalism. Third, Langer translated ideas, literary styles, genres, and modes of thinking about the homosexual experience that were being explored within contemporary homosexual letters (including sexology and psychoanalysis) using a Jewish and Hebrew cultural vocabulary. In his poetry, he used literary forms and strategies of representation that were common among contemporary homosexual poets; while in his major theoretical treatise, he engaged with other homosexual writers, incorporating their ideas about Jewish gender and sexuality in his writings. He thus can be considered not only a man of Jewish letters but a participant in the burgeoning homosexual public sphere of his day.

As a mediator between homosexual and Jewish culture, Langer is a unique historical figure. Historians of the Jews have yet to locate such a figure in modern Jewish history before the 1970s despite the expansive growth in LGBT historiography over the past four decades.\footnote{Langer, of course, was hardly the first homosexual Jew, but he was the first to think through his homosexuality along with Jewish ideas, texts, aesthetics, and politics (and vice versa, to consider Judaism with the modern language of sexual subjectivity). The lives and work of Magnus Hirschfeld, Otto Weininger, Benedict Friedländer, Jacob Israel de Haan, and Marcel Proust (among others) also embody a distinct Jewish}

\footnote{Langer, of course, was hardly the first homosexual Jew, but he was the first to think through his homosexuality along with Jewish ideas, texts, aesthetics, and politics (and vice versa, to consider Judaism with the modern language of sexual subjectivity). The lives and work of Magnus Hirschfeld, Otto Weininger, Benedict Friedländer, Jacob Israel de Haan, and Marcel Proust (among others) also embody a distinct Jewish pronunciation: The “í” in “Jiří” is long and pronounced like “seen.” The letter “š” in “František” should be pronounced “sh” as in “ship.” The letter “ž” is pronounced like “z” in “azure.” The letter “ř” in “Jiří” is the fricative form of the Czech “r,” which is pronounced like the combination of “rs” or “rz.”}
explicates how Langer thought through homosexuality with Judaism; how he drew upon homosexual cultural thought and the new language of sexuality to reconceive Jewish history, Jewish theology, and Jewish nationalism; how he introduced the male homosexual experience to Hebrew literature; how he fit within contemporary homosexual politics and culture; and how his writings shared in specific homosexual styles, genres, and concerns. It is a chapter in modern Jewish and LGBT history that has never been told before.

This study maintains that the birth of the modern Jewish homosexual as an identity at this particular moment in time is best understood through the prism of developments internal to the German homosexual emancipation movement during the two decades bracketing the First World War. This movement, which was almost exclusively a male affair, was split on a number of homosexual identity by accident of birth; or because their ideas were informed by the ubiquitous conflation of Jewish masculinity and sexual inversion in this era; or because, like Hirschfeld, their ideas, political activism, and style were defamed as “Jewish” by antisemites. But these figures did not reconcile homosexuality and Judaism in any sustained or substantial way; nor did they think about their dual identities as mutually constitutive; nor did they draw on the Jewish textual, religious, or cultural tradition in any way to think about homosexuality. Langer was the first to integrate homosexuality with Judaism, Jewish texts, and Jewish culture (including Zionism). Weininger comes closest to qualifying as a figure who thinks homosexuality with Judaism and Jews, but he is problematic. In his raddibly antisemitic and misogyny Geschlecht und Character (Vienna: Braumüller, 1903), he certainly used categories like “the Jew” and “the sexual invert” together, but “the Jew” in Weininger’s thought is not about real Jews, Jewish texts and ideas, nor Jewish culture, but an antisemitic and racist abstraction of “the Jew.” Benedict Friedländer, a leading homosexual figure, was like Weininger, entrenched in an extremist German hyper-masculinism and German nationalism. As for Weininger, his antisemitism and “self-hatred” culminated in suicide. De Haan offers a few choice hints at thinking about his dual identity as a problem, but his ideas are not developed in any sustained way. Magnus Hirschfeld was a proud Jew, but there is no explicit evidence that this influenced his ideas about homosexuality. On the issue of the Jewish identity of these figures, see the following: on Hirschfeld, Elena Mancini, Magnus Hirschfeld and the Quest for Sexual Freedom: A History of the First International Sexual Freedom Movement (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 136-139; on De Haan, see Michael Berkowitz, “Rejecting Zion, Embracing the Orient: The Life and Death of Jacob Israel De Haan” in Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar, eds., Orientalism and the Jews (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 109-124; on Weininger, see the essays in Nancy A. Horowitz and Barbara Hyams eds. Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) and David S. Luft, Eros and Inwardness in Vienna: Weininger, Musil, Doderer (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003). For an inroad to Proust’s Jewishness, see Isabelle Monette Ebert, “‘Le Premier Dreyfusard: Jewishness in Marcel Proust’” The French Review 67:2 (December 1993), 196-217.

The pioneering studies are James D. Steakley, The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany (Salem: Ayer Press, 1975); John Lauritson and David Thorstad, The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (New York: Times Change, 1974); and the collection of essays in Michael Bollé ed. Eldorado: Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850-1950: Geschichte, Alltag und Kultur (Berlin: Hentrich, 1984). Of course there has been much work done since, which I cite later in the dissertation, but scholars have generally followed Steakley’s language of “emancipation” and his periodization (1860-1933) for Germany. This periodization must be adjusted somewhat for the rest of West-Central Europe, including Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, and England, where 1938 makes more sense as an end date for this era. Though Langer wrote during the course of the interwar, his writings fit firmly within cultural trends in homosexual history that characterize the entire “emancipation” period from the 1860s, as we shall see. This dissertation also follows historian Florence Tamagne’s in isolating the interwar period (1918-1933 in Germany) as the high maturation point of the era of homosexual emancipation (1860-1933), which she describes as the “golden age of homosexual movements.” The interwar was characterized by the increase in homosexual visibility and the proliferation of discussions
fundamental issues: What was the nature of homosexuality? Did it have an etiology? Was it a phenomenon specific to a minority or was it a universal one found in varying degree among all human beings? What was the homosexual’s gender? What should homosexual culture look like? Where did the homosexual fit within the culture and politics of the majority? What posture should he take vis-à-vis bourgeois norms of respectability: accommodation or subversion? What cultural and political meaning could the homosexual make of his same-sex desire? Did same-sex desire have a purpose or a meaning? or was it merely a fact of nature or a pathology? The homosexual emancipation movement was also divided about what politics the male homosexual should embrace, including his relationship to nationalism and the rights of women; it was also a movement that was defined and split by antisemitism.

On the eve of the First World War, two factions were most visible on the German scene. The hyper-masculinist, hyper-nationalist, and misogynist wing of the movement was using Judentum (the German term for both “Jewry” and “Judaism”) as a foil against which to define homosexual culture. These German masculinists (as historians call them) argued that Judaism, Jewish gender, and even Jewish aesthetics were entirely hostile to homosexual culture, which they believed was the font of national culture and politics. Concurrently, they and other antisemites (not necessarily homosexual) pegged the liberal and positivist faction of the movement, led by Magnus Hirschfield and his Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, as “Jewish.”

Mordechai Langer was deeply attuned to the cultural Zeitgeist, which was characterized by a broad disaffection among intellectuals and artists with positivism and liberalism (known to intellectual historians as the fin de siècle “crisis of reason”). In Prague in particular, Jewish writers rejected the integrative bourgeois politics of their fathers to search for Jewish cultural authenticity. Many embraced Zionism. In such a climate, the appeal of Magnus Hirschfeld’s liberal and scientific-materialist model of homosexual identity was limited. Coupled with German masculinist attacks, a new need emerged to turn inward to the Jewish historical, cultural, and religious experience to think through homosexuality on Judaism’s own intrinsic terms. Reconciliations of homosexuality with Zionism and the revival of Hebrew culture were no less pressing since they too came under German masculinist attack. Langer rose to meet this challenge, and thus, the modern Jewish homosexual was born.


Mordechai Jiří Langer as a Homosexual Writer

The present dissertation focuses exclusively on Langer’s literary oeuvre from the 1920s, which included his major German study *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (1923) and his first published volume of Hebrew poetry, *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot* [*Liturgical and Love poetry*] (1929). Mordechai Jiří Langer has until very recently been outside the purview of Jewish historiography. Langer does not belong to the canon of modern Jewish thought or Hebrew literature. Historians and literary critics have largely neglected his literary oeuvre; he is hardly known even to specialists in Jewish history. Not surprisingly, he is also entirely unknown to LGBT historiography and historians of sexuality. No book-length study exists in English on any aspect of his thought. The few studies that do exist do not consider the subject of homosexuality with any sustained attention, though his homosexuality is acknowledged by most (though rather cryptically by scholars prior to the turn of the 21st century).

Surely one reason for the scholarly neglect of the issue is that Langer’s engagement with homosexuality and with homosexual literature is not entirely self-evident without training and familiarity with LGBT history and literature. No scholar could doubt that the texts under present consideration clearly take up male-male love and eroticism (if often through euphemism, codes, and obfuscating devices). But the fact that these texts concern the male homosexual—the modern category of person—and the fact that they use the language and *forms* of contemporary homosexual literature needs to be demonstrated. This dissertation’s first major intervention, then, is to do the bare-bones work of intellectual history: to illuminate the meaning and form of these texts by situating them within a specific discursive context. This will allow us to see clearly how Langer translated contemporary homosexual writing practices and ideologies into a distinctly Jewish idiom.

But there is more. It is not just the meaning of these texts that will concern us; it is their *significance* as well: the cultural and ideological labor that they performed for a homosexual Jew during the 1920s. First, Langer used these texts to battle antisemitism within the homosexual rights movement and to do the work of asserting a dual identity under fierce attack. Second, he enlisted the Jewish historical and textual tradition to help make sense and meaning of a modern subjectivity (an organization of a distinct kind of self around same-sex desire) that had been previously unknown to that past. And third, he developed ways of speaking about a taboo subject using the internal historical and textual materials of the Jewish experience. He even reversed the terms of

---

6 M.D. Georg Langer, *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (Prague: Dr. Josef Flesch, 1923); Mordechai Georgo Langer, *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot* [*Liturgical and Love Poems*] (Prague: Dr. Josef Flesch, 1928). I refer to *Die Erotik der Kabbala* as EK in the notes. Although Langer’s engagement with the issue of homosexuality does not end in 1929, I have restricted the scope of this dissertation to the 1920s because of limitations of time and space. However, I do draw on Langer’s writings anecdotally from the 1930s and early 1940s where appropriate. In chapter four, my arguments concerning Langer’s Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality are based on analysis of Langer’s entire corpus of Hebrew poetry, though I have drawn almost all of my examples for demonstrating its thesis from poetry written during the 1920s. For Langer’s second volume of Hebrew poetry see Mordechai Georgo Langer, *Me’at Tzori: Shirim* [*A Bit of Balsam: Poems*] (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1943 [תש”ג]). Langer’s other major studies—his two studies of phallic worship in Jewish ritual (published in *Imago* and several coded portions of *Nine Gates* (like his erotic attachment to the Belze Rebbe and the folktale of “transsexual” dybbuks) can be fruitfully included in any future extended analysis of homosexuality in his writing. Why the theme of homosexuality became even more coded in *Nine Gates* is an interesting question that I hope to take up elsewhere.
homosexuality’s marginalization and argued instead that same-sex desire was at the heart of Judaism, arguing that same-sex erotic love would revive modern Jewish culture and strengthen Jewish nationalism.\(^7\)

Scholars who are primarily interested in Langer’s intellectual biography may find the focus of this study reductive and even overdetermined.\(^8\) Langer was interested in a great many subjects, texts, and authors beyond the world of homosexual letters, psychoanalysis, and sexology. This is undoubtedly true, but this study is not an intellectual biography and makes no claims to be. To take up Langer as a homosexual writer is not to suggest that this was the entirety of the man. Still, as we shall see, this focus is not unjustified. The issue of homosexuality is central to his thought and to his art: neither can be fully understood without accounting for it.

What this means is that this study will be concerned with Langer the man, the intellectual, and the poet in so far as he illuminates our central concern: tracing why and how the Jewish homosexual emerged as a distinct kind of modern identity. It will highlight those historical forces that produced the “modern homosexual Jew” as a cultural and intellectual construct. An intellectual biographer would focus on Langer’s much broader range of interests beyond homosexuality; she would emphasize Langer’s personal motivations, reading habits, social circles, and intellectual pedigree. We too will need to understand much of Langer’s wide-ranging intellectual interests to understand why his reconciliation of Judaism and homosexuality looks the way it does. But this study is only secondarily interested in these matters.

Interventions in Jewish Historiography, the History of Homosexuality, and Hebrew Criticism

An Unexamined Problem

While scholars have studied post-Stonewall lesbian and gay Jewish culture for some time now, historians have largely neglected Jewish homosexuals as a discrete subject of analysis within the Jewish historical experience from the eighteenth century.\(^9\) This is somewhat surprising given their

---

\(^7\) My distinction between meaning and significance has been influenced by the classic New Historicist study of Stephen Greenblatt, *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

\(^8\) The meaning of the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality,” of course, are not self-evident. And although the chronological scope of this study takes place after the “invention of sexuality,” the matter of using the word “homosexual” to describe Langer is also not self-evident. See discussion below.

\(^9\) Jewish Studies has developed something of a Queer (and Queer-Theoretical) subfield, much of which turns on the post-Stonewall LGBT Jewish and Israeli community. See my bibliographic overview of this research in Shaun Jacob Halper, “Coming Out of the Hasidic Closet: Jiří Mordechai Langer (1894–1943) and the Fashioning of Homosexual-Jewish Identity,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 2 (2011): 189–231. There I also list much of the scholarly attention paid to pre-modern male-male love and desire among Jews. In my article, I failed to properly recognize the major contributions of Eliot Wolfson’s numerous studies on the homoerotics of Kabbala. Much of Wolfson’s pioneering scholarship, as well as the other studies I mention there and that have been written since, are cited in the course of this dissertation (they are also available in the bibliography).
proliferation of interest in Jewish gender and (hetero)sexuality over the past three decades. Certainly part of this oversight is due to a dearth of sources. The present study is therefore all the more important as a rare window into the thinking of an interwar homosexual Jew who found his dual identity to be fraught and problematic, and therefore, worth writing and publishing about. That is not to say that homosexuals and homosexuality have made no appearance in Jewish historiography at all. They have and in significant ways which overlap and inform the birth of the modern Jewish homosexual traced here.

In his classic studies of sexuality and masculinity in post-Enlightenment Europe, George Mosse argued that Jews and homosexuals had parallel and interlocking histories. Both groups were written out by nationalists and proponents of bourgeois respectability as incompatible with the aesthetic and moral health of the social body. Mosse also demonstrated that Jewish men were regularly berated as effeminate and sometimes conflated with “sexual invert” in a range of elite cultural discourses. It was against this Jewish-homosexual “countertype” that the aesthetic and cultural ideal of masculinity was fashioned from the Enlightenment. Langer, as we shall see, anticipated a good portion of this work and referred to many texts, historical figures, and ideas that have concerned scholars thinking about “queer” Jewish history.


George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison, Wis., 1985), and idem, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York, 1996). The parallel, and often intersecting, histories of Jews and “homosexuals” begins prior to the modern period. Two classics on
Complementing Mosse’s work in a number of in-depth studies, Sander Gilman demonstrated how fin-de-siècle antisemitism and homophobia were each imbricated with representations of the other, demonstrating that “symbolic elements of one social representation could be—and frequently were—exchanged with those of [the] other.”\textsuperscript{13} John Efron demonstrated that these assumptions about Jewish masculinity extended into mainstream medical and psychiatric calls for Jewish psychic regeneration, calls which asserted homosexuality as the particular pathological provenance of the neurotic Jew and his degenerate body.\textsuperscript{14} Jay Geller and Warren J. Blumenfeld explored these themes in reverse, considering how the racialization of the Jew affected the production of the modern homosexual (Geller did this specifically for Freudian psychoanalysis).\textsuperscript{15} Matti Bunzl summarizes these historiographic developments: “the historical trajectories of Jews and queers have been linked by a joint logic of social articulation;” their “abjection gave coherence to the fiction of German nationness” and both “became central players in the social drama of modernity.”\textsuperscript{16} To be sure, these scholars, and much of the subsequent volumes they have inspired, have approached the subject of homosexuality indirectly within a broader interest in medical, racial-scientific, sexological, and antisemitic representations of Jewish masculinity and the Jewish body.\textsuperscript{17}

\vspace{1cm}


\vspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{14} John M. Efron, \textit{Medicine and the German Jews: A History} (New Haven: Yale University, 2001). Sander Gilman’s many studies also take up mainstream scientific and medical discourse as well.


\vspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{16} Bunzl, \textit{Symptoms of Modernity}, 12–13.

\vspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{17} Much attention has been paid to the subject of Jewish masculinity in the modern era (to say nothing of Jewish history as a whole). For a sense of the proliferation of interest in Jewish masculinity and the Jewish body, see the many fine essays and bibliographies in Benjamin Maria Baader, Sharon Gillerman, and Paul Lerner, eds., \textit{Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender, and History} (Indiana University Press, 2012); Harry Brod and Shawn Zevit, \textit{Brother Keepers: New Perspectives on Jewish Masculinity} (Harriman, Tenn.: Men’s Studies Press, 2010). On male Jewish body culture, see Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni, \textit{Emancipation Through Muscles: Jews and Sports in Europe} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Sharon Gillerman, “More than Skin Deep: Histories of the Modern Jewish Body” \textit{Jewish Quarterly Review} 95 (2005): 470-478; Daniel Wildmann, \textit{Der veränderbare Körper: Jüdische Turner, Männerlichkeit und das Wiedergewinnen von Geschichte in Deutschland um 1900} (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).
Mordechai Jiri Langer and the Birth of the Modern Jewish Homosexual inaugurates a shift in focus in modern Jewish history; it concerns the internal world of fin-de-siècle homosexual experience and the way an interwar Jewish homosexual made meaning of his sexual subjectivity within a world in which doctors and other elite cultural figures regularly conflated Jewishness and homosexuality. Langer shifts the historian’s gaze from representations of Jews and homosexuals produced by institutions (medicine, sexology, race science, etc.) to the reception history of those representations in the thought of an actual Jewish homosexual who articulated a dual identity.

Scholars have paid much attention to Otto Weininger, a homosexual Viennese Jewish convert to Protestantism who caused a sensation when he published his doctoral dissertation as Geschlecht und Charakter [Sex and Character] in 1903 (after which he killed himself in the Vienna house in which Beethoven had died). A rigid neo-Kantian, Weininger argued for the moral inferiority of the abstractions “woman” and “Jew” based on a theory of human bisexuality and on racist ideas about Jewish psychology. Much of Weininger scholarship has turned on the question of whether he is truly an antisemite and misogynist or a liberal in virulently hostile clothing. Other scholars have used Weininger as the archetype of Jewish (and to a lesser extent, homosexual) “self-hatred” and view his suicide as the logical culmination of his ideas.

This is not the place to evaluate the utility or historicity of terms like “self-hatred” or their viability vis-à-vis Weininger. What is relevant is to point out is that for historians, Mordechai Langer can serve fruitfully as a counterpoint to the “self-hating” Weininger (and can also change the subject a bit: what else is there to say about Weininger, really?). Langer is a figure who positively reaffirmed his Jewishness and his homosexuality; even more interestingly, though, he thought them through together not simply as abstractions, but using the ideas, texts, and genres developed within these respective communities. What is more, Langer thought through his homosexuality and Jewishness together, not only against the backdrop of racism and antisemitism or as symbolic constructs, but using internal Jewish and homosexual cultural materials that he drew upon to make sense of his place in both worlds.

---


20 In general, very few works in Jewish Studies (excluding post-Stonewall-directed studies), historical or otherwise, have engaged with the vast scholarship of LGBT Studies and Queer Theory. This dissertation hopes to bring these otherwise disparate fields of study into closer conversation. The work of Jeffrey Shandler, Elliot Wolfson, David Shneer, Caryn Aviv, Daniel Boyarin, Naomi Seidman, Yuval Yonay, and a few others in Jewish Studies are exceptions.
“Jews” and “Judaism” as Critical Categories in Homosexual Self-Definition

Another historiographical point of intersection between Jewish and LGBT history is the disproportionate role that Jews have played in medicine, sexology, and psychoanalysis. These were the central institutions (along with the press and the law) for dispersing the language of sexuality and the new taxonomy of sexual subjectivity (like the words “homosexual” and “heterosexual”), which in Foucault’s terms “produced” the modern homosexual as a distinct personage, at least in discourse. To be sure, the disproportionate influence of Jews in these fields was part of the much wider social role that Jews played in modern medical discourse and practice in general. John Efron has argued that Jews were attracted to medicine for both the social standing and the opportunities for self-representation it afforded them, to “use the discourse and methodology of medicine to ponder the place of Jews and the nature of Jewishness in the modern, secular world.” Efron also showed that Jewish race scientists in particular asserted Jewish agency when they reclaimed the tools of their trade to reread dominant understandings of Jewish racial characteristics and to “assert Jewish equality and very often, moral superiority.”

Whether or not Jewish doctors at the forefront of Sexuwlwissenschaft were motivated by needs to vindicate or legitimate their Jewish identities has not yet been systematically studied, with the exception of psychoanalysis where the issue has been debated for many years. The issue is also important because Jewish doctors often also played leading roles in political campaigns for sexual liberalization and women’s rights (one thinks of Magnus Hirschfeld, Max Marcuse, Max Hodann, Friedrich Wolf, Felix Theilhaber, and many others). Jewish doctors (along with their Christian colleagues) lead campaigns to decriminalize abortion (Paragraph 218) and male homosexuality (Paragraph 175); they were promoters of family planning, encouraged efforts to make contraception more available; and they were at the forefront of sexual education efforts. Preliminary attempts to think about the role of Jews in relation to scientia sexualis as a whole have been offered by Erwin Haeberle and Christina von Braun, but the issue has not received sustained attention.

21 John M. Efron, Medicine and the German Jews, 7.

22 John M. Efron, Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race in Fin-de-Siècle Europe (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 32.


The role that Jews played as leaders of sexual liberalization was not lost on their enemies. In fact, the portrayal of Jews as the main advocates of sexual reform, as Dagmar Herzog has shown, “became a racist, right-wing construct.” Herzog argues that this construct eventually became central to the Nazi portrayal of the Weimar Republic, which was “reduced to sex” as a “hothouse of decadence and promiscuity.” Given that many Jewish figures involved with sexual freedom were also attracted to socialism, Nazis had an easy time connecting this phenomenon with “the larger phantasmagorical menace of ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’.”

The homosexual subculture and political movement that emerged in Central Europe from 1850 (and arguably Western Europe as well) was deeply affected by this history of Jews and antisemitism. Magnus Hirschfeld, for example, was the most visible and important leader of the homosexual political movement and was regularly attacked by antisemites. When the Nazis took power in 1933, Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science was one of their first targets. But it was not merely antisemites from outside the homosexual rights movement who forced the Jewish issue by binding homosexuals to Jewry. It was also forced from within. Jews and Judaism played critical roles as foils in the self-definition of homosexual theorists.

While the antisemitism of this moment is well known to LGBT historians and historians of Wilhelmine and Weimar sexuality in general, scholars have not sufficiently examined or emphasized the ways in which “the Jewish question” affected homosexual cultural self-definition as well as its relation to German politics. Concern with Jews and Judaism was not only linked to wider political concerns on the national German stage, but can be found in theoretical work concerned with homosexual identity, culture, and social life. In historicizing Langer’s literary oeuvre, this dissertation demonstrates how Jews were used as critical categories of thought within homosexual literature of this period. Jews and homosexuals were not merely parallel travelers at the back of modernity’s bus, they were agents invested in the other’s self-making.

---


27 This story can be thought of as the emancipatory-era (1860-1933) homosexual chapter in David Nirenberg’s magisterial Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition (New York: Norton, 2013). Nirenberg’s study concerns a tradition of using Jews and Judaism in critical critique from antiquity. He explicitly distinguishes his concerns from the history of antisemitism, although the two often overlap. This present study will concern figures who were antisemites but also fit within Nirenberg’s framework. For the history of antisemitism, see Robert S. Wistrich, A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to Global Jihad (New York: Yale University Press, 1987); and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable (Yale University Press, 1993).
By understanding how German masculinists used “Jews” and “Judaism” as critical categories of thought, this study will explore much deeper questions related to the cultural logic they made of same-sex love in this period. Although the superficial contours of the history of the German homosexual emancipation movement have been told by others, I would argue that the big and interesting questions that shaped this movement have not been explained clearly or sufficiently. Beneath the political debates of this movement (and thus beneath the reconciliation between Judaism and homosexuality that it indirectly engendered through Langer), lurk a number of simple but very profound questions: What is the meaning of same-sex desire? Does it have a story? Why do homosexual people exist? How can the existence of homosexual love be reconciled with other narratives of modernity: nationalist, religious, historical, Romantic, positivist? What story can homosexuals tell themselves about themselves to make sense of their purpose and place in the world? Historians of homosexuality for several decades now have largely focused on questions of taxonomy and power—through the institutions of the law, the press, and especially medicine and science—following, of course, Michel Foucault (more on this below). As a result, they have often lost sight of the big narratives and cultural meanings that many homosexuals were creating for themselves during this period (these were not necessarily at odds with science, though sometimes they were). With a handful of exceptions, even the work that has brought attention to homosexual thought and cultural practices, like its obsession with Hellenism or with aesthetics (explored in chapter three), has not sufficiently explained the logic or the meaning-work of this obsession. Although this is not a comprehensive study of this movement by any means, through its focus on one author and his intellectual world, this study will highlight these deeper points of significance and explain some of the ways that these bigger questions were answered. 

**Zionism and Homosexuality**

One final area in which Jewish historiography has considered LGBT history before is in thinking about Zionism, again largely through the prism of gender and antisemitism. Zionism, of course, was a movement deeply shaped by the intellectual currents of the fin de siècle including

---

28 It is my contention that these kinds of meaning-related questions are often sidelined or ignored entirely by scholars. Perhaps more importantly, these are also questions that are rarely openly raised within contemporary homosexual culture (with some exceptions of course), which is largely (and rightfully) preoccupied with political and civil rights. This study also directs attention to the ways in which homosexuals conceived of their experience that went beyond biology or psychology into culture, religion, aesthetics, and politics. In this I am in line with David Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008). In general, I have been heavily influenced by the work of the historian David Halperin who has written so deeply and movingly about homosexual culture, history, and politics.

antisemitism. Much attention has been paid to the ways that Zionist leaders seemed to have absorbed much of the broader cultural critique of Jewish masculinity and the Jewish body. Famously calling for a new “Muscular Judaism,” Max Nordau (1849-1923), for example, hoped to rejuvenate Jewish bodies and re-masculinize Jewish men through a return to agricultural labor, sports, and the promotion of physical culture.\(^\text{30}\) Just as Jews were a deterritorialized nation, they were also perceived as disembodied: the return to the soil of Palestine was expected to coincide with their reclaiming of normal physicality (which was coded as masculine). Their ailment was captured in the Yiddish moniker for Jews as Luftmenschen [people in the air]. As David Biale writes, “Zionism promised an erotic revolution for the Jews: the creation of a virile New Hebrew Man but also the rejection of the inequality of women found in traditional Judaism in favor of full equality between the sexes in all spheres of life.”\(^\text{31}\)

To be sure, and this is too often forgotten by scholars who should know better, the critique of Jewish masculinity was not only a Zionist affair; it was also shared by a range of Jewish political factions, which were far larger and influential than Zionism. Furthermore, it was not simply political organizations and ideologues that promoted body culture. There was widespread participation by the Jewish masses in organized and professional sports, in dueling fraternities, and a range of clubs and organizations involving physical activity and self-defense. These Jewish clubs spanned the political spectrum and included Zionists across Europe, Bundists in Eastern Europe, and liberals in Western Europe. This fact belies the ideological and popular myth that it was Zionists alone who were singularly concerned with the transformation of the “Jewish man” and the Jewish body.\(^\text{32}\) Ideological concern with the Jewish body began far earlier, as John Efron writes, “The modern era has seen the construction of an enduring Jewish type—the sickly Jew. He was first created, golem-like, by a host of unlikely ideological bedfellows: anti-emancipationist Christians and maskilim of the eighteenth century, then Zionists, assimilationists, and antisemites in the following two centuries.”\(^\text{33}\)

Be that as it may, Langer was a Zionist and linked homosexuality and nationalism, and so our attention will be focused in this direction as well. There is no doubt that among elites, there was concern with reversing the perceived social and physical “degeneration” of Jews, especially Jewish men.\(^\text{34}\) But whether or not Zionists had sexuality and homosexuality on their minds has become a subject of heated debate, which needs to be considered.

In his highly controversial Unheroic Conduct, Daniel Boyarin, a specialist in Rabbinics, argued that modern Jewish masculinity developed through a process of assimilation of secular European norms. During this process of assimilation, Jewish ideologues rejected a centuries-long Ashkenazic [Central and East European] rabbinic ideal, which was at odds with it. Boyarin contends that the rabbinic elite of the Talmudic era (the Talmud was completed by the 6\(^\text{th}\) or 7\(^\text{th}\) century) promoted a


\(^{31}\) David Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 176-177.

\(^{32}\) Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni eds., *Emancipation through Muscles*.


“feminized” masculinity, one which affirmed gentleness, passivity and intellectualism (Boyarin characterizes this ideal using the Yiddish term “Edelkayt,” which he translates as “civility” but which is better translated as “gentle refinement”). This specifically Jewish masculinity was fashioned in opposition to the physicality, aggression, and martial values of European masculinity. What’s more, this rabbinc ideal of the “gentle Jewish male” gave way to homosocial forms of socialization where a range of same-sex feelings, desires, and bonding—including erotic attachment—could be expressed. Enter modernity: when this ahistorical rabbinc ideal, which is vilified by antisemites and race scientists, begins to haunt major figures of German-speaking Jewry like Freud and Herzl. Boyarin argued that both Jewish emancipation and Zionism (which he equates) sought to refashion the Jewish man along non-Jewish gender and sexual norms.

What’s most relevant for our purposes is what Boyarin has to say about Zionism and homosexuality. While the promotion of a new Jewish man by some Zionist ideologues is not in doubt, Boyarin took their program one step further: he argued that Zionism embarked on a “heterosexualizing agenda” (to use Yaron Peleg’s phrase); it attempted to “straighten” Jewish men. Drawing on the pioneering work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a scholar of English literature and one of the pioneering figures of Queer Theory who does not deal with Zionism at all, Boyarin argued that Zionists, like Western European male culture more broadly, suffered from “homosexual panic.” This term was used by Sedgwick to describe the broad hostility and resistance among males in Western Europe (but her focus is really late Victorian Britain), which emerged in the wake of increased homosexual visibility and political activism; the spread of the new language of “sexuality” (including the invention of the homo/hetero taxonomic order still with us); and the broader attack on male privilege represented by the feminist movement. Boyarin argued that

35 Boyarin’s pre-modern rabbinc ideal is belied by the historical evidence of martial phenomena among medieval Jews. For examples see David Biale, Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History (New York: Schocken, 1986).

36 The term “homosocial” is a social-science neologism (though not quite so new anymore) that was popularized in LGBT studies by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. “Homosocial” refers to the entire range of feelings and manners of association that may exist between members of the same-sex including “homosexuality,” which refers specifically (at least in its colloquial usage) to same-sex genital sexuality. Some scholars prefer the term because it suggests an unbroken continuum between male-male friendship and homosexuality (although this too is an ideological assumption that is usually asserted by scholars and not proven). This present study will in part concern a number of theories concerning the boundary between friendship and same-sex subjectivity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 2.

37 The famous homoerotic friendship between Resh Lakish and Rav Yohanan is Boyarin’s shining example of this homoerotic potential between gentle learned Jewish men. Boyarin, 127-150. As we shall see, Langer anticipated Boyarin’s queer use of Resh Lakish and Rav Yohanan by about seventy years. See chapter two.

38 Of course there is not one kind of Zionism. Boyarin refers to what he calls “Herzilian Zionism.”

39 Boyarin, 17.

Zionists (or at least Zionist leaders) were attuned to antisemitic discourse about Jewish gender and sexuality and had absorbed the conflation of Jewish men and homosexuals discussed before (and according to Boyarin, this conflation was based in more than a kernel of truth). Whence the Zionist interest in a “heterosexualization” campaign.

Boyarin’s thesis has been significantly challenged by Allan Arkush and Hillel Kieval (among others) and these challenges do not need to be rehashed here. When it comes to Zionism, there is no doubt that some important ideologues were concerned with masculinity, but there is very little evidence of a “heterosexualizing campaign.” More likely, as Yaron Peleg argues and as the evidence (at least from Hebrew literature) suggests, Zionism was ambivalent about same-sex eroticism, but not explicitly hostile to it. Still, until a comprehensive social history of Zionist youth movements takes up this question, the verdict will not be definitive.

As we shall see, Mordechai Langer had a very different vision of Zionism and the nature of same-sex desire in the Jewish past. Langer affords the intellectual historian an alternative to Boyarin’s conceptualization. For Langer, the history of same-sex desire in the Jewish past is available to the modern Jewish homosexual and to Zionism. He envisioned same-sex desire as a constituent element of Zionism, and in turn, he envisioned Zionism as continuous with the centuries-long Jewish historical, religious, and aesthetic tradition. Langer emphasizes continuity rather than rupture, though he can be seen as sharing Boyarin’s skepticism vis-à-vis Jewish emancipation.

---


42 Peleg points out that Boyarin assumes an innate link between effeminacy and homosexuality, a link that was not self-evident at the fin de siècle. Although homosexuals were indeed often understood to be gender inverts, an entire wing of the homosexual emancipation movement, as mentioned, conceived of homosexuality as a form of hyper-masculinity. As a result, one cannot assume that because Zionists absorbed the gender critique of Jewish masculinity, that they necessarily also maintained a critique of Jewish sexuality. The ideas of the major German theoretician of the Wandervogel and German masculinism, Hans Blüher, as we shall see in this study, confirm Peleg’s point. Blüher’s attack on Jewish masculinity also attacked their inability to form homosexual relationships. Drawing on Hebrew literature as his sources, Peleg maintains that Zionism was ambivalent about same-sex eroticism, not hostile to it. While Hebrew literature is hardly rife with homoerotic imagery, it does contain some. To put it in Peleg’s terms, they are dealt with in a “stunningly unselfconscious way” and “in some instances” this literature “even celebrate[s] it.” (Peleg, 34). It seems to me that Peleg’s argument could also be extended to Zionist art as well; one thinks of the famous work of Moses Lilienblum, which glorified male Zionist bodies in homoerotic strokes. On the other hand, argues Peleg, Zionism was not particularly hospitable to explicit expressions of same-sex desire either. Peleg argues that expressions of same-sex desire within Zionism were very rare (which seems to be true, but has not been studied systematically), while they were common in the Wandervogel. While I agree that most Zionists were ambivalent or unconcerned with same-sex sexuality, I think Peleg overstates the case when he avers that Zionism was “unique among European nationalisms” in that “homoeroticism left almost no actual imprint on it.” In general, neither Boyarin nor Peleg marshal sufficient evidence to make definitive claims about “Zionism” (Herzilian or otherwise). See Yaron Peleg, “Heroic Conduct: Homoeroticism and the Creation of Modern, Jewish Masculinities,” *Jewish Social Studies* 13:1 (Autumn 2006): 31–58.
Homosexuality in Hebrew Literature

Though chiefly a work of intellectual and cultural history, this dissertation is also interdisciplinary. Chapters four and five, which take up Langer’s corpus of Hebrew poetry, employ the methodology of literary criticism and translation, although their aim is to use Langer’s poetry to prove a historical argument; namely that as a poet, Langer participated in a specific contemporary homosexual cultural practice.

Hebrew and Yiddish literary criticism has been another site for the intersection of LGBT and Jewish Studies. Most notable is the scholarship of Yaron Peleg, Naomi Seidman, Jeffrey Shandler, and Shachar Pinsker, who have fruitfully incorporated concepts (like homoeroticism, homosociality, queer, queering, and drag), as well as reading techniques from LGBT criticism and Queer Theory.43 Chana Kronfeld, Dan Miron, and Michael Gluzman (among others) have done pioneering work on gender and Jewish literature, which also at times intersects with things “queer.”44 All of these scholars take up same-sex eroticism or gender play within “heterosexual” Jewish culture; they have yet to locate the homosexual experience in Hebrew literature prior to the post-Stonewall era. This again makes Langer’s corpus of Hebrew poetry particularly important and interesting.

In order to illuminate the meaning and cultural work of his poetry and to historicize it, I have drawn extensively on the scholarship of comparative LGBT literature, which I have integrated into Hebrew criticism for the first time.45 Langer is a particularly interesting figure in modern Hebrew letters although he has received almost no scholarly attention, in part because he is difficult to fit within traditional periodization schemes. In Hebrew literary terms, the subject matter of his verse is modernist, but his form is often similar to the nusakh of the Hebrew Revival, though at times he imitates medieval piyyut while at other times he uses free verse. My primary interests, however, are not to categorize Langer as a Hebrew poet or to determine his exact place within Hebrew modernism. Nor am I interested in evaluating the aesthetic worth of his verse (which is uneven). Instead, this dissertation will demonstrate how he brought the homosexual experience to light for Hebrew readers for the first time. It examines how Langer shared a set of techniques used by other homosexual poets of the Decadence and Symbolist movements who wanted to bring the homosexual experience to light safely and in a manner that would be consistent with the aesthetic values of the national culture (as opposed to openly subverting them). Writing homosexual verse in

---


45 See chapter four for references and extensive discussion of this literature.
Hebrew, a language very few in Europe spoke in the 1920s, posed its own set of unique challenges and it is to these challenges that I will direct my concern.  

*Against Assimilation: Between Identity and Subjectivity*

In a certain respect, Langer represents a familiar model of Jewish modernization. He is a particular example of a modern Jewish intellectual determining the viability of the Jewish past and of Judaism to speak to the modern Jewish experience. Like other modern Jewish identities, Langer’s involved an accommodation between his Jewishness (and Zionist affiliation) and another set of identifications: ideas and cultural practices that homosexuals were bringing to the world at this time to make meaning of themselves (including the language of sexuality itself). In other words, in Langer we have an unusual case study of identity formation—one of the central leitmotifs of Jewish historiographic concern for many decades now.

Following Richard Jenkins and Kateřina Čapková, when I use the term “identity” I am not suggesting that Langer’s was a “fixed, immutable, or primordial” concept, but that his identity is “utterly socio-cultural in its origins and is ‘negotiable and flexible.’”47 When I argue that Langer made identifications with homosexual culture and borrowed from it, I am not suggesting that homosexual culture or literature was fixed, uncomplicated, or in any way monolithic.48 The same goes for his Jewishness. And of course, let me state again that I am not making a comprehensive argument about Langer the man. He surely made other identifications as well—to German, Czech, and other cultures. My exclusive focus on his negotiation of homosexuality and Jewishness is not a total picture of him.

As a case study in Jewish modernization, however, the Jewish homosexual is also distinct. The work of identity that Langer performs in these texts is a bit different than other Jewish identity projects. Langer called on Judaism’s vast historical, literary, and spiritual arsenal of texts, figures, and ideas to make sense of a modern sexual subjectivity: an organization of the self around sexual orientation, a type of experience of selfhood unknown to Judaism.49 Langer confronted a problem

---


48 Obviously, pinning down rigorous boundaries for what constitutes “homosexual history,” homosexual politics,” and “homosexual literature” is a Sisyphean task. Not all writers who took up the subject would identify themselves using the term “homosexual.” This study maps a small portion of this wide topography of definitions and meanings that were given to male love by men who loved and desired men. How Langer defined homosexuality is, of course, part of our story. Although the focus of this dissertation takes place after the “invention of sexuality,” the meanings of terms like “homosexual” were not self-evident or uncontested. The best introduction to these issues is David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004).

49 It was Michel Foucault, of course, who did most to draw scholarly attention to the reified category “sexuality,” which as H.G. Cocks describes is “the conceptual, experiential, and institutional apparatus that modernity has built around the body and its erotic pleasures.” As Foucault’s widely-influential thesis goes, it is only in the present epoch that the self is understood as possessing sexuality at all. Prior to our era, there is no
that was deeper than identity: Where does the homosexual as an ontological being (a real thing in the world) fit theologically, historically, culturally, politically, and aesthetically within the Jewish experience?

Let me quickly elaborate on why this distinction between identity and subjectivity is important. Where it has been mentioned (as in the work of Daniel Boyarin previously discussed) the constitution of homosexuality in Jewish modernity has been described (like German-Jewish identity more broadly) as part of a process of “assimilation” of foreign ideas and values. To be sure, this way of conceptualizing the emergence of sexual subjectivity is not unique to Boyarin; it is used (I think wrongly) as part of critiques of Western colonialism and neo-colonialism, where the West is accused of imposing its taxonomies of sexuality in places where “sexuality” had not previously existed. In Jewish historiography, the term “assimilation” has been subjected to a wide range of criticisms (and rightly so) and it is no more useful in thinking about the Jewish homosexual.

“Assimilation” is a poor choice for describing the process of identity formation for at least four reasons. First, the term suggests a one-sided process, where the minority subject struggles to navigate within an overbearing and static majority culture. When it comes to the Jewish homosexual this makes little sense, because all homosexuals in this period were themselves coming to grips with what homosexuality entailed, including its etiology (what caused it, if anything), its ontology (what it was), its phenomenology (how it was experienced), as well as their politics and culture. Langer was on equal terms with other homosexuals; he was coming to grips with his desires and sense of self and what that meant just as all were. His ideas contributed as much as they took (at least in theory). Second, as we shall see, it was the exclusion of the Jewish homosexual by a wing of the homosexual rights movement that incited Langer to consider homosexuality as a Jewish problem in the first organization of subjectivity in relation to sexual desire. Instead, the historian only finds discursive considerations of sexual acts. As H.G. Cocks summarizes, “This [new] apparatus of knowledge, power, and bodily experience, Foucault says, is the effect of bio-power, defined as the various ways in which states and their agencies have, since the eighteenth century, tried to govern the entirety of natural processes within any population.” At the heart of Foucault’s thesis, of course, is the central question of “whether there is such a thing as a form of selfhood peculiar to modernity.” Much has been written that has challenged his original thesis, which I discuss below, but the centrality of sex to the modern sense of selfhood is still undeniable. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage, 1990); H. G. Cocks, “Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality,” *The Historical Journal* 49:4 (December 2006): 1211–1227, 1212.


51 An extreme example of this kind of argumentation is Joseph Massad, “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World” *Public Culture* 14:2, 361-385. Indeed, for Boyarin, the embrace of the heterosexual/homosexual taxonomic system by Western Jews is tantamount to the subaltern absorbing the values of his or her colonial master; these Jews then seek to impose their new sexual taxonomies on their own colonial victims, *Ostjüden* [Eastern-European Jews] and “Oriental” Jews or Mirzrahim. Beyond the distorted picture he paints of Jewish social history in Europe (in its assumption of the extreme otherness of Jews vis-à-vis their “host” cultures), one wonders where a Jewish homosexual identity is supposed to fit within such a schema.
place. Third, though originally benign, the term “assimilation” is too loaded with ideological baggage as a term of opprobrium—a form of betrayal—to be of much use.\textsuperscript{52}

But most importantly, assimilation is a poor conceptual framework for thinking about the Jewish homosexual because it reveals a shallow understanding of how it came to be historically.\textsuperscript{53} The emergence of sexual subjectivities was the result of a complicated structural process, tied to the massive transformations in social, cultural, and personal life in Europe that accompanied industrialization, the rise of capitalism, and the slow reorganization of traditional society toward a modern individualistic one. During this process, sex took on an importance for the definition of selfhood that it did not previously possess.\textsuperscript{54} This process began centuries before these subjectivities become classified and named by sexology.\textsuperscript{55} There is no doubt that doctors and sexologists in the second half of the nineteenth century played an immense role in transforming how desire was conceived and organized in language and thus how it was experienced. But sexual subjectivity, as historians have shown, emerged prior to the taxonomy of sexology, which undoubtedly brought much attention to the idea of sexual selfhood that many were not even consciously speaking about yet (although plenty were).\textsuperscript{56} Either way, while identity can be negotiated


\textsuperscript{53} In other words, it misunderstands the depth of the social-constructivist history of sexuality.

\textsuperscript{54} Thomas Laqueur’s pioneering work is a fine example of scholarship that has both illuminated the stakes of sexuality for modern selfhood and also helped refocus historians on the place of sexuality within the long-term economic and social processes of modernization itself. Thomas W. Laqueur, \textit{Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation} (New York: Zone Books, 2004). Laqueur argues persuasively that there are good reasons to focus on the eighteenth century to observe the emergence of the modern sexual self. Thomas W. Laqueur, “The Rise of Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Historical Context and Historiographical Implications,” \textit{Signs} 37, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 802–812.


\textsuperscript{56} Still, even if one rigidly insists on clinging to Foucault’s original thesis, the concept of “assimilation” still would not make much sense. Even according to Foucault, sexual subjectivity cannot be appropriated or discarded at will (in fact, this is his entire point about the repressive hypothesis). Hence, the concept of “assimilation” for describing Jewish homosexuals (or heterosexuals) is misguided and incorrect. It seems to me that to describe the emergence of homosexuality (or heterosexuality) as a form of assimilation, the scholar either assumes that homosexuality is just an identity (and therefore can be chosen or assimilated like introducing the organ at Shabbat service or joining the German army); or, the scholar assumes that if an individual rejected the taxonomy of sexual subjectivity, he or she could somehow avoid this new form of selfhood.
and while the taxonomy of sexuality can be rejected, sexual subjectivity is the product of major long-term structural forces.

Langer’s sense of himself as a distinct kind of sexual subject was not handed to him by other homosexuals or by doctors or by European colonial oppressors, but was something he came to grips with on his own. Once he moved to consider how to make meaning of his subjectivity, the nature of which was attacked by homosexual antisemites, Langer began the work of identity. He thought through this identity using the language of sexology, psychoanalysis, and the various cultural ideas formulated by homosexuals, but his subjectivity was not created by these discourses.57

From the vantage point of the historiography of sexuality, the present dissertation is about homosexual phenomenology (how it was experienced) and cultural production. As a case study in homosexual identity formation, Langer is interesting because he used multiple discourses and literatures together—historical, aesthetic, mystical, religious, and sexological/psychoanalytic—to make meaning of same-sex desire.58 This study fits within a growing body of scholarship that has demonstrated how homosexuals were active participants in the production of sexual-scientific discourse rather than mere passive objects of its attention. As a number of important studies have also shown, homosexuals found alternative literatures, histories, and ideas through which to mediate or entirely bypass the language of scientia sexualis (though they sometimes enabled sexology in what Dagmar Herzog has called a “feedback loop”).59 The plastic arts and literature were also opportunities for homosexuals to express agency, identification, self-aestheticization, and to explore the nature of their subjectivity. Finally, in focusing on the intersection of religious and sexual identity, this study also contributes to the growing body of work that has challenged the narrative of

57 As historian Yvonne Ivory writes, “Late-nineteenth-century legislative, juridical, medical, and journalistic productions of homosexuality—the representation, that is, of same-sex desire in the late nineteenth-century public sphere—shaped but did not exclusively control individual experiences of homosexuality.” Yvonne Ivory, The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style, 1850-1930 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1-2.

58 Obviously, I am assuming that homosexuals have had and do have a distinct culture (although this was not unitary or monolithic). As historian David Halperin writes, this simple fact has yet to universally accepted, even by some LGBT people. See David M. Halperin, How To Be Gay (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 8-10. In chapters three and four, I have followed Halperin’s lead in exploring aspects of the homosexual experience—ways that some homosexuals have historically understood themselves as distinct subjects that go beyond their sexual desires, including their distinct relation to gender and aesthetic sensibility.

the history of homosexuality as the history of secularization. It is clear that many individuals mediated the language of sexology through a religious prism.60

Homosexual Culture from the Center

Homosexuals like Mordechai Langer created culture from a position of social marginalization. The topic itself was widely thought unfit for high-cultural discourse well into the interwar (and beyond). A writer would immediately confront the reigning assertion of his subject as perverted, criminal, abnormal, ugly, unnatural, and sinful.61 The idea that the homosexual could produce culture was an oxymoron at best. All homosexual writers and artists had to contend with the problem of homosexual social, moral, and aesthetic non-normativity. As a result, much of their cultural production was aimed at challenging prevailing social norms from the perspective of outsiders.

The more common way of handling this problem was to develop strategies of subversion, irony, camp, and other modes of undermining traditional aesthetic and moral expectations without getting into too much trouble. Indeed, LGBT cultural historians, literary critics, and queer theorists have paid heavy attention to these homosexual forms of subversion since the Decadence. LGBT culture has even coined its own verb to describe this carnivalesque cultural mode (which by its very nature is not unitary): “to queer.” “To queer something,” says the encyclopedia of glbtq culture, “is to replace the normative, heterosexual values with values of minority sexualities, in effect to make non-normative values the norm.”62

In his recent study Queer Beauty, intellectual (and art) historian Whitney Davis has suggested that scholars shift attention to the ways that homosexuals have historically presented same-sex desire as normative within the majority culture. Davis, for example, focuses on a range of intellectuals and artists who, in the spirit of Plato, variously conceived of homoerotic desire as the wellspring of mainstream and normative culture, art, and philosophy. Davis, focusing on homosexual art (though his study extends well beyond), describes this as follows:

The history of modern and contemporary art provides many examples of the “queering” of cultural and social norms. It has been tempting to consider this process of subversion and transgression or “outlaw representation” (as Richard


Meyer has called it), as well as related performances of “camp,” or otherwise gay-inflecting the dominant forms of representation, to be the most creative mode of queer cultural production...[but] we can identify a historical process in modern culture that has worked in the opposite direction—namely the constitution of aesthetic ideas, cultural norms that claim validity within an entire society, that have been based on manifestly homoerotic prototypes and significance. There has been little subversion or camp in these configurations. Indeed, perhaps there has been a surfeit of idealizing configuration and normalizing representation.63

This dissertation picks up on Davis’s study of normative homosexual aesthetics. Langer generally fits within Davis’s framework: he sought to frame same-sex desire as normative and consistent with Jewish aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural values and he did so by arguing that same-sex desire was the font and driving motor of Jewish history and culture. To be sure, Langer was exposed to the transgressive styles of Decadent authors as well, and as we shall see, he was also capable of irony and subversion (at least poetically) too.64

Homosexual Coding

Not only did homosexual writers have to find ways to present the purported ugly aesthetically, but they had to develop strategies for doing so safely. They sought ways to represent and explore their experiences, as well as to communicate with one another, while circumventing social and religious taboos, and at times, legal proscriptions and censors too. As a result, much of the writing of this period used code, euphemism, and a range of obfuscating strategies to protect a writer from opprobrium, prosecution, or worse.

The increased visibility of homosexuals in cities across Western and Central Europe and the proliferation of discussion about sexuality were characterized by a paradox. One the one hand, literature, the press, police, legal and medical discourses increasingly pushed the subject of homosexuality into the public sphere (and thus helped to consolidate it as a modern identity). On the other hand, these very same representations of homosexuality often described the homosexuality in ways that reaffirmed it as ineffable—the “nameless love” that could not be spoken of directly.

Scholars of the LGBT experience have referred to this peculiar dynamic of gay history as the “unspeakable” quality of homosexuality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, famously argued that the homosexual became a figure who was uniquely associated with secrecy.65 As historian H.G. Cocks explains, it was not so much that homosexuality could not be spoken at all—it was, and increasingly so during the interwar thanks to the spread of psychoanalysis and sexology—but that it

63 Whitney Davis, Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 23.

64 Davis discusses German masculinist culture, which fit his criteria well, in detail. Langer was quite influenced by German masculinism, as we shall see. To put things in Davis’s terms: Langer’s approach is one of “queer beauty” (same-sex desire as normative and a constituent element of culture) and, though far less often, “beauty queered” (a transgression or overturning of traditional cultural norms).

65 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet.
could only be spoken about in highly regulated, coded, and specific ways. Even if no immediate threat of legal sanction existed (which was rare), writers had to straddle the lines of middle-class respectability (whether or not they queered it).

World War One was a watershed in upsetting the foundation of nineteenth-century mores. The unprecedented visibility of homosexuals, their political movement, and their social and cultural life during the interwar period reflected part of the great razing of “the edifice of lies and dissimulation which had enabled Victorian society to persevere its appearance of morality.” But as historian Florence Tamagne has correctly argued, when it came to literary representations, the pre-war legacy of homosexuality as the unspeakable vice was not easily shaken. While homosexuality appeared in literature as never before, it continued to be represented in ways that reflected the pre-war middle-class moral compass.

Langer also confronted the problem of homosexuality’s “unspeakability.” On the one hand, thanks to the language of psychoanalysis and sexology, Langer could present his defense of same-sex love and Judaism (Die Erotik der Kabbala) as merely an attempt to apply these sciences to Judaism. On the other hand, when bringing the homosexual experience to light for readers of Hebrew verse, Langer resorted to strategies of concealment and coding. As we shall see, these strategies were shared by other homosexual poets of the era. Chapter four is devoted in part to demonstrating Langer’s poetic strategy of speaking to two readers at once, both revealing and concealing the homosexual subtext of his verse.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One

Chapter one concerns the historical matrix that produced the modern Jewish homosexual during the interwar. It uses Langer’s fascinating early biography (up to 1929) as an inroad to studying the broader dynamics of early twentieth-century Jewish, homosexual, and central-eastern European history. While unpacking each relevant context layer by layer, this chapter ultimately privileges the internal dynamics of German homosexual emancipation to explain the birth of the modern Jewish homosexual. It reconstructs a poorly-studied but markedly important dimension of this movement; namely, the role that Jews and Judaism played as critical categories of thought in the self-definition of homosexuals involved with this movement. In particular, the leading German-masculinist theoretician Hans Blüher waged a widely-discussed attack on Jewish sexuality. The German masculinist embrace of antisemitism coupled with the general disillusionment with a liberal model of homosexual politics engendered a new need for a Jewish homosexual identity, drawn from the internal cultural, religious, and nationalist vocabulary of the Jews.


67 Tamagne, A History of Homosexuality in Europe, 27.

68 An earlier highly-abridged version of chapters one and two, which I have significantly expanded and revised here, was published as Halper, “Coming Out of the Hasidic Closet: Jiří Mordechai Langer (1894–1943) and the Fashioning of Homosexual-Jewish Identity.” I thank the editors of the Jewish Quarterly Review for allowing me to reuse select portions of it here.
Chapter Two
Langer’s Jewish Homosexuality: History, Sociology, Theology, Politics

Chapter two is a synchronic study of Langer’s *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (1923). It demonstrates how Langer responded to the German-masculinist attack on Jewish sexuality and its exclusion of the Jewish homosexual from homosexual politics and culture. Langer, in turn, introduced the subject of homosexuality to modern Jewish thought for the first time. His strategy was not to directly subvert or challenge Judaism, but to demonstrate that same-sex desire was normative to the Jewish experience. What’s more, he argued that same-sex desire was a driving motor of Jewish history, theology, and sociology and would be the precondition for any future success of Jewish nationalism. This chapter will demonstrate how Langer constructed the first homosexual-Jewish history, the first Jewish theology of homosexuality, the first sociology of same-sex male desire in Hasidism, and the first reconciliation between homosexuality and Jewish politics.

Chapter Three
*Jewish Beauty in the Homosexual Mirror: On the Aesthetics of the Modern Jewish Homosexual*

Chapter three delves more deeply into the aesthetic dimensions of German homosexual masculinism. It examines the role that homosexuals like Hans Blüher attributed to aesthetics and aesthetic sensibility in their construction of homosexual subjectivity, identity, and culture. It also highlights the significant role that Jews played as foils in German-masculinist aesthetic self-definition. It argues that as a result of their attacks on Jewish aesthetics, German masculinists produced among Jewish homosexuals at this particular historical moment (the European interwar) a new cultural need for the development of a distinctly Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality. Mordechai Langer responded to this challenge and offered his homoerotic Hebrew poetry as a partial corrective to the Blüherian critique of Jewish aesthetics. His act of producing a homosexual-Jewish art, in other words, was an ideological and political form of resistance to German masculinist antisemitism.

Chapters 4 and 5
*Mordechai Langer’s Jewish Aesthetic of Homosexuality in Hebrew in Two Parts*

Chapters 4 and 5 are an extended synchronic study of the first Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Mordechai Langer’s Hebrew poetry. Together they demonstrate how Langer carved out an aesthetic space for the experience of the Jewish male homosexual within Hebrew literature. My primary argument is that Langer used a set of literary devices common to contemporary homosexual poets to broach the subject of homosexuality in literature. These devices functioned together as a form of coding, which allowed homosexual poets to speak to two readers at once: to a minority reader who could pick up on the poet’s homosexual subtext and to a majority reader who could write off the subject of homosexuality as something else. Langer developed an elaborate set of symbols, metaphors, allusions, framing devices, and settings that reflect a Hebrew and Jewish adaptation of devices used by homosexual poets like Stefan George, Arthur Rimbaud, Federico García Lorca, Otokar Brezina, Jiri Karazec ze Levov, and others. In other words, this portion of the dissertation is invested in demonstrating that, like *Die Erotik der Kabbala*, Langer’s Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew is “homosexual” in the sense that it is not just about homosexuality, but because it fits within a distinctly homosexual literary genre. Langer in effect participated in a shared emancipatory-era homosexual cultural practice.
These chapters explore how Langer adapted such literary devices for Hebrew literature. They look at how he framed homoerotic desire as aesthetically normative to Jewish culture, at times using the language of traditional (and usually religious) Jewish texts like the Bible. Of central interest is how Langer mined the centuries-long Hebrew textual corpus for Hebrew homoerotic literary models and “homosexual” figures to imitate, like the homoerotic Hebrew poetry of the Golden Age of Spain (10th-11th centuries) and homoerotic Hebrew mystical poetry, including the poetry of Israel Najara of Safed and Damascus (16th century).

Finally, as an addendum to this dissertation, I have translated Mordechai Langer’s two published volumes of Hebrew poetry, *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot* (1929) and *Me'at Tzori* (1943) for the first time.
Chapter One

Coming out of the Hasidic Closet: Mordechai Jiří Langer in the Age of Homosexual Emancipation

I. The Bug

Mordechai Jiří Langer awoke many times in his short, bitter life to find himself transformed in the eyes of those around him into a monstrous, venomous bug. The title of his 1937 anthology of medieval Hebrew poetry, “songs of the rejected,” might stand in for his life as a whole. Although the surviving biographical evidence is limited, what can be deduced is that regardless of where he lived (Prague, Galician Belz, Vienna, Tel Aviv), what language he used (primarily Hebrew, German, and Czech; but also Yiddish, French, Arabic, English, and Aramaic), or the communities with which he affiliated (those of literary figures, homosexual activists, Hasidim and Zionists) Langer always felt like an outsider. He died young in Tel Aviv at the age of forty-nine, after a bout with kidney disease, apparently a consequence of his flight from the Nazis in 1939 when he spent his winter freezing on a refugee boat on the Danube. His friends describe his final years as isolated and broken.

69 Then part of the Habsburg province of Galicia, Belz is a town in today’s western Ukraine, near the border with Poland, a distance František estimated as over 500 kilometers from urbane and cultured Prague.

70 Hasidism was a popular pietistic movement that originated in the 1730s in Podolia around the charismatic leadership of Israel ben Eliezer (c. 1700–1760), known as the Ba’al Shem Tov. Hasidism aimed to revive Judaism by injecting the ecstasy of mystical experience (formally reserved for the small scholarly elite) into popular religious practice and observance. It emphasized intensity and concentration in prayer over study and offered the possibility of continuous attachment to the divine in everyday life (devokut). What is important to know for the purposes of this essay is that the Hasidic movement was based on the leadership of one man, the tzadik, possessed of spiritual power and strong religious influence who gathered around him a community of male believers. The Hasidic court was often a considerable distance from an individual’s home. Male companionship at court created a competing social environment with the home and offered an alternative to the world of family and community. For a succinct introduction to Hasidism see John M. Efron, et al. The Jews: A History, 261–65. The literature on Hasidism is voluminous. For points of entry see: Glenn Dynner, Men of Silk: The Hassidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Hasidism Reappraised, ed. A. Rapoport-Albert (London, 1997); on Hasidism and sexuality, see David Biale, Eros and the Jews, chapter 6.

71 Once in Palestine, Langer’s ordeal continued as he was detained, despite his serious illness, in a British detention camp for immigrants at Atlit.

72 Beyond a handful of reviews published during his lifetime, scholarly assessments of Langer’s writings began after his death. The first assessments include a spattering of short tributes and retrospectives written by friends in Hebrew, including Dov Sadan, Shmuel HaCohen Weingarten, Miriam Zinger, and Avigdor Dagan (see Miriam Dror’s bibliography cited below). Dov Sadan’s master’s student Miriam Dror took up the first extended scholarly consideration of Langer’s poetry. Dror’s 1969 MA thesis is a remarkably excellent masters-level study. She both summarizes the broad contours of Langer’s biography and examines his poetry in detail (if at times somewhat superficially). See, Miriam Dror, Mordechai Georgo Langer: Ha-ish ve-shirato (MA Thesis,
Though far from complete, her pioneering work is still indispensable. I point this out because more recent German scholarship on Langer seems unaware of her study. Dror detailed many important facts regarding Langer’s final years in the Yishuv that German-speaking scholars missed. As a student of Hebrew literature, Dror naturally focused almost exclusively on Langer’s Hebrew poetry in her thesis. Unable to read German or Czech, Dror was closed off to the links between Langer’s poetry and his other writings as well as to the broader homosexual literary world of which they were a part. With the support of Dov Sadan, in 1984 Dror published Langer’s entire corpus of Hebrew poetry along with many of his Hebrew articles, translations (including parts of Nine Gates), and some correspondence under the title *Me’at tsori: asufat ketavav* [A Bit of Balsam: Collected Writings] through Mosad Bialik: Mordechai Georgo (Dov) Langer, *Me’at tsori: Asufat ketavav* ed. Miriam Dror (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1984). She also included an abridged and highly sanitized version of her original MA thesis as an addendum to the book. The original thesis should be consulted, not least because Dror was far more direct in handling Langer’s homosexuality, which is largely absent from the published volume. Still, even in the MA thesis, Dror refers to Langer’s homosexuality euphemistically, though she acknowledges that these are not just poems about male friendship. Dror's discomfort with the language of homosexuality was already noticed by Israeli literary critics Yoram Bronowski and Ilan Sheinfeld in their reviews of her published volume from the 1980s (though neither seemed aware of her original MA thesis). Bronovski in particular suggested that Langer would someday be a ripe subject for exploring homosexual identity. See Yoram Bronowski, *Bikoret tiybey : reshimot ‘al shirah, prozah u-masah ba- sifrut ha-‘Ivrit* ed. David Vinfeld (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2006); and Ilan Sheinfeld, “Me-shoresh ha-Yetser” *Al Ha-mishmar*, June 21, 1985, 15. Dov Sadan, Dror’s adviser, was well aware of Langer’s homosexuality and referred to it explicitly as “homosexuality” in a private letter to another fine Hebrew critic, Avner Holtzman in 1982. See, Avner Holtzman, *Aharot Tsiyon: panim ba- sifrut ha-hadashah* (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2006), 585, note 15. I discuss Israeli historian Zohar Maor’s recent arguments about Langer in his study of the Prague Circle’s mysticism in footnotes below.


In German: Scholars writing in German have been attracted to Langer as a figure of linguistic liminalism and transnationalism. Walter Koschmal has described Langer as a “model European” and as a “Czech-Jewish author.” Certainly within the context of the language conflicts of Bohemia, Langer’s non-committal moves between Czech, German, and Hebrew are refreshingly non-ideological. His travels East and his life-long interest in bridging western and eastern European Jewish culture, on the one hand, and his interest in drawing connections between a number of faith and mystical traditions, on the other hand, are undoubtedly cosmopolitan. But Koschmal’s description of Langer as a “model European” seems misguided to me. Langer was a cultural mediator, but he was most devoted to defending Judaism against antisemitic attacks, which dovetailed with his life-long commitments to Zionism. Of course none of this is mutually exclusive with
Langer’s deep loneliness was noticed already as a child. His father and brothers, who raised him in Vínohardy, a district of Prague, never really understood him. His mother “poor thing, was deaf, shut up within herself, quiet and gentle” and “played a passive, almost invisible role in the life of the family.” Mordechai Jiří was the youngest of three boys. One Czech literary scholar described his oldest brother František Langer (1888-1965) as “one of the most important Czech playwrights of the twentieth century.” František was also the first to draw the analogy between his younger brother Jiří and that most Kafkaesque of interwar bugs, Gregor Samsa.

As František later remembered, the year was 1913 and Jiří had brought crisis into his well-respected, secular home:

[It] seemed to us at the time to resemble the situation in Kafka’s novel, Die Verwandlung, in which an entire family finds its way of life completely upset when the son of the house is suddenly changed into an enormous cockroach, and consequently had to be hidden from the rest of the world, while the family strived in vain to find some place for him in their affections.

The crisis started when nineteen-year-old Jiří returned home from a long stay in the distant Galician town of Belz to share a burning personal secret he had kept from his family for years; or rather, as František revealingly put it, the crisis started when “my brother had not come back from being a “model European,” but I think the description slightly distorts his picture. Koschmal does not address Langer’s Hebrew writings or seem to be aware of Dror’s Hebrew study. That said, Koschmal’s study contains much valuable information about Langer’s life and work and is an important contribution to Langer studies. Also in German are the following short and less substantial articles: Milan Tvrdík, “Die Emanzipation der Jüdischen Kultur: Familie Langer” Jüdische Identitäten in Mitteleuropa: Literarische Modelle der Identitätskonstruktion (Tübingen, 2002), 111–17; Anja Tippner, „Verwandlung und Verfremdung: Chassidismus in Jiří Langers Devět bran. Chasidů tajemství“ Jüdische Literatur als europäische Literatur. Europäizität und jüdische Identität, 1860–1930, ed. C. Battegay and B. Breysach (Munich, 2008), 139–59. In Czech, see Kateřina Čapková, “Chasid učitelem náboženství v Praze” Židovská ročenka 5761 (Prague, 2000/2001), 159–67.


74 Ibid., xii.

75 Josef Langer, the family’s third son, followed in his father’s footsteps and became a successful businessman. He took his own life prior to his deportation during the Nazi genocide.


77 Perhaps František also noticed that Jiří’s German name “Georg” is an anagram of “Gregor.”

Belz, to home and civilization; he had brought Belz with him.” Jiří had physically returned, but was no longer Jiří:

Father told me with a note of horror in his voice that Jiří had returned. I understand what had filled him with dread as soon as I saw my brother. He stood before me in a frayed black overcoat, clipped like a caftan, reaching from his chin to the ground. On his head he wore a broad round hat of black velvet, thrust back toward his neck. He stood there in a stooping posture his whole face and chin were covered with a red beard, and side whiskers in front of his ears hung in ringlets down to his shoulders. All that remained to be seen of his face was some white, unhealthy skin and eyes that at moments appeared tired and at others feverish.

Jiří had come out to his family: he was now a Hasid, preferring his Hebrew name Mordechai, who, among other things, kept strictly kosher and refused to speak with or look directly at women. František continued:

He no longer washed his hands before every meal, as any God-fearing and hygienically minded person would do. Instead he made this a more symbolic act, pouring water alternately on to his palms from a cup. He would not shake hands with women—I do not know if he made an exception to this rule when he was welcomed by mother—and whenever he spoke to a woman, even our old Julia, he would turn his back on her. He said his prayers aloud, in a singsong voice, running round the room in a sort of trance. Now even the kosher food provided at Prague’s restaurants was suspect, as far as he was concerned.

Max Brod described how Langer’s conversion brushed up against the limits of Prague-Jewish sensibilities, when locals gaped at him “als Rudiment des Mittelalters”—a walking relic of the Middle Ages. The family was devastated:

Needless to say, such exhibitionism, whether religious or otherwise, was exceedingly embarrassing to all of us at home. Like the rest of the Jewish community, our family had completely assimilated itself to all the outward signs and customs of our neighborhood. Would not Jiří’s appearance now make us all seem guilty of pretense and hypocrisy?

Needless to say, František’s defensive posture might belie his own lingering guilt for shaming the young Jiří. “It was difficult for us to find a common meeting ground,” František admitted forty-

---

79 Ibid., xvii, emphasis added.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., xviii.

82 Max Brod, *Der Prager Kreis* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966), 156–57.

83 Nine Gates, xix.
six years later, “perhaps his isolation was our own fault in that we did not know how to cope with it.”

At around the same period, František went through something of a metamorphosis himself, abandoning any pre-existing German-speaking Jewish ties to wholly embrace Czech nationalism. František, who was also a medical doctor in T. G. Masaryk’s Allied Czechoslovak Legion during World War I, even returned home with a surprise of his own: a Russian-Orthodox wife, though we have no word on how the Hasidic Jiří or the family reacted. In the interwar period, František (unlike Mordechai) wrote exclusively in Czech. His life-long commitment to Czech politics and culture lasted beyond the Second World War: when he remained a political activist in London for the Czechoslovak government-in-exile.

We therefore have good reason to suspect that František Langer’s tableau of their early family life was colored with ideological disparagement for his Jewish-bourgeois roots. We can sense his ideological inflection throughout his testimony, for example, in his assertion that “it goes without saying that [our father] sent us children to Czech schools and saw to it that we had Czech books to read from babyhood,” which, of course, seems to hardly “go without saying” in what was a heavily German-speaking Jewish culture (not to mention that Mordechai Langer’s first book and most of his published articles were written in German and Hebrew).

---

84 Ibid, xx. As Avigdor Dagan points out, by the time Jiří came out of his Hasidic closet, František was already recognized as the successful author of *Saint Wenceslas*, which intensified their discomfort with the public attention Jiří solicited. See Dagan, “The Czech-German-Jewish Symbiosis of Prague,” 184.

85 Ibid., 183–84.

86 The impact of WWI on František Langer was profound: he experienced the Austrian trenches of Bukovina and life in Russian prisoner of war camps, returning home in 1920 via China, Japan, and India. Avigdor Dagan describes the impact: “The war and the Russian experience erased from his work its former intellectual detachment. It was replaced by human warmth… and a humorous folksiness, qualities that bordered at times on the sunny joviality of Ignat Herrmann or even Vojtech Rakous, two Czech Jewish writers who appealed to all strata of readers.” Dagan, “The Czech-German-Jewish Symbiosis of Prague,” 181.

87 František remained loyal to Czech nationalism until his death in 1965 under Communist rule. He remained politically suspect in Czechoslovakia for his former standing during the First Republic and close ties to Masaryk. Hillel Kieval writes, “Yet he never was arrested or put on trial; though he suffered the effects of literary censorship, he never lost his freedom[…] he lived in relatively obscure retirement in Prague, unscathed by the turmoil, political infighting, and show trials of the late Stalinist years.” Kieval, Languages of Community, 225–26. František’s son was arrested by the Communists and imprisoned for many years, which devastated his father. Dagan, “The Czech-German-Jewish Symbiosis of Prague,” 184.

88 *Nine Gates*, xii. Kieval describes, based on František’s testimony, just how unique Jiří Langer’s personal trajectory was in the context of the Langer family: “The family exhibited most of the cultural traits that I normally would associate with the formation of an integrationist, Czech-Jewish identity: roots in Czech village life, intimacy with Czech language and local culture, migration to a Czech provincial city or to Prague, and a generation or more of secularization within the family. The boy’s father… belonged to numerous Czech civic associations, including Sokol (the gymnastics society), and sent his sons to Czech schools.” Kieval is correct that Langer’s father did have an affiliation to Czech culture, but Kieval overstates that affiliation slightly by
František’s nationalist loyalties may explain why he makes no mention of his brother’s extensive interwar Zionist activities. His depiction of their secular family life, which foregrounded Mordechai’s self-generated interest in Judaism as a young autodidact, was colored by the influence of Kafka’s famous *Letter to His Father*:

> At school, in our religious education lessons, we barely succeeded in learning to read the Hebrew letters, but with such lack of thoroughness that in later years I have had to be content to admire these magnificent ancient characters without understanding their import. We learned no more of Jewish history than, for instance, Roman history, and we imbibed little of the essence and ethics of Jewish religion. From our homes, too we acquired little in this respect, and in our particular case almost nothing. My last religious act was reading aloud from the Torah when I became bar mitsvah.  

František penned his lyrical testimony in “My Brother Jiří,” first written in Czech in 1959 and then expanded as an English introduction in 1961 to his brother’s *Nine Gates to the Hassidic Mysteries*. His record is our most comprehensive source for his brother’s biographical details, but his testimony is tendentious and scholars should examine it with more critical care than they have.

Mordechai Jiří’s arrant embrace of Hasidism certainly was exceptional, but as the historian Scott Spector has demonstrated, cultural “exceptionality” was the defining characteristic of most of the German-speaking Jewish writers who came of age in Prague at the fin de siècle. Langer was part of a generation marked by the rejection of their parents’ relationship to “German liberalism,” that “imagined line from the Enlightenment to the turn of the twentieth century in which the parents of the Prague circle generation of German-speaking Jews had held so much stock.” If Langer’s embrace of Hasidism shocked his parents’ sensibilities, so did the ideological choices of most of his friends.

II. **Jewish Prague on the Eve of WWI**

relying on František’s testimony, while conflating the father’s identity with his son’s. There are other problems with František’s testimony: his depiction of Jiří's conversion as a sudden and unexpected shock to the family is contradicted in the details of his own narrative. František recalls that before he traveled to Belz, Jiří was “already totally immersed in religion, in the full range of that mystical, abstract, spiritual universe that is called religion.” *Nine Gates*, xv. Furthermore, when František asserts that Jiří's “exhibitionism” was “embarrassing to *all of us* at home” [emphasis added], one wonders who “all of us” entails, given that Jiří’s mother “played a passive, almost invisible role in the life of the family.”


91 Spector, *Prague Territories*, x.
The broad contours of this rebellion-of-sons-against-their-fathers narrative is well known and goes something like this: German-speaking Jews dominated fin de siècle Prague culturally and socially. As in other urban centers of the Habsburg monarchy, they identified themselves with German-liberal ideology and politics. The love affair between Jews and liberalism was based on the assumption that Jewish emancipation (in effect in Bohemia since mid-century) and social integration seemed inextricably linked to the fate of liberal politics. The urban Jewish loyalty to German language and Bildung was buttressed politically by the Habsburg monarchy, which privileged this language group throughout the empire. But Jews enamored with German liberalism (itself an essentializing fantasy about German culture) discovered in the waning decades of the century that broader German ideological sentiments had “changed,” racialist völkisch ideology was now ascendant. The disorientation caused by changes in German Kultur (which Jews by no means entirely abandoned even at the brink of the Second World War) was intensified by the growing dominance of Czech nationalism in municipal politics thanks to liberal political reform; pre-WWI Czech nationalism was also as antisemitic as it was anti-German.

Jiří Langer’s generation of German-speaking Jews came of age experiencing acute ethnic, linguistic, and political disinheritance. During this cultural upheaval they experienced the double or triple marginalization of their parents (as German speakers, as Jews, and as liberals), leaving them stranded in between a waning world of German liberal culture and emerging realms of German völkisch ideology and Czech national hegemony. By the interwar period, this generation also experienced the radical alteration of the world they were born into, living through the First World War, the dissolution of the Habsburg multinational state, and the creation of Czechoslovakia. By the time Langer sat down to write his first book, an ideological and political reorganization of Jewish loyalties had been well under way: some, like his brother František, embraced Czech nationalism; others became ardent Zionists or Socialists (or both).

The generational disaffection of Prague Jewish sons was a parochial variation of the much broader intellectual and cultural moment, known to historians as the European “crisis of reason.” The crisis entailed a broad elite disillusionment and skepticism with the epistemological assumptions of nineteenth century bourgeois civilization. It manifested itself in the dissemination of philosophical irrationalism and a widespread intellectual and cultural fascination with mysticism, the Occult, and “the cult of the Orient.” The crisis flowed from a number of historical developments: the new political realities of anti-liberal and antisemitic mass politics and militant nationalisms; the emergence of high-cultural modernisms and mass popular culture; the social disruptions of rapid urbanization, soaring population increases, the decline of the rural social order, and massive internal

---

92 In 1900, there were just under 20,000 Jews in Prague (9.4% of the population). In 1910, there were 85,826 Jews in Bohemia and 41,158 in Moravia. Gary B. Cohen, The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague: 1861-1914 (Princeton, 1981), 92-93.


94 On new Jewish political formations at the fin de siècle, see Ezra Mendelsohn’s classic On Modern Jewish Politics (New York, 1983).

European immigration from East to West, among many other dislocating elements of “high modernity.”

Among Prague’s Jewish elite, the “crisis of reason” engendered what has been called a “Jewish Renaissance.” Many Jews, including Kafka and Brod, and more famously, Martin Buber and Arnold Zweig, looked “back” and “abroad,” seduced by what they believed to be “authentic Judaism” to mysticism, Jewish folklore, Yiddish culture, and the lives of orientalized Eastern European Jews in a search for “national cultural vitality” and “historical models for the rejuvenation of the Jewish people.” Hasidism was a particularly attractive “counter-tradition” for Jews within the anti-positivist fin-de-siècle mood. Buber in particular was on a “mission to forge a modern Jewish culture out of what appeared to be authentic Jewish folkways, much in the same way that the Grimm brothers had employed fairy tales in the service of early German nationalism.” Langer’s conversion to Hasidism was part of a much wider cultural fascination with the East. But while most who loitered in the imaginative landscape of Hasidism never stepped foot into the “ghetto” of the Ostjuden, Jiří Langer, as historian Steven Aschheim put it, “went ‘native’ in the full anthropological sense of the word.”

The new ideological and cultural affiliations that characterized Langer’s generation were by no means mutually exclusive. As Hillel Kieval has argued, the boundaries between old and new were porous:

citeThe very categories German, Czech, Jew; liberal, Communist, patriot; mystic, rationalist, Orthodox, and assimilationist... existed in a state of perpetual movement—seeming to appear only to collapse, regroup, and melt away. Any attempt to establish hard and fast categories of ethnicity and social status is fraught with danger... And when the point of reference is Jewish Prague between the wars, one might as well give up.

In a similar vein, Scott Spector has argued that the cultural production of the “Prague circle” should be evaluated on similar terms. The “Prague circle” inhabited an “in between” cultural and ideological space mediating between ideologies, national cultures, and religious identities. Spector describes these writers as “in between subject positions or ‘identities’—national identities, to be sure,


citeSteven Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers*, 124. A reading of Langer’s take on Hasidism against Buber’s would be especially fruitful but is beyond the scope of this essay. See my conclusion and forthcoming dissertation.

citeIbid., 112.

citeKieval, *Languages of Community*, 224.
but also other sorts of communal identities, aesthetic identities, ideological identities.” As a result, their cultural productions were not simply “subversions of dominant cultural productions” but rather characterized by “a strange cohabitation of subversion and collusion: within an outspoken attack on liberalism, its foundation is refortified; as another ideology is embraced, the tenets of the system are undermined.”

This cultural “in-betweeness” goes a long way in making sense of Langer’s synthesis of Western discursive models of sexuality with Jewish culture. It is also contextualizes Langer’s life-long flirtation with a variety of genres, languages, and cultural affiliations.

III. A Homosexual Hasid Between Belz and Prague

František’s retelling of Jiří’s coming-out-as-Hasid story is significant for another reason too. The primacy he afforded the story is telling, not for what it reveals about Mordechai Jiří (and certainly about František), but for what it hides. František constructed a hyperbolic narrative of his brother’s conversion to Hasidism, using the image of “coming out” to the family as Kafkaesque bug, to bury a far more troubling family secret: his brother was a homosexual.

As far as I have been able to determine, František never mentioned his brother’s homosexuality in print; yet it is highly unlikely that he never discovered it given Langer’s engagement with the issue in Die Erotik der Kabbala and in his Hebrew poetry (others like Max Brod and Dov Sadan were also aware). At one point František does mention that his brother was highly influenced by Czech Decadence-Symbolism, which, as Robert B. Pynset, Roar Lishaugen, and others have shown, was a literary movement almost synonymous with homosexuality in the Czech lands (and beyond). Given that

\[102\] Spector, Prague Territories, xi.

\[103\] There is no debate among the few scholars who have written about Langer in regards to his homosexuality (nor should there be); although the issue of homosexuality has not been examined in any depth. While there is no debate about Langer’s homosexuality, there is little evidence external to Langer’s published works that shed light on his personal sexual life. We do not know if Langer had any sexual affairs. Langer never married, left no children, and was resistant to dating women at all (there is even record of his rejecting an offer to be set up on a date with a woman). In other words, there is no indication of bisexuality whatsoever. In a brief discussion of Langer in her unpublished Ph.D. dissertation on Kafka’s Jewish identity, Ann Oppenheimer writes that in the 1920s, upon his return to Prague after living among the Belze Hasidim in today’s Ukraine, Langer had “pursued [his homosexuality] with an extremism comparable with his former devotion to Hasidism.” Beyond the ugly tone of this comment, there is little evidence to support her assertion. Beyond the ugly tone of this comment, there is little evidence to support her assertion. Presumably Oppenheimer is referring to the subject of homosexuality in his published work. See Anne Oppenheimer, “Franz Kafka’s Relation to Judaism” (Ph.D. dissertation., Oxford, 1977), 300. There is evidence that Langer’s homosexuality was known to his friends and family though the matter was referred to cryptically and euphemistically. Dov Sadan, Dror’s adviser, was well aware of Langer’s homosexuality and referred to it explicitly as “homosexuality” in a private letter to another fine Hebrew critic, Avner Holtzman in 1982. See Avner Holtzman, Abarot Tişyon: panim ba-sifrut ba-Ivrit ba-badashab (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2006), 585, note 15. There Sadan recommended that the subject of same-sex sexuality be taken up as a discrete focus of criticism and listed Langer as an example. Sadan also referred to Langer’s homosexuality through euphemism in his eulogy for Langer and in his introduction to Dror’s 1984 volume.
František was himself caught up in the Czech avant-garde (he claimed to have introduced his brother to the work of Otokar Březina), he would have undoubtedly known about its reputation. What then should we make of František’s reticence? Might it signal acceptance or apathy regarding his brother’s homosexuality rather than discomfort? Was Hasidism perhaps more troubling than homosexuality to the Langer family? Or was this open secret just too dangerous to print in Communist Prague of 1963? We will have to make due with speculation.

By hiding his brother’s homosexuality in the Hasidic closet, and by using the coming-out scene (however anachronistic the metaphor) to describe Mordechai’s revelation, his brother invited us to speculate on the connections between homosexuality and Hasidism in Mordechai Jiří’s life: Was Langer’s highly unusual decision to run away to the Hasidic court related to his homosexuality? Was Belz a refuge for a confused and bewildered adolescent boy? Or did Jiří discover his same-sex desire at Belz among the Hasidim? The evidence for such connections does not end with František. Mordechai Jiří drew them as well; he described Hasidism as an incubator of homosexual desire in Die Erotik der Kabbalah, as in the following depiction of Hasidic yeshiva students:

The boy’s soul, suddenly taken by an inexplicable yearning [Sehnsucht; alternatively: “lust”] for the rabbi, finds no peace at home. Not only in his nightly dreams, but also—and this is for the Hasidim a sign of grace [Gnade]—while awake the shining form of the rabbi appears before his eyes. Finally he decides: He leaves a comfortable home—often against his father’s will and his mother’s tears—and travels to the city of the rabbi, in order to “cleave” [anschmiegen; alternatively, “to nestle up to’”] to him (to be dorek) forever. As soon as he arrives and it is determined that he is serious, he is greeted with open arms by the “Chevre” [social group]. Soon he finds himself in the middle of a circle of friends [Freundeskreis], who “draw near” [annäbert] to him through various tenderness [Zärtlichkeiten] and it doesn’t take long to find an older student who has “the same soul” to study with, which he accepts with great joy. How blessed he feels.104

Langer later evoked this very description of the Hasidic student’s homoerotic attachment to the Rebbe in his own autobiographical recounting of experiences at Belz in the first chapter of his Nine Gates to the Hasidic Mysteries. There he tells that while he later found his years among the Hasidim to be the happiest in his life, he first had difficulty fitting in at Belz, where the Hasidim distrusted his “Western” ways; he even returned home at one point during his first year of study.105 At the time, Langer considered remaining in Prague for good, frustrated with his unbearable loneliness among the Hasidim, but was visited one night in the family kitchen by the Belze Rebbe, Yissachar Dov

104 EK, 116.

105 Nine Gates, 12–13. This is further evidence of the unreliability of František’s account of Mordechai Jiří’s life, which erases the resistance and difficulties Jiří faced at the Hasidic court. Of course, Mordechai Jiří’s testimony is not without its own problems, but it will have to wait for an extended study of Langer’s oeuvre.
Rokeach, in a prophetic vision that inspired his return. The following example is even more explicit:

To understand what kind of love [Liebe] dwelled between the “yoshvim” [talmudic scholars; literally: “those who sit”], one only has to step into the beis ba-midrash (“house of study”), where they are enveloped with their studies [wo sie sich mit ihrem Studium beschäftigen]. Here sit two young men (bachurim), with beards just beginning to cover their chins, “studying” assiduously over thick Talmud-folios. The one holds the other by his beard, looks deep into his eyes, and in this manner explains a complicated Talmud passage. And there, two friends (yedidim) pace around the hall deep in conversation, while embracing one another [sie halten einander umschlungen]. (During meals one can see that they always dine out of the same bowl). In the dark corner stand a pair. The younger of the two rests his back against the wall, the elder has the entire frontal part of his body literally pressed against him [der ältere liegt fürmlich mit der ganzen Vorderseite seines Körpers an ihn gedrückt]; they look lovingly in each other’s eyes, but keep still. What could be playing out within their pure souls? They themselves don’t even know.

Did Mordechai Langer first realize his sexual proclivity for men in the “dark corners” of the bet midrash? Or was his a rereading made later in life thanks to the gift of hindsight? Langer’s qualification that even “they themselves don’t even know” what is “playing out within their souls” might suggest that his own studies at Belz were a turning point on his journey to sexual self-consciousness: an inchoate process of which he (perhaps) was not yet fully aware at the time. Whether Langer "discovered" his homosexuality before, during, or after his time living with the Hasidim will probably never be fully determined. That he experienced, or reimagined his experience, in the Hasidic world as homoerotic is undeniable (this description, we should also note, was published only three years after his return to Prague). We will return to these descriptions later in examining Die Erotik der Kabbala. For now, it is enough to point out that for Langer Hasidism was an incubator of male-male love and sexual desire.

Langer lived among the Hasidim of Belz intermittently between 1913 and 1919. He later recalled these years in romantic, homoerotic terms, but Langer lived with the Hasidim during its bleakest moments of social crisis engendered by the First World War. With the outbreak of the war, Langer joined the evacuation of Rokeach’s court to Transleithenian Hungary, but soon was forced to leave their ranks after receiving his draft notice in Ratzfert. During the course of his short military career, Langer witnessed the dislocation and devastation of the Galician Hasidic world situated at the geographic center of the Eastern Front. Though Rokeach and company eventually returned to Belz later in the war (Langer joined them after his dismissal from the army), the

---

106 Ibid., 13. Dov Sadan recalled that even at the end of his life, while suffering from illness, Langer believed that if he could only touch the Rebbe of Belz, he would recoup his health and return to normal life. See his testimony in Dror ed., Me’at tsori.


108 Koschmal, 11.
Hasidic community never returned to its former self. The postwar settlement concluded in Paris transferred Belz to Polish sovereignty; Langer became a foreign subject and was forced to return to Prague. Rokeach’s return to Belz was temporary too: with the outbreak of the Polish-Soviet war of 1919, Rokeach had to evacuate his court once again. He settled in Mukacheve, which was under Czechoslovak rule, where Langer rejoined him for a short time until Rokeach was expelled back to Poland.

Langer’s final encounter with the Hasidim in Mukacheve, however, was nothing like his experience at Belz. The war ended the relative cultural isolation that was once Belze’s hallmark, as a variety of political refugees from Galicia, deserters, closeted Zionists, and political activists took refuge with them as “newborn Hasidim.” The Zionists seemed to have had a particular influence on Langer, prompting his next metamorphosis into an activist. \(^{110}\) Langer organized the first hakhshara [preparation] training program for Zionist emigrants at Mukacheve, and assisted in the emigration of (mostly Polish) Jewish war refugees to British Mandate Palestine. \(^{111}\) Remarkable is that Langer’s early Zionist activities coincided with his studies as a Hasid, although such political engagements were

---

\(^{109}\) František reports that, due to his refusal to carry his gun on the Sabbath, his brother was thrown in military prison. Thanks to his intervention (as a military doctor), František reports, Jiří was diagnosed as mentally ill and released. See Nine Gates, xxi. Jiří saw things a bit differently: “I have felt profoundly indebted to the saint of Belz. I know that it is he alone whom I have to thank for my miraculous deliverance from Austrian military service. It was his intercession with God that brought this about.” Ibid., 21.

\(^{110}\) This study argues against Zohar Maor’s recent description of Langer as “opposed the principle of nationalism” and as an intellectual who used mysticism to “break the boundaries of the nation.” Maor has based his argument on two pieces of evidence: one, a letter Langer wrote in regard to his poetry to Yaakov Rabinovich in 1921, which I take up in chapter three for other reasons and which I have translated in full in the addendum to this dissertation. Maor claims that in this letter Langer “places blame [for the rejection of his poems] on a militant Zionist way of thinking” (Maor, 265, note 73). How Maor reads this in Langer’s letter is a mystery to me. While Langer bitingly shares his frustrations about the difficulties he faced in getting his homoerotic poetry published and criticizes the “conservative” assumptions of a number of editors regarding Hebrew literature, Langer says nothing critical about Zionism in this letter, “militant” or otherwise. On the contrary, he presents his poetry within a nationalist framework, as we shall see. The second piece of evidence that Maor cites is Langer’s cosmopolitan and inclusive reading of Jewish mysticism: his view that all mystical traditions essentially confirm the core truth of Jewish mysticism. I find Maor’s reading of Langer’s inclusive mysticism as a form of anti-Zionism unconvincing. On the contrary, there is abundant evidence that Langer was a life-long Zionist, if at times also capable of temperate criticism. Zohar Maor, Torat sod ḥadasah: ruḥaniyyut, yetsirah u-leumiyut be-“ḥag Prag” (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-toldot Yisrael, 2010). A piece of evidence that Maor does not refer to is Miriam Zinger’s testimony “Kafka’s Hebrew Teacher” Orot 6 (1969), 87. Zinger claimed that Langer “opposed Zionism” and that “Hebrew was for him the language of the Bible and of prayers.” Zinger’s testimony is entirely unreliable; her assertion is entirely belied by Langer’s many secular Hebrew writings. In fact, Langer was affiliated with quite a few Zionist organizations, wrote nationalist poetry, and published in a number of Zionist journals throughout his life. His Zionism is also confirmed by Dagan, “The Czech-German-Jewish Symbiosis of Prague,” 187 and Dror ed, Me’at tsori, 196–97. That Langer was also capable of criticizing Zionism is also true, but this surely hardly qualifies one as “not a Zionist” or an “anti-Zionist.”

\(^{111}\) Langer also briefly mediated between Prague’s secular General-Zionist establishment and the religious Mizrahi Zionists. See Dror, Me’at tsori, 197. Langer also considered emigrating to Palestine in 1920, though it is unclear why he did not do so. Avigdor Dagan writes that “the attraction to Western culture was too strong,” (187) but offers no evidence for his ideologically-tinged assertion.
strictly prohibited for yeshiva students. His simultaneous involvement with both Zionism and Hasidism, we might note here, may help to explain his ease with drawing connections between the homoerotics of both movements in Die Erotik der Kabbala.

The social dislocation of the war and the Paris Peace Conference did not provide the immediate impetus for Langer to write his homoerotic Hebrew poetry or Die Erotik der Kabbala; but without an understanding of this broader context these texts are opaque. From around the age of nineteen to twenty-five, Langer began to come to grips with his same-sex desire while living as a Hasid in the epicenter of Hasidic society. Officially, of course, the Hasidic court conformed strictly to Jewish law: homosexuality was (and is) forbidden. The Hasidim would not have perceived their homoerotic behavior as anything queer. Langer, however, found some transient comfort and brotherhood within their world, either concurrently or retroactively, as a space in which he was able to negotiate his same-sex desires (consciously or not) in some self-satisfying respect. It is even possible that Langer looked back with longing at the world of Hasidim for its dearth of rigid distinctions between homoeroticism, homosexuality, and heterosexuality; nevertheless, in his retelling, Langer applies these categories to their world—categories, as he put it, that “they themselves don’t even know.”

And here is the key point: the institution of Hasidism gave meaning and shape to how Langer experienced the inner life of his sexual self, even if he did not yet have the language to express it as such. He would, however, find that language after his exposure to Freud, the sexologists, and, especially, the work of Hans Blüher upon his permanent return to Prague. With the advent of the war, Langer was wrenched from his social and psychic equilibrium, experiencing the intense social dislocation of the homoerotic world he had come to cherish, informed his writing extensively. It is no coincidence that Langer’s descriptions of Hasidic homoeroticism read like memorialized recovery as well as an ethnographic study of sexuality.

When he returned home to Prague from the war in 1919, František, to his delight, found his brother Mordechai “completely Europeanized”—that is, without Hasidic caftan and sidelocks. Mordechai continued to live as a deeply devout and observant Jew, though his strict observance of halakha would progressively wane until his death. He carried Belz with him wherever he went, but now he did so, at least as František saw it, in a more Prague-palatable form: at home “he wore the velvet rabbi’s cap instead” and he “was no longer so obstinate as before the war.” Yet František also felt it worthy to note (and for the second time) that his brother still “faced sideways and would on no account shake hands” when “speaking to a woman.”

Why Langer decided to shed his Hasidic frock coat (caftan) and sidelocks is unknown. It may be related to his turn to Zionism, but it would be presumptuous to say more. But we do know

---

112 Nine Gates, xxii–xxiii. Avigdor Dagan claims that "to the very end he remained a Hasid" Ibid, 188. Langer's passion for halakhic Judaism, however, seem to have progressively cooled until his death in 1944. Iris Bruce informs me that in her own interview with Jiří Kraus, a former student of Langer's during the 1930s, Kraus averred that Langer hardly ever spoke of religion, preferring to take students out for ice cream and ice skating. Langer's eccentricity and colorful personality made him very popular with his students. See Iris Bruce, Kafka and Cultural Zionism: Dates in Palestine (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 178 and 233 note 34.
that his Hasidic experiences continued to shape his intellectual life for years to come; it was almost twenty years later that he published his collection of Hasidic folktales *Nine Gates*.

The Hasidic court that had shaped the inner experience of his sexual self was now gone. In Prague, he deepened his interactions with Zionist organizations and publications; he also apparently worked as a clerk for a Zionist organization during the interwar. For several months in 1918, Langer also studied at the *Pedagogyon ha-Ivri* [The Hebrew Pedagogic Academy] in Vienna. He taught Jewish studies subjects in Czech schools intermittently throughout the interwar (in both German and Czech). In the immediate years after the war, he also strengthened his friendships with Franz Kafka, Max Brod, and other figures of the Prague-Jewish literary scene (he first met Kafka during a visit home during the war). He became well acquainted with a range of modernisms including Czech Decadence-Symbolism and read widely in psychoanalytic and possibly in other sexological writings as well. But Langer’s commitments to Jewish practice still made him a Kafkaesque insect in an urbane secular city with few Orthodox Jews. His temptation to abandon religious practice must have been particularly strong, not least because of his homosexuality. All of these factors coalesced to make the issue of homosexuality and Jewish culture pressing to him on a personal level, but none of these factors in and of themselves account for his turn to draft homoerotic Hebrew poetry and *Die Erotik der Kabbala*, probably beginning sometime in 1920. This final spark came from the

---

113 Zionist journals were rife with discussion and debate about whether the war would finally propel Hasidim, and *Ostjuden* generally, to abandon their humiliating garb for western civilization. Langer was probably aware of these debates given his involvement with the Zionist press; they may have had influence on him.

114 Koschmal, 14.

115 Ibid.

116 Langer’s last volume of Hebrew poetry was published posthumously, as were several individual poems in 1944. He switched between Hebrew, German, and Czech throughout his literary career. Once he arrived in the Yishuv [pre-state Jewish settlement in Palestine] in 1940 he published exclusively in Hebrew, though he continued to write his brother, who did not read Hebrew, in Czech. Aside from his major book-length studies, Langer penned articles on a wide range of Jewish-themed topics and published in a number of journals including: the Zionist journal *Selbstwehr, Jüdischer Almanach, Židovské zprávy, Rozvoj, Studentský časopis, Česka, Tribuna, Národní listy*; and in the Hebrew newspapers and journals, *ba-Mitzpeh, Kolot, Davar, Hegeh, Gazit, Gilyonot, Sikot, and Ketuwim*. In the Yishuv he worked for a short time as an art and theater critic while continuing to publish on Jewish themes. Tracking down all of Langer’s short publications is somewhat difficult because he is listed under various combinations of his German, Hebrew, and Czech names: Mordechai Dov, Georg, Georgio, Georg M., Jiří M., M.D. Georg, Mordechai Jiří, Mordechai Zev Georgo, etc. Thankfully, Walter Koschmal has recently collected many of Langer’s German articles, which he has published as the second half of his, *Der Dichternomad: Jiří Mordechai Langer - ein tschechisch-jüdischer Autor*. Miriam Dror compiled a detailed bibliography of Langer’s Hebrew publications in *Me’at Tzori* and Alice Marxova (not listed in the text) has collected Langer’s Czech publications, correspondence, and several translations of his German articles as *Jiří Langer: Studie, recenze, články, dopisy*, Mordechai Georgo (Dov) Langer, *Me’at torsi: Aynfat ketuwah* ed. M. Dror (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1984); *Jiří Langer: Studie, recenze, články, dopisy*, trans. Eva Adamová, et al. (Prague: Sefer, 1995); Walter Koschmal, *Der Dichternomad: Jiří Mordechai Langer - ein tschechisch-jüdischer Autor* (Köln [etc.]: Böhlau Verlag, 2010). I have not determined whether these scholars have accounted for every article Langer ever published, but it is probable that they are not comprehensive given that his studies are listed under various formulations of his name. I thank Alice Marxová for generously giving me a copy of her book from Prague.
world of ideas; it was struck in the form of a vehement attack on the Jewish homosexual from within homosexual discourse itself.

IV. The Homosexual Scene in Prague

We know very little about Langer's life in Prague during the 1920s, so it is not possible to determine whether he had any direct contacts with the inchoate homosexual scene in interwar Prague. As Walter Koschmal points out, scholars interested in Langer's biography immediately encounter two problems: first, the broad linguistic demands required to handle Langer's writing. Second, the amount of available archival evidence with which to recreate Langer's life is modest. Langer did not leave behind a diary or an extensive amount of correspondence. Furthermore, when he fled the Nazis (alone) in 1938, he took very little with him to Tel Aviv (his brother described him as travelling with only a suitcase or two full of books). Langer died childless and unmarried in Tel Aviv in 1943; his third brother committed suicide in Prague in defiance of the Nazis while Frantisek lived in exile in London. His letters are a fascinating window into the torturous years during which he escaped Prague, suffered on the Danube, and struggled with financial problems in Tel Aviv, but they do not address Langer's personal sexual life in any way. When Langer died his estate passed to Max Brod, who donated his small collection of books to the municipal library in Tel Aviv, which is today's Beit Ariella (the library, however, has no record or further information about this donation). As of this writing, historians have yet to have access to Max Brod’s personal archive in Tel Aviv, which includes Brod’s diaries. Brod knew Langer well for most of Langer’s short life. Brod’s diaries will in all likelihood shed more light on his friend. The few materials that survived of Langer’s estate were handed over to Dov Sadan, who placed them in the National Library Archive of Jerusalem (some correspondence ended up at Beit Hasofer in Tel Aviv). Other Langer correspondence can be found in archives related to his brother in Prague and New York as well. It is not entirely clear if Brod and Sadan preserved everything of worth in
point out that Prague’s homosexual subculture was far smaller and less organized than its more-famous counterpart in Berlin is to engage in understatement. But the relatively liberal atmosphere of Czechoslovakia’s First Republic (1918-1938) did promote the increased visibility of homosexual life in Prague, too. Still, homosexual acts remained illegal, as the new state adopted the statutes against sodomy of the Austrian Penal Code (paragraph 129b).\textsuperscript{118}

The 1920s and 1930s in Prague saw the emergence of the first gay political-rights organizations and emancipation-related literature. In 1919, the lawyer František Čeřovský, a heterosexual, tried what was ultimately a failed struggle for decriminalization of homosexuality. The interwar also saw an effort by Prague sexologists to bring about the decriminalization of homosexuality (they also failed). The German sexologist and homosexual rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld helped establish The Institute of Sexology at Charles University of Prague in 1921, which was the first of its kind in Europe and which brought increased attention to sexual minorities. He would later hold a conference for his World League for Sex Reform in Czechoslovakia in 1932.\textsuperscript{119} In 1924, František Jelínek published *Homosexualita ve světě vědy* [*Homosexuality in the Light of Science*], which argued for the decriminalization of homosexuality by drawing on medical and legal arguments, as well as homoeroticism in Czech art and literature, especially the Czech Decadents.\textsuperscript{120} The first gay journal, *Hlas sexuální menšiny* [*The Voice of the Sexual Minority*], emerged in 1932 (it was later renewed as *Nový hlas* [*The New Voice*]).

Whether or not Langer was directly involved with any of these figures (he probably was not), he did read widely in literature related to the subject, especially in Czech Decadence and Symbolism.\textsuperscript{121} Czech Decadent-Symbolists played crucial roles in bringing homosexuality into public view.\textsuperscript{122} They debated the nature and morality of homosexuality in their journal *Moderní revue*, edited by Arnošť Prochážka and Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic. Already in 1895, a major debate ensued on its pages (as well as several other journals) regarding the Oscar Wilde trials and whether his homosexuality discredited his merits as an author. The debate prompted homosexual writers like

---


\textsuperscript{119} Grossman, *Reforming Sex*, 16.

\textsuperscript{120} Lishaugen, 78.

\textsuperscript{121} František later claimed that he had introduced him to the work of Otokar Březina.

\textsuperscript{122} Pynsent, “The Decadent Nation”, 88-89.
Karásek to call for homosexuality's decriminalization. In the same year, police confiscated Karásek's collection of poetry *Sodoma* for indecency and he faced criminal prosecution (though he was granted amnesty by the Emperor). Karásek also edited *Nový blas* and led the homosexual organization *Osvětové a společenské sdružení Přátelství* ["The Educative and Social Association Friendship"].

Even more important than his contact with Czech modernists, Langer engaged with the new language of sexual science and sexual subjectivity through Freud and one of the major theorists of German homosexual emancipation, Hans Blüher (and by way of Blüher to many other homosexual writers as well). How Langer first came into contact with these intellectuals is unclear. Both Freud and Blüher were widely read (or at least known) within interwar Prague literary circles (including, of course, Kafka and Brod), as well as within Zionist circles. Hans Blüher's ideas also had a particularly strong influence on Heinz Rutha, a homosexual leader of the Sudeten-German youth movement. Marc Cornwall, Rutha's biographer, has described him as the most significant youth leader of his generation.

Blüher's ideas about the homoeroticism of the German youth movement sparked wide debate among a wide swath of Central European intellectuals and publications. Thanks to the influence of Rutha, such debates spread to Bohemia as well. To properly appreciate Hans Blüher and his significance for Langer, some background on German homosexual emancipation is needed in order to contextualize his ideas.

### IV. Jews and the German Homosexual Emancipation Movement

Since the 1970s, when the history of the German homosexual emancipation was first written, historians have narrated its story as a tale of two competing homosexual political traditions, each of which was grounded in a different conceptualization of homosexuality itself. This division, as some recent work as begun to show, is too neat: first, there were quite a variety of homosexual political groups and identities that fell in between these two polarized traditions; second, when the historian examines each pole in detail, she quickly discovers that each “wing” bore traits often associated with the other. What’s more, during the early years of the movement the figures associated with these two traditions often collaborated. The two traditions only gradually diverged in the fifteen-odd years before the First World War, as one side grew increasingly

---


125 Mark Cornwall, “Heinrich Rutha and the Unraveling,” 320.

antisemitic, misogynist and hyper-nationalist. Be that as it may, with these qualifications acknowledged, the traditional framework of two traditions will do for our purposes.

The first tradition is most often associated with the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), founded in 1897 by Magnus Hirschfeld and other sexologists and doctors, although its origins can be traced back at least to Heinrich Hösseli’s 1830s defenses of “Greek love.” Hirschfeld shaped its political agenda on the assumption that homosexuals were a distinct and largely stable minority (representing what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called the “minoritizing tradition” in gay cultural and political history). He joined the prevailing scientific theory of homosexuality as a form of gender inversion. Both cosmopolitan and transnational (Hirschfeld once wrote: “My field is the world—not Germany, not Europe alone”), Hirschfeld’s model of homosexual inversion was what scholars call “gender-transitive”: homosexuality was a biological aberration that manifests for both males and females in the species. Historians generally treat the Hirschfeldian wing of the movement as part of a broader set of progressive German reform movements such as the Frauenbewegung (women’s movement), campaigns for sexual liberalization and family planning, and other demands for civil rights (not least because Hirschfeld was also involved with these movements too). They have characterized the Hirschfeldian agenda, popularly known as the “third-sex” model of homosexuality, based on his own disinterested science as a liberal and positivistic one.

Hirschfeld’s “third sex” theory, the popular name he gave it exclusively in his nonacademic publications, is a bit of a misnomer. In fact, he asserted a more fundamental insight that all human


128 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 88–90. Sedgwick famously asserted that the “minoritizing” and “universalizing” traditions predated the nineteenth century, but Sedgwick sees these two political models as archetypical for the twentieth century.


130 Hirschfeld, of course, was not the first to argue for the idea of sexual intermediacy. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, for example, the German classicist, lawyer, and homosexual activist, had already argued almost a generation earlier that the male homosexual represented “a female soul in a male body” and that the homosexual was kind of a psychic hermaphrodite with a physical body of one sex and with a mental constitution of the opposite sex. On Ulrichs see Hubert C Kennedy, Ulrichs: The Life and Works of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Pioneer of the Modern Gay Movement (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988). But Hirschfeld, unlike Ulrichs, argued that not only does the developmental defect called homosexuality (which he later believed occurred during embryological development), lead to the feminization of the psyche, but it also caused morphological forms of hermaphroditism—though for the homosexual these physical differences were non-genital. For Hirschfeld, the homosexual male was, therefore, both mentally and physically distinct from a complete male. In fact, he once asserted, “of the fifteen hundred homosexuals that I have seen, each was physically and mentally distinct from a complete male.” Magnus Hirschfeld, “Die Ursachen und Wesen des Uranismus” Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen, vol. 5 (1903) 1–193, 80.
begins were “intersexual variants.” This wider principle of “sexual intermediacy” stipulated that there were no absolute, qualitative distinctions between male and female. Every human being was partly male and partly female but the degree of maleness and femaleness varied with the individual. All humans were placed on a spectrum stretching between the hypothetical poles of absolute maleness and absolute femaleness. In between the two poles of male and female, an almost indefinite number of sexual types exist. Hirschfeld explains that “everything that the woman possesses, the man—even if in very small degrees—also has, and at least traces of all male characteristics can be detected in woman.” (“alles was das Weib besitzt, hat—even also in very small Resten — der Mann und von allen männlichen Eigenschaften sind beim Weibe zum mindesten Spuren verbunden…”)

The cause of homosexuality, Hirschfeld tentatively concluded, was hormonal and related to abnormal glandular development.

Hirschfeld lectured everywhere and published even more than he lectured. He led a visible campaign to repeal Paragraph 175 of the German constitution, which criminalized sodomy. His motto was “Through Knowledge to Justice,” [Per scientiam ad justitiam]. As Nicholas C. Edsall summarizes, “almost to the eve of the Nazi era, he stubbornly held to the belief that he could, and would, triumph through reason and persuasion.” For nearly twenty-five years, beginning in 1899, the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee published the Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen [Yearbook of Sexual Intermediaries], which included articles related to homosexuality in a range of disciplines from history, anthropology, law, medicine and on. In 1921, he organized the World League for Sexual Reform, the institution that held international conferences and broadened the reach of his work. In sum, Hirschfeld was the most visible leader of the fledgling homosexual community and the most famous advocate of a homosexual rights campaign grounded in science and reason.

The second tradition of homosexual emancipation—the tradition of Langer’s most important interlocutor, Hans Blüher—was the elitist, misogynist, masculinist, and hyper-nationalist tradition represented most visibly by the writers affiliated with Die Gemeinschaft der Eigenen [Fellowship of Individuals; also sometimes translated as “Community of the Self-Owned” or “Community of the Special”], founded by Adolf Brand, Wilhelm Jansen, and Benedict Friedländer, among others in 1902. The tradition of German homosexual masculinism, like the liberal tradition bound up with the figure of Magnus Hirschfeld, actually extended well beyond the immediate figures who affiliated


133 Nicholas C. Edsall, Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World (University of Virginia Press, 2006), 94.

134 Ibid.

135 Other famous members, whose ideas we will encounter in this study, included John Henry Mackay, a poet anarchist who published under the name Sagitta; Paul Brandt, a scholar of classics who wrote on the sexual mores of ancient Greece; Elisarion von Kupffer, a painter and photographer of homoerotic art, who also edited an anthology of homoerotic literature from antiquity; and Edwin Bab, who was one of the few doctors who supported the group. For the other personalities involved see, Oosterhuis and Kennedy eds., Homosexual and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany.
with this organization or who contributed to Brand’s magazine *Der Eigene*, which launched in 1898.\(^{136}\) Hans Blüher, arguably the most important of German masculinist theorists, for example, was only loosely affiliated with this group, although he knew it well; for one, his mentor was Wilhelm Jansen, who was also a leader of the *Wandervogel* youth movement and was forced to resign in 1908 because of homosexual accusations. Some of the other major German masculinist figures beyond *Die Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* are known because of their contribution to other homosexual journals like *Eros* and *Die Freundschaft* (and many other homosexual publications). In addition, this wing also included: a number of leaders of the German *Wandervogelbewegung* other than Blüher and Jansen; Heinz Rutha and other homosexual leaders of the Sudeten German-speaking youth movement; several members of the Stefan George circle (including George himself) and several contributors to George’s *Blätter für die Kunst* [*Pages for Art*]; many homosexuals who participated in the Wagner cult; and beyond.\(^{137}\) Though there were a number of ideological and political differences between these disparate circles, and though many among them would have resisted association with a “homosexual tradition,” there was a shared set of assumptions between them.\(^{138}\)

\(^{136}\) The term “German masculinists” is widely used to describe this tradition by scholars such as Hans-Georg Stümke, Claudia Bruns, Harry Oosterhuis, Andrew Hewitt, Andreas Sternweiler, and many others. Andrew Hewitt’s *Political Inversions* is the closest to a monograph on this group in English, but a comprehensive study is a desideratum. *Der Eigene*, the “journal for male culture,” was in fact a journal for homosexual male culture. Brand was imprisoned for reproducing pictures of nude late-teenage boys and the publication resumed from 1906 until after WWI, when he was re-imprisoned for his involvement in a homosexual scandal. Edsall, 95.


\(^{138}\) Stefan George, for example, distanced himself from homosexual association after the Eulenberg Scandal (ca. 1907-1909). The Eulenburg Affair was one of Wilhelmine Germany’s most important domestic scandals before the First World War. Journalist Maximilian Harden ignited the scandal by exposing the homosexuality of the circle surrounding the Kaiser, whose most prominent member was the highly influential Prince Philip Eulenburg. The affair had important effects on the shape of homosexual political movement and was intimately tied to widespread German concern with the Empire’s moral and political decline—especially Germany’s increasing international isolation after the Moroccan Crisis of 1906. In short, the scandal involved members of the Liebenberg Circle, whose prominent member was Philipp Eulenburg, the closest adviser to the German Kaiser. Maximilian Harden launched a public attack, accusing the circle of homosexuality (which was true). The resulting trials pushed homosexuality into public discourse as never before (as did many other libel trials did in this era). In Bisno’s words: “The public disgrace of Eulenburg, who had been denounced as a homosexual and pervert, sent shockwaves even as far as George and contributed in no small part to his Circle’s efforts to distance the Master [as they called George] from associations with known homosexuals…” Bisno, 48. See Laqueur, *Young Germany*, 51–55; James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York, 1975), 54–55.
German masculinists opposed Hirschfeld’s liberal and positivist model of homosexuality. Instead, they advocated a “gender-separatist” model of homosexuality—that is, they conceived it as a specifically male phenomenon and as a “universal” one that existed in lower degrees among all men. Furthermore, to them same-sex desire was a form of male virility: homosexual longing arose out of a deep spiritual admiration for masculine virtues. The pure homosexual and the pure heterosexual were poles on a continuum of bisexuality, but the homosexual was at the manlier end of the spectrum; in other words, they reversed the Hirschfeldian “third sex” model. Some, like Benedict Friedländer, argued that there were no real homosexuals or heterosexuals at all, only bisexuals (though he maintained that living as a homosexual was an ethically superior choice). Others like Hans Blüher or Adolf Brand argued that there were indeed real “homosexuals” (Blüher preferred the word “invert”), but still made room for a universal bisexuality as well (more on this below).

All German Masculinists drew inspiration from the Greek classical tradition, a peculiarity we will take up in detail in chapter three. For now, it is worth noting that many masculinists spoke of male-male “Eros,” a term they took from Plato, rather than homosexuality per se. Rather than emphasize physical desire, which they did not deny, German masculinists celebrated the spiritual bonds of affection and love that all men could establish with one another. For many German masculinists, male-male sexual activity was a mere accessory, though still a natural outcome, of the more important task of cultivating deep bonds of friendship between men. They lauded all male-male relationships as superior to male-female ones because the former were not merely concerned with physical pleasure or procreation. To be sure, much of this spiritual talk was strategic: by taking the emphasis away from sex, German masculinists could keep a lower profile—at least in theory. In reality, most of the general German public saw through their euphemisms; they lumped masculinists together with other homosexuals anyway. Still, we should remember (as not all historians have) that these men were generally not ascetics; they usually advocated the decriminalization of homosexuality (though the far-more-cautious George Circle did not) and celebrated same-sex sex as well. German masculinist emphasis on the spiritual side of male-male Eros was just that: an emphasis. There was some variation in how they used the term “Eros,” as there was for every word used to describe the homosexual in this period, including “homosexual.” But almost as a rule, German

---

139 The political affiliations of German masculinists varied, at least during the first two decades of the movement. After WWI, this group moved increasingly closer to right wing parties and ideologies.


141 Friedrich Radszuweit’s less famous *Bund für Menschenrechte* would also fall under this tradition. Harry Oosterhuis, “Homosexual Emancipation in Germany Before 1933: Two Traditions” in *Homosexuality and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany*, 1–21.

masculinists found the term “Eros” useful since it encompassed both spiritual and physical aspects of male-male association.

One of the more important characteristics of German masculinism was that its theorists were not particularly concerned with questions of homosexual etiology (the cause of homosexuality). It is not so much that they took no stand on the matter (many did), but that the focus of their concerns lay elsewhere. Indeed, one of their major bones of contention with the Magnus Hirschfeld types was their unremitting preoccupation with “scientific” explanations. Most liberals focused on proving that homosexuals could not help what they were. They argued that because they were not responsible for what they were, the state should reasonably fall in line with nature. But to German masculinists, liberals also seemed shackled by their scientific explanations. Whatever their answer (biological, psychological or hereditary), medical models of homosexuality seemed to frame the homosexual experience in unavoidably negative terms, as some aberration from “normal” sexuality and thus to reaffirm him as a social pariah.

But for masculinists the burning questions were not why they existed or how they came to be but where and how they fit within the majority culture, within the nation, and within a religious or metaphysical schema. Their objectives were to make sense of same-sex desire within broader cultural narratives: What was its purpose? What meaning, whether metaphorical, nationalist, or otherwise, could one attribute to it? What role was the homosexual to play in society, especially given that he could not procreate? The appeal of German masculinism was to offer compelling counter-narratives about place and meaning that turned vice into virtue. These narratives presented homosexuality as a special blessing bestowed on an elite vanguard of men. Because of their exclusive desire for the same sex, they were endowed with special capacities to lead, to educate, to create, to shape culture and the nation, even to think. All of these men shared a sense that German society had lost its way culturally, aesthetically, and politically. They shared the broader disaffection with the atomized, highly industrialized, and urbanized modern world. They believed that Germans needed to get back in touch with their Greek roots (and indirectly with its Romantic roots as well) to restore wholeness to German society. In their worldview, homosexuals were

---

143 By blurring the boundaries between male friendship and homosexuality, German masculinists expanded the capacity of history to speak to their identities. Crucial for these authors was a recovery of the Romantic-era (ca. 1750-1850) cult of same-sex friendships (Romantics were themselves also quite engaged with ancient Greece too) which we will see more of in chapter three.

144 This is often lost in present LGBT scholarship, which is largely focused on questions of taxonomy and power (following Foucault). Scholars have not sufficiently explained the internal logic of German masculinism, which to be sure does not in any way justify its misogyny, antisemitism, or fascist leanings, but which must be considered if we are to understand its appeal for otherwise liberal figures like Mordechai Langer.

145 Another point scholars often miss is that although German masculinists liked to talk about male-male Eros as a universal phenomenon, they were in fact not especially concerned with most men at all. True, homoerotic desire was something that all men potentially possessed, but their real interest was to justify their own exclusive orientations by presenting themselves as an elite vanguard of art, culture, political life, and the nation. They never would say this explicitly, but their concern with their own elitism, often grounded in the Nietzschian language of the “superman,” was directly related to their sense of being distinct homosexual subjects. In other words, they were not just male supremacists, but homosexual supremacists.
endowed with the capacities to lead this revival and to restore this wholeness by promoting male-
male Eros. We will encounter various specific formulations of this ideology over the course of this
study, but for now let me emphasize that German masculinists reversed the homosexual’s marginal
position and brought him straight into the center, portraying him as an integral, and even an
indispensable, part of cultural and political life.

There was, however, a dark side to German masculinism that was inextricable from its
attempts to make positive cultural hay of homosexuality. German masculinists defined themselves
using foils: women, “gender inverts,” and, most importantly for our purposes, Jews (including
Judaism, Jewish culture, and Jewish aesthetics).

The antisemitism of the various groups that constitute the German masculinist tradition was
not pronounced until the immediate years prior to World War One. Earlier, most of these figures
were more concerned with attacking women and, in particular, women’s emancipation (women’s
suffrage, women’s higher education, women’s employment) as the greatest threat to European, and
especially German, civilization. Theorists like Elisarion von Kupffer warned of “female ascendancy”
and the loss of manhood as a result of growing female power.\footnote{146} Many German masculinists, from
Eduard von Mayer, to Stefan George, to Hans Blüher, drew heavily on the ideas of the Swiss
historian Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887). In his 1861 \textit{Das Mutterrecht [Matriarchy]}, Bachofen
argued that all of human culture could be traced back to the conflict between the two sexes.\footnote{147} As
Robert Norton pithily summarizes, according to Bachofen:

\begin{quote}
All of our conceptions of morality and religion, all of our social and political
structures are deeply informed by this primal constellation. Indeed, history itself,
according to Bachofen, took shape as a struggle between the female and male
principles.\footnote{148}
\end{quote}

At the origins of history, humanity was organized as a “matriarchy” in which the female principle
dominated and “under which male spirituality had been stifled by collective materialism and primate
superstition.”\footnote{149} “The mother Right,” wrote Bachofen, “is the law of material life, the law of the
earth from which it derives its origin. In contrast, the Father Right is the law of our immaterial, non-
corporeal nature.”\footnote{150} In this Manichean scheme, the male was intellectual, spiritual, and rational; the
woman, his opposite. Eventually, the male “phallic master” defeated the “matriarchal” principle and
eliminated her sovereignty, but all of human history since could be reduced to the recurring clash
between these two primal forces. What this meant was that men needed to guard their supremacy
and the equilibrium that they had established. German masculinists, following Bachofen, saw

\footnote{146} Elisarion von Kupffer, \textit{“Die ethisch-politische Bedeutung der Leiblingminne,” Der Eigene 6/7} (1899), 182-199.
Translated in Oousterhuis and Kennedy, 35-48.

\footnote{147} J.J. Bachofen, \textit{Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen
rechtlichen Natur} (Frankfurt am Main, 1975; first edition 1861); Ralph Manheim, trans., \textit{Ralph Manheim, Trns.

\footnote{148} Norton, \textit{Secret Germany}, 296.

\footnote{149} Oosterhuis, 187.

\footnote{150} Bachofen, I: 199; translated in Norton, 296.
modern industrial and democratic life as leading humankind backwards to the prehistoric “matriarchate.” The danger was not only that women would pervade political life, but that they would stifle male potency with their influence. In women’s view, as Harry Oosterhuis writes, “man’s idealism and creative drive were suffocated by exclusive emotional ties to women and by the material obligations entailed by marriage and family.” The antidote to this threat was to promote all-male culture. Those men best in the position to lead this fight were homosexuals, at least in the eyes of German masculinists. Because they were divorced entirely from female influence, homosexuals actively promoted “Männerliebe,” the love of men, and Männerbünde, male societies. As Edmund von Mayer and Benedict Friedländer argued, these all-male institutions would break through modern egalitarianism, reverse the “feminization” of society, and destroy the threats of bourgeois mediocrity and materialism that were corroding modern life.

Already before World War One but increasingly so during the war and in its wake, German masculinists turned to “Jews” and “Judaism” as their negative foils. Hans Blüher (1888-1955) was representative of this shift. He also offered the most elaborate formulation of German masculinist ideology and the most vehement attack against Jews. Blüher was a leading theorist and active

---

151 Oosterhuis, 186.

152 The term Männerbund was coined by Heinrich Schurtz (1863-1903), an ethnologist in his 1902 study, Heinrich Schurtz, Alterklassen und Männerbunde: Eine Darstellung der Gesellschaft: mit einer Verbreitungskarte (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1902). In a similar move to Bachofen, Schurtz argued that men were at the core of cultural progress. Because of their “sexual instinct,” women form families; men, on the other hand, have a “social instinct” that leads them away from the family and motivates them to form Männerbünde [male societies], which are at the core of “social order.” Women “stand predominantly under the influence of sexual love and the feelings for the family that derive from this; the man on the other hand, is determined in his behavior more by the pure “social instinct,” which brings him together with his peers. There women are the nursery of all forms of society that emerge from the union of two people. Blüher drew his ideas from Heinrich Schurtz, a German sociologist, who had in 1902 argued that women were motivated exclusively by their sacrifice to family; men were driven beyond the family toward a higher association with other men. From this intense male bonding, the creative spirit lead to civil society and the state. Jürgen Reulecke, “Ich möchte einer warnen so wie die”: Männerbünde im 20. Jahrhundert (Frankfurt: Campus, 2001), 38-40. To people of the opposite sex, the man on the other hand is the representative of all kinds of union that are purely socially driven and thus of the higher forms of social organization.” Translated by Katherine Faull, in Bruns, “The Politics of Eros,” 155. Schurtz had a strong impact on both Hans Blüher and Otto Weininger.

153 Their romanticizing of the homosexual was not inherently antagonistic with liberalism or science. Indeed, as we have seen, Blüher himself had drawn extensively from psychoanalysis. Still, German masculinists rejected liberal and positivist assumptions (while in Britain, by contrast, liberals like Walter Pater did the romanticizing of homosexuality).

154 The “self-hating” Jewish zoologist Benedict Friedländer committed suicide in 1908.

participant of the Wandervogelbewegung, a wing of the German Youth Movement. The Wandervogel was originally an all-male hiking club for high school students in Berlin, but quickly spread across the country. The movement was caught up with the German reform movements of the early twentieth century, as Claudia Bruns describes:

The movement embodied the new feeling for life of the young, predominantly educated middle-class generation that wished to free itself of certain demands of Wilhelmine society and then develop its own lifestyle, fashion, and music. They wore practical clothes, forsook comfortable travel, managed their money together, and stressed the wild romance of these trips that were just as much inspired by reading Karl May as by the ideal of the “traveling scholar” and the “bacchante” of the Middle Ages.156

The movement had a reputation for homoerotic bonding and many of its leaders were indeed homosexuals, which prompted much scandal as already mentioned. Still, Hans Blüher’s theories ultimately received the wide currency that they did because his arguments were directed at a movement that was specifically not homosexual or parochial (as the GdE was). In other words, unlike other German masculinists, Blüher made his claims concerning homosexual supremacy as an authority from within a seemingly heterosexual social institution.

Blüher’s ideas first made waves in his “history” of the Wandervogel movement in 1912, which included an explanatory model for the movement’s genesis. Blüher published his ideas in three volumes, but it was in the third volume, Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung als erotisches Phänomen [The German Wandervogel Movement as an Erotic Phenomenon], that he began to explicitly take up the issue of homosexuality.157 Blüher described the Wandervogel movement as a “romantic revolution,” in which the youth rebelled against their parents’ generation. Young men all over Germany were rejecting their real fathers, replacing them with “a better father,” a beloved Führer, whom they found in older male figures of the movement (but not necessarily much older). The strong bonds between Wandervogel males could best be explained, he argued, as sublimated (and sometimes non-sublimated) homosexual “forces or drives” that exist in varying degrees among all men. It was the Wandervogel, of course, which exemplified the German masculinist Männerbund in real time.


157 The first two volumes were published as Hans Blüher, Wandervogel: Geschichte Einer Jugendbewegung, 2 vols. (Berlin-Tempelhof: Buchhandlung Bernhard Weise, 1912). The third volume, which is most explicit about male love was published as Hans Blüher, Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung als erotisches Phänomen: Ein Beitrag zur Erkenntnis der sexuellen Inversion, 1st edition (Berlin: Bernhard Weise Buchhandlung, 1912).
Like other German masculinists, Blüher insisted on separating homosexuality from gender inversion. The true *typus inversus*, Blüher argued, was not effeminate but a paragon of masculinity. By contrast, Hirschfeld’s effeminate “homosexual” (gender-invert) was a pathological neurotic and not a real homosexual. Blüher also believed that all men were originally born bisexual, an idea he took from Freud, but as a natural part of male development men settled into only one orientation after puberty, either homosexual or heterosexual, while the other was suppressed. This process was gradual and, as a result, young heterosexual men could develop strong erotic male relationships, especially in the proper social environments (like the youth movement) and with the guiding help of “real inverts” who lead the movement. Heterosexual men retained their capacity to form homoerotic bonds, but at very weak levels (the reverse, that homosexuals retain the capacity to form weak heterosexual bonds is implied as well), and as a result, heterosexual men could only perform supportive roles within the *Männerbund*. Homosexuality was a natural variation that required no etiological explanation, he claimed. Same-sex desire was not pathological, but part of “the general sexual-social animal species, the human.” As Bruns writes, “sexuality between men should no longer be considered a pathological deviation from the norm, according to Blüher, but rather a biological force, a *zoön politikon*, because it granted him the ability for social bonding.”

The homosexual was, as a result, the natural charismatic leader, the *Männerheld* [the hero of men], of the *Männerbund*; it was only he who was oriented completely away from women and the feminine sphere of the family and who could, through erotic bonding with other men, form the core of *Männerbunde*. What more, he argued, homoerotic *Männerbünde*—and not the family—were the basis of the state. As the leader of the *Männerbund*, the homosexual was not just a potential political leader and head of state, he was also a natural educator. Here the historical record was particularly useful: Blüher pointed to the well-known fact, especially to those trained in classics, that ancient Greek history had been built upon social models of pedagogic male-male Eros. In such paternal-sexual models, the male adult or *erastes* educated and sexually initiated a beautiful young man into adulthood. The male youth or *eromenos* was bound to his *erastes* for life. For Blüher, this hierarchical organization of same-sex relationships was ideal (since it was socially purposeful), though he also recognized mutualistic relationships between men of the same age as well. Blüher argued that male-

---

158 In his earliest studies, Blüher does not exhibit any strong proclivity for antisemitism. The first edition of his studies do not bare traces of antisemitism and indeed, Magnus Hirschfeld wrote an introduction to it. The two, however, parted ways rather quickly, as Blüher articulated his antisemitism more explicitly in his next writings.

159 Blüher’s terminology can get confusing: he refers to the manly type in his work as an “invert” and Hirschfeld’s gender-inverted type as a “homosexual.” However, he made this distinction for rhetorical purposes.

160 Blüher’s theory tells us very little about how the Wandervogel really was. Undoubtedly for actual homosexuals, his theories offered comfort that their attractions were ok. Certainly male-male emotional relationships were allowed to flourish there.


162 Bruns, 160.
male associations facilitated by the *Männerbund* were the foundations of state-building. In it he argued that male-male erotic relations were not only normal but formed the social foundations for the political state, which was essentially a *Männerbund* writ large.

In his second and far more elaborate two-volume study *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft*, published in two volumes in 1917 and 1919, Blüher expanded his thesis regarding the *Wandervogel* into a broader argument about same-sex Eros in history. Rejecting both Hegel’s foundation of spirit and Marx’s economic vision of history, Blüher argued that male-male Eros was the historical prime cause that lead to the foundation of the state:

> The final justification for the need to build states of the human race can be found in Eros. This root lies so deeply buried, and it has nothing to do with the superficial business of spirit or even economy. What matters is that the human being has the ability to fall for another person in a quite significant and particular way.

Blüher traced homosocial and homosexual social formations (which he also understood as competing heterosexual forces) across history; the *telos* of this trajectory culminated in the rise of the modern state (the triumph of male-male Eros).

Whether as natural leader or educator, Blüher reversed the terms of the homosexual’s marginality. It was not the procreating heterosexual who was the socializing force in society, but the barren homosexual, who was free to devote himself to community. The oft-described degenerate and abnormal sexual subject was in fact the chief cornerstone of politics and social life. He presented the homosexual as the natural political leader and framed same-sex desire as the keystone of nationalism and male-privileged culture. To do this, he used “Jews” and “Judaism” to mark the limits of true homosexuality, and thus, to mark the boundaries of the nation.

Drawing on Bachofen and Schurtz, Blüher argued that the family was the historical foil to the homosocial *Männerbund*, representing the institutionalization of heterosexual desire and, therefore, antithetical to state-building (though necessary to perpetuate mankind). This family, of course, was the sphere of the feminine, but also that of the Jew.

---


164 Vol 1., 4; translated in Bruns, 169.


166 St. Ch. Waldecke (pseudonym of Edward Tscheck) published an article “*Männerbund und Staat*” where he argues slightly differently that the *Männerbund* is the higher form of association, which brings together the elite of the nation as a countervailing power to the State. *Der Eigene*, October 1, 1920.
For Blüher, the (male) “Jew” embodied (sometimes literally) all of the harrowing dangers of effeminacy. The Jew’s erotic energies were focused on the family, the realm of women. Jews “suffer from a weakness of male-bonding [Männerbundschwäche] and at the same time, a hypertrophy of the family… allegiance, alliances, and bonds are not Jewish affairs.”\(^{167}\) This overemphasis on the family, and under-emphasis on male-bonding, homosexuality, and institutions of homosociality, has condemned Jews to have strong familial, racial, and ethnic ties, but no state: “World history has cursed them always to be a race and never a Volk.”\(^{168}\) In other words, far from being too homosexual, as another contemporary “masculinist” homosexual-Jew (and anti-Semitic) Otto Weininger argued, Blüher posited that Jews were not homosexual enough.\(^{169}\) Women and Jews were tied to the familial sphere and were incapable of homoerotic bonding and therefore any kind of political association. Both were biologically and culturally incapable of homosexuality; a fact, Blüher argued, that is born out in the historical record. Furthermore, Judaism as both religion and culture stifled the formation of homoerotic bonds through its legal proscriptions.

These deployments of “Jews” and “Judaism” effectively negated the Jewish homosexual as an ontological possibility (as Blüher stated explicitly): the Jewish homosexual was a contradiction in terms. The evidence, argued Blüher, or rather, the lack thereof, spoke for itself: Jews were historically incapable of male love; their religion stifled it and their racial characteristics precluded it. Blüher also argued that Zionism could never form the grounds on which to build a Jewish state since it was already “on its way to being jewified [verjudet]” through “organizing, making deals, politicizing, and speculating.”\(^{170}\) Zionism would fail by becoming speculative, exchange and money oriented, familial and heterosexual.

German homosexual masculinism as articulated by Blüher pushed Mordechai Langer to express his homosexual identity in distinctly Jewish terms. Like many other interwar intellectuals, Langer was both stimulated and repelled by Hans Blüher’s ideas. On the one hand, bracketing its misogyny and antisemitism, there was a compelling core to Blüher’s thesis for the interwar homosexual that we have considered. Blüher proposed a Romantic mythology about same-sex desire that provided for the existential needs of many homosexuals: Hans Blüher and German masculinists answered these questions by privileging same-sex love as the fundamental core of politics and education, and, as we shall see later in this dissertation, cultural and aesthetic production.

From the perspective of a religious and Zionist homosexual like Langer, who was also an intellectual highly attuned to the broad disaffection of the Zeitgeist with liberalism and positivism, the liberal models of homosexual identity did not offer a satisfying alternative on their own. These models, promoted by the likes of Magnus Hirschfeld and many others, Hirschfeld’s model of homosexual identity—transnational, cosmopolitan, individualist, liberal, and scientific-materialist—was increasingly unsatisfying for many homosexuals both within and without the German “masculinist” wing during the interwar. Coupled with the direct assault on Jews that German

---


\(^{168}\) Ibid., 170.

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 172.

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 170.
masculinists like Hans Blüher already waged in the decade before 1914, a new intellectual space opened and a new cultural need emerged for the assertion of a distinctly Jewish homosexual identity and culture.

Langer turned inward to Jewish textual and cultural resources from which to articulate a Jewish homosexual identity and to think through and make sense of contemporary discourse on homosexuality. Forced by the intellectual and antisemitic currents within the nascent German homosexual rights movement of the day to consider homosexuality a Jewish problem, Langer argued for the compatibility of modern homosexual identity and modern homosexual culture with Judaism and Jewish culture, on the one hand, and with Jewish nationalism, on the other. It is to Langer’s reconciliation within *Die Erotik der Kabbala* that we now turn.
Chapter Two

Mordechai Langer’s Jewish Homosexuality: History, Sociology, Theology, Politics

I. A Jewish Homosexuality

One need not need to be a historian to recognize the subject of same-sex Eros in Die Erotik der Kabbala. Langer discussed it openly and extensively.\(^{171}\) It does take the historian’s intervention, however, to demonstrate that Die Erotik der Kabbala is a homosexual text: a text in which Langer engaged with the ideas of contemporary homosexual letters, enlisted its vocabulary, and even imitated its genres. This chapter argues that Die Erotik der Kabbala should be read first and foremost as Langer’s rejoinder to Hans Blüher. This is not obvious through a mere read of the text. For one thing, in the course of his argument, Langer only mentions Blüher three times in passing, as when he made the following parenthetical remark: “(I admit that few European creations have had as much impact on me as Blüher’s writings […]).”\(^{172}\) His admission was not an overstatement. He formulated his core thesis concerning Eros and Judaism with German masculinist ideas in mind from beginning to end. When Die Erotik der Kabbala is properly set within the broader homosexual discourse of which it was a part, as we have already begun to do, Langer’s ongoing conversation with Blüher and German masculinism, and to a lesser extent with other homosexual writers and genres as well, comes into clearer focus.

Like all homosexual writers, Langer ensured that his real concerns were presented respectably and safely. But rather than create ambiguity or mask his subject matter, as he would when composing homoerotic Hebrew verse, his strategy in Die Erotik der Kabbala was to embed his discussion of same-sex Eros within a broader thesis regarding Eros and Judaism in general. Still, Langer paid a disproportionate amount of attention to the subject of same-sex Eros in this text and he privileged it over male-female Eros, too.

Langer’s unstated objective in Die Erotik der Kabbala was to demonstrate that same-sex love was historically present, even prevalent, among Jews. He presented same-sex Eros as a driving motor of Jewish history, theology, and sociology and recommended its revival as the precondition

\(^{171}\) All references are to the 2006 edition, Georg Langer, Die Erotik der Kabbala von M.D. Georg Langer mit einem Vorwort von Peter Orban (Neu Isenburg: Melzer Verlag, 2006). Orban’s edition (originally reprinted in 1989) is a faithful rendering of the first edition, Mordechai Georgo Langer, Die Erotik Der Kabbala, 1st ed. (Prag: Josef Flesch, 1923). I refer to this text as EK in the notes. EK has not been translated into English. All translations from the German are my own, unless otherwise noted.

\(^{172}\) Although Blüher’s antisemitism became much more vehement over the course of the interwar period, there can be no doubt that Langer already recognized the antisemitism of his work, as he explicitly describes his ideas as “Rasseantisemitismus Hans Blühers.” EK, 129-130.
for any future success of Zionism. In short, Langer designed *Die Erotik der Kabbala* to prove Hans Blüher wrong on his own terms. Langer just never explicitly said so within the text.\(^{173}\)

In his drive to battle Blüher’s antisemitism, Langer introduced the subject of homosexuality to modern Jewish thought for the first time. What’s more, Langer was the first to make meaning of same-sex desire in specifically Jewish terms by applying Blüher’s thesis to Judaism and Jewish history. Following Blüher, of course, his strategy was not to directly subvert or challenge Judaism, but to demonstrate that same-sex desire was normative to and a constituent element of the Jewish experience.

We can summarize Langer’s *Jewish* homosexuality as consisting of four interlinked projects: (1) Langer adumbrated a “homosexual” Jewish history. He offered an essentialist tasting menu of “homosexual” personalities in Jewish history and argued that same-sex Eros is a causal motor of Jewish history. (2) He offered two sociological arguments: first, he argued that Hasidism facilitated and encouraged male-male Eros; second, he posited that the rabbi-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships that dominate yeshiva life in Judaism are sustained through male-male Eros. (3) His third project was theological: he maintained that same-sex Eros is reflected symbolically in Jewish mystical theosophy (the shape and operations of the divine) and is reflected within Jewish ritual. (4) Fourth: Langer presented same-sex desire as integral to Jewish politics: male-male bonding and male-male Eros were the essential building blocks for a viable Zionism. The result of Langer’s apologia was to produce a distinctly Jewish inflected conception of homosexuality, drawing on history, sociology, theology, and politics.

### II. Eros: The Essence of Judaism

*Die Erotik der Kabbala* defies easy categorization. It is a peculiar admixture of topics and disciplines, and it incorporates elements of history, theology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis without clear boundaries in method.\(^{174}\) It is also an intertextual playground, engaging with myriad writers and texts, sometimes directly, but usually not, including (among others): Nietzsche, Freud, Sombart, Wagner, Hans Sperber, the Indian Upanishads, and, not least, Hans Blüher. It is a soup made from Jewish historical description and Jewish textual hermeneutics from the Tanakh to Tchernikhovsky. Filled with short asides and recurring digressions, Langer’s text comments on a range of topics including: the relationship between Judaism and Eastern religion; the eroticism and sacrality of language; masturbation; and cultural degeneration. Its title, as the reader may have guessed, is something of a misrepresentation. Although this text does take up the Kabbala extensively,

---

\(^{173}\) In the context of discussing the homoerotic life of Hasidic men, Langer does write that the prohibitions laid out by the Talmud and *Shulkhan Arukh*, which intended to prevent male-male intercourse, are “a proof that among Jews, Blüher’s so-called “inversion” was present to a large extent.” EK, 115. See further discussion in the chapter.

\(^{174}\) Langer introduced his subject as follows: “Thus if one wanted to find a term that would characterize the essence of Kabbala, one could call it “The Metaphysics of Life” [*Lebens-Metaphysik*] (analogous to the “Lebens-Philosophie” of Dilthey, Nietzsche, Bergson, Eucken, Felix Weltsch, and others).” EK, 13. Langer’s analogy between Kabbala and *Lebensphilosophie* may explain the interdisciplinary style of *Die Erotik der Kabbala*. 
especially its erotic symbolism, the purview of its argument is far more ambitious, encompassing no less than Judaism itself, as well as Jewish history from antiquity to Langer’s own era. A failure in humility, to be sure, Die Erotik der Kabbala is breathtaking in its grandiose scope and sweeping claims.

The structure of Die Erotik der Kabbala divides very roughly into two parts. The first six chapters of the text sketch Jewish history from antiquity to the present (though not in chronological order), which Langer understood as an immanent and irreconcilable dialectic between two (male) erotic forces—heterosexual (male-female Eros) and homosexual (male-male Eros). This dialectic should be familiar to us by now; it was a widely used framework used by German masculinists, who drew upon the ideas of J.J. Bachofen and Heinrich Schurtz. As Langer had it, this dialectic reappears from antiquity to modern times, the one “drive” [Treib] or “orientation” [Richtung] sometimes dominating the other during various historical epochs. Following Blüher, Langer combined Bachofen and Schurtz’s ideas with Freud’s language of sublimation; he argued that the struggle between these two competing erotic drives, sometimes operating unconsciously, produced Jewish cultural variations in history. Eros, therefore, is the structural motor of Jewish history, everything else is superstructure: “The entire internal history of the eternal people,” he writes, “seems to be more or less a chain of conflicts between the two orientations.”

Langer’s reading of the dialectic in the ancient world is exemplary. The world of the Bible saw the fall of male-male Eros from its privileged dominance over male-female Eros. This “tragic” trajectory took place over the course of millennia when “female power strengthened” and won decisive victories that buttressed its normative status:

The great victory of woman and her allies [Freunde], who have always comprised the majority within human populations, struggling over the course of millennia (between male-male love and the love of women), manifests itself first and foremost, in that the performance of the sexual act between men is a capital offense (Lev 20.13); though according to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 5:55) only if executed in anum. As a result, marriage became a universal obligation and the duties which stem from the law “love your neighbor as yourself” also now applied to women. The extension of “loving your neighbor” to women was just the beginning.

Originally, Langer asserted, the injunction to “love your friend as yourself” [du wirst deinen Freund lieben wie dich selbst] exclusively signified male-male Eros. Thanks to “the great victory of woman and her allies,” however, same-sex activity was prohibited and the injunction was drained of its original sexual implications; normative sexuality was limited to the marriage bed, while the golden rule was

175 EK, 134: “Die ganze innere Geschichte des ewigen Volkes erscheint also eigentlich wie eine Kette mehr oder minder bewusster Kämpfe der beiden Richtungen.”

176 EK, 138. The topic of Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 55b concerns the particular sexual point at which one becomes liable for sodomy. There is unanimous rabbinic opinion that one becomes liable for homosexuality at the stage of ba-‘ara‘ab, though there is debate regarding whether this constitutes a small degree of anal penetration or placing the penis on its surface (this debate is found in BT Yevamot 55b). What is noteworthy here is that Langer makes no mention of the broader rabbinic prohibition of any sexual contact between two men under the proscription of “None of you shall approach near of kin to uncover nakedness” (Lev 18.6). See Maimonides, Hilket isure biab 21:1 and Shulkhan ‘arukh, Even ha-ezer 20:1.
universalized as commanding respect for mankind. This victory of heterosexual Eros, Langer implied, was somewhat qualified in rabbinic times, where the prohibition was limited to anal intercourse. The true meaning of the commandment, however, was never lost. Langer insisted that even when Hillel famously “summarized the entire Torah to a gentile” as “That which you hate, do not do unto others,” Hillel had not “undermine[d] the original erotic meaning of this Biblical verse, [rather] Hillel could not reveal the secret to a gentile.”

Other male-male erotic triumphs were also preserved in the tradition:

But the male-male orientation [Richtung] also won considerable victories. When the number of its bearers is smaller, the orientation is therefore more intense [Denn, wenn sie an Zahl ihrer Träger kleiner ist, so ist sie dafür viel intensiver]. That the esteemed Rabbi Löew of Prague recognized this is demonstrated by his view that when a man has slept with another man out of passion, he no longer knows how to repress himself, while his lust for women decreases (Gur Aryeh, Chapter Vayigash). This victory of the male-male orientation [der mannmännlichen Richtung], along with the [original] commandment to love your friend, should be seen in the context of the shrinking of the rights of women in ritual. Women are exempt from all “commandments that are time-bound” [mitsvot ha-teluyot bi-zeman]. Some of them are expressly forbidden to her (e.g., tefillin), so that it appears as if women were originally considered possessions of male society… Also, the Talmudic passage that describes how the [heterosexual] act should be quick and unwilling, “as if the evil spirit were compelling him to do so,” is, along with other passages, evidence of the victory of male-male eroticism [der Sieg männlicher Erotik].

This dialectic between male-male and male-female Eros is played out (at least in theory) through the entire historical record. Each historical manifestation of one form of Eros has its erotic Doppelgänger. For example: the highly “heterosexualized” Sabbateans engendered a homoeroticized reactionary Hasidim; Moshe Hayim Luzatto the “invert” is juxtaposed with the fierce advocate of the virtues of marriage, Hayim ben Bezalel. Langer’s execution of this dialectic, however, was sloppy and more suggestive than systematic. He hardly followed this dialectical thread through more than a few examples. Instead, Langer devoted the bulk of his attention to demonstrating the manifestations of male-male Eros.

Langer argued that both normative Judaism and its mystical tradition confirm his core thesis that “the entire inner history of the eternal people seems to be more or less a chain of conflicts between the two orientations” and that “Eros is the messenger through which God sent us the

177 EK, 127-128.

178 EK, 139–41.

179 Langer’s narrative anticipated many of the historical foci that current scholars have only recently begun to explore in investigating sexuality in Jewish history. Almost half a century before the Stonewall riots and almost seventy-five years before the work of Daniel Boyarin, Elliot Wolfson, Yaron Ben-Naeh, Shaul Magid, and others, Langer fused these various sites of potential textual and historical inquiry into one cohesive unitary story. The historicity of Langer’s project, of course, is questionable at best.
Throughout the text, but primarily in the final four chapters, Langer explicated various Kabbalistic ideas about the map of the divine realm and the various components that make up the “godhead” (what scholars of Jewish mysticism call a “theosophy”), which is affected by human performance or transgression of the commandments (what scholars call “theurgy”). Langer described these concepts in laborious detail, and as one of the early reviews of the text complained, he sometimes “loses the forest for the trees.”

His primary objective was to locate the kabbalistic origins of the hetero/homo historical dialectic outlined before: the historical conflict between homosexual and heterosexual Eros that played out in the practices of the Jewish people is also built into the Kabbala as das Wesen des Judentums (the essence of Judaism). This erotic essence of Judaism is also encoded in the Bible and rabbinic tradition, but in less explicit form.

Finally, Jewish rituals also owe their formation to operations of Eros. On this final point, Langer is only suggestive; he would later take up the rituals of tefillin and mezuzah on the pages of Freud’s journal Imago. Be that as it may, and again drawing on the language of sublimation and totems, Langer avers that rituals express repressed infantile desires. Not surprisingly, however, his examples, tefillin and mezuzah, concern same-sex Eros: fixation with the phallus. Jewish ritual, in other words, is a form of phallic worship. The Hebrews, as he formulated it, “put the male sex organ” [das männliche Geschlechtglied] at the center of their poetry and law.

In sum, just about every aspect of Judaism can be read as a semiotic field that signifies these two competing erotic drives.

Perhaps sensing that his thesis might provoke controversy, Langer began the study by defending himself, dropping his first hint regarding his personal investment—“the truth of the heart”—in its subject matter:

---

180 EK, 134 and 141.

181 Shapira, 238.

182 I say “primary objective” because Langer is also digresses into two subtopics, language and the Freudian significance of dreams, in chapters seven and nine. The erotic symbolism of Kabbalistic theosophy is largely explored at the end of chapter three, six, and eight.

183 Langer’s theological arguments about the shape of the godhead and Jewish ritual do not have a direct parallel in Hans Blüher’s writings. Although the latter, in typical neo-Romantic fashion, was concerned with “spirit,” “transcendence,” “wholeness,” and the mystical properties of Eros, he made no serious inroads into locating male-male Eros within theological ideas. On the contrary: Blüher, as we have seen, was an avid critic of Christianity as well as Judaism. He viewed both as anathema to male-male erotic love, though for him, Judaism was the real culprit. But in defending Judaism against German masculinist attack, Langer argued that same-sex desire is a constituent element of Jewish theology as well.


185 EK, 126.
And no matter how painful we find this grasping into the inside [of Judaism], we cannot evade our duty to investigate it. And on this I have another word to say. There is nothing more “un-Jewish,” than to hide the truth, because Judaism is Torat Emet, the teaching of truth and its eternal searching ([die Lehre der Wahrheit und ihr ewiges Suchen]. Emet (the truth) is, as the Talmud says, ‘the seal of God’ (‘der siegelring Gottes’) […] [A] student of the Baal-Shem, the Great Elimelech of Lisensk, was once asked why he does not publish a book. “I am publishing a book,” the rabbi said, “it concerns the points of the heart (es behandelt die Punkte des Herzens).” I have already finished two points, so that my work is called Eimat ha-Lev (“The Fear of the Heart” – Eimat is written with the tsere vowel, which consists of two points under the consonant). Now I [Langer] will make an effort to complete an additional point, so that I might call the work Emet ha-Lev (“The Truth of the Heart” Emet is written with a three-pointed vowel segol under the first consonant). We too shall develop the fear-eimat into a truth-emet! The construction of Judaism (Der Bau des Judentums) will not be shaken by it, the “Sea of Torah” (Meer der Tora) will not lose any of its depth!

III. Eros in Context

Before we examine his thesis more closely, let us consider: what did Langer mean by the term Eros? German homosexual masculinists preferred terms like Eros over homosexuality or inversion (though they used the latter as well). They did so, in part, because the term highlighted the spiritual bonds of affection and love that all men could establish with one another. Hans Blüher, who gave Langer his vocabulary, was no exception. Like other German masculinists, Blüher used the term Eros to reflect his opposition to the sexologists. First, he believed male-male Eros would raze the link between homosexuality and effeminacy. Second, he hoped Eros would move away from the issue of etiology—the causes of homosexuality—which most sexologists like Hirschfeld explained as the psychic form of physical androgyny.

Gender, Blüher agreed, was indeed a biological concept, but sexuality was “a useless abstraction” since sexuality never manifested itself in pure biological form; sexuality was always culturally inscribed. In other words, Blüher argued that sexuality was a reified category: sexologists, the inventors of sexuality, had treated an abstract concept as if it really existed, but in fact there was no observable biological form of sexuality. Why Blüher did not apply the same constructivist logic to gender is a mystery; he seems to have been blinded by his misogyny. Be that as it may, for Blüher, homosexuality was a cultural and historic fact, just like heterosexuality; it hardly required explaining, either in biological or psychological terms. To reflect his opposition to the sexologists, Blüher abandoned the term sexuality for Eros, which he felt signified a sexuality that is “qualitatively different” and culturally informed. But despite his opposition to sexology, Blüher appropriated various psychoanalytic concepts like sublimation, repression, and unconscious, when it suited him. Still, he rejected Freud’s theoretical model of homosexuality as displacement. He argued that Freud, like the sexologists, viewed homosexuality as something that had to be explained (or

186 EK, 20-23.
explained away); it was a symptom or representation of something else (in Freud’s case, displaced heterosexual desire thanks to infantile narcissism). But for Blüher, homosexuality was a cultural and social fact—no explanatory theory of origins was necessary. As Blüher put it:

Eros is not sexuality, but rather it is that which gives sexuality its meaning [...] Eros is the affirmation of the human regardless of worth[...] It is having to affirm unconditionally, unconditionally even to sacrificing one’s own life; this is not the same as desire or disgust, as play or amusement[...] Eros is a god, but a god with the lowered torch[...] [A]n old, serious, and awesome god, who knows no mercy.  [

Pinning down a rigorous definition for Eros in Blüher’s thought is somewhat futile. Even in this short passage, we can see that Blüher did not use Eros consistently: Eros is both a “God” and “what gives sexuality its meaning.” As Claudia Bruns writes, for Blüher Eros had a “tendency toward the mystical about it.” Following Plato, Blüher used Eros as a mysterious and metaphysical power, although he combined this conception with a Freudian vocabulary. It was this mystical side to Eros that infused the Männerbund with so much significance; it was the social antidote to a decayed, atomized, and hyper-rational modern life. As other scholars have shown, this vague use of Eros as a metaphysical force operating through the individual, through the collective, and through history was also used by a number of homosexual writers (sometimes as an alternative to the language of sexuality and sometimes, like Blüher, in tandem with it).

Langer used Eros in parallel fashion. What, however, were the practical ramifications in his (and Blüher’s) shift in usage from sexuality to Eros? Previously, I argued that ironically, there were no practical ramifications. Langer often used Eros essentially as a synonym for sexuality. Both terms denote a complex of feelings, experiential constructs, and forms of behavior that inform the drive to establish sexual or emotional contacts, corporeal or spiritual, between two people. Eros, like sexuality, does not necessarily imply corporeal consummation. Eros, like sexuality, does not necessarily imply an exclusive orientation toward one sex. Eros signifies a spectrum of diverse desires


189 Ibid, 169.

190 This metaphysical understanding of Eros was shared by many other German masculinist writers, for example, the many contributors to the journal Die Freundschaft. See Max Fassnacht, “Enchanted Desires, Sacred Embodiments: Sex and Gender Variant Spiritualties in Weimar Germany” (MA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2008).

191 Langer makes the same Blüherian distinction between Eros and sexuality in EK, 33-34, but regularly draws on the language of sexuality to describe male-male Eros and “inverts” in the Jewish historical record.

192 Halper, “Coming Out of the Hasidic Closet.”
and feelings that range from spiritual love to experiences of intense emotional connection between two men to physical desire for sex and to actual sexual practice between men, all of which sometimes manifest in the same individual. Indeed, as we shall see below, although both writers spoke of male-male Eros, they grouped the “invert,” “homosexual,” “Männerliebe,” loving “friends,” and other categories within it.  

I would amend my previous argument here slightly. For Blüher and Langer, the shift from the language of science to metaphysics, allowed them to locate same-sex desire and the homosexual experience within a wider cultural field. The metaphysical concept of Eros is not only reflected in the body, but it works itself through religion, history (as a causal force), sociology, aesthetic production, and politics. But that said, I maintain that when Blüher and Langer used Eros to describe the individual’s emotional and physical desires for other men, Eros is indeed used as a synonym for sexuality.

IV. The “Tragedy” of Homosexuality and Judaism

How did Mordechai Langer, a homosexual man affiliated with halakhic Judaism until his death, address the issue of male-male sex in Die Erotik der Kabbala? Given that he maintained no cultural or personal allegiances to Christianity, Hans Blüher was hardly preoccupied with the problem of religious proscription, which for him was essentially a non-issue. Blüher argued that Christianity, following Judaism had in any case been a historic enemy of homosexuality. For Langer, the religious problem, what Blüher would call the opposition between Eros and Geist, was highly pressing on a personal level; but also because the halakhic prohibitions on male-male intercourse provided fuel for Blüher’s assertion that Jews were historically incapable of homosexuality. Blüher argued, after all, that the Jew’s religious commitments stunted homosexual expression by channeling Jewish drives exclusively around the interests of the family.

Langer’s commitment to Jewish law undoubtedly still ran deep between 1920 and 1922, when he drafted Die Erotik der Kabbala. During one digression (the text is rife with them), Langer vigorously defended halakha against, what was by the 1920s, an oft-repeated attack by Haskalah writers, Zionists, and Jews of many other ideological stripes for decades—Jewish law was oppressive, ascetic, and caused spiritual decay:

---

193 I argue against Zohar Maor’s reading of Langer’s EK as negating sexuality and as arguing the opposite of Blüher. Although halakha curtails homosexuality, Langer’s aim was to legitimize same-sex desire and put it on equal footing with heterosexual desire. His entire project affirms Blüher’s ideas and method. As mentioned in chapter one, I also argue against Maor’s tendentious reading of Langer as an anti-Zionist. See Maor, Torat sod khadasha.

194 Given that Langer’s Eros is a metaphysical category it follows logically that Langer could speak of it as working itself through the Godhead, which in Kabbalistic terms parallels human action on earth.

195 Blüher’s antisemitism, however, was grounded in racial roots. See Hewitt, Political Inversions, 121–24.
When the modern Hebrew poet Saul Tchernikhovsky mocks his people for “tying up the divine in tefillin [phylacteries]” he in a way touched on the deep secrets of the commandments. But his jeers are misplaced [Aber das Spotten is nicht am Platze]. The power of tefillin to “tie up” the divine is worthy of the highest admiration. Wrongly, one believes that an unrestrained life, driven extremely in one direction, is a sign of inner strength. On the contrary, every extreme, passionate way of life or ideology is, tragically actually a symptom of spiritual uncertainty or else inner weakness [geistigen Unsicherheit oder sonst einer inneren Schwäche]. Finding a happy compromise, as long as one’s energies are not lost, is actually the hardest thing to accomplish. It is always a work of especial spiritual depth [Geistetiefe] and unflinching will to live. Therefore, only the noblest men and races can accomplish it.\(^{196}\)

In defending the law, Langer asserted the capacity of halakha to balance extreme passions with a healthy dose of restraint. Halakha forms a “happy compromise” between compulsive drives and civilizing responsibilities. But what about the expression of homosexual desire? Is the homosexual offered a “happy compromise” as well when he is denied emotional and physical satisfaction through sex? Indeed, the problem of homosexuality and Jewish law stretched Langer’s faith to its limits:

The official position that emerges works coercively on individuals, in that it requires each individual who seeks to comply with the law to suppress his sexual tendencies [sexuellen Neigungen] and bring himself into harmony with ideas about the preservation of society. The tragedy that this inflicts upon each individual is proportional to his sexual drive.\(^{197}\)

In describing the homosexual Jew as “tragic,” Langer evoked an aura of Nietzschean heroism as well as critique. Trapped between Apollonian law and Dionysian impulses, between duty [Pflicht] and sexual drives [Tribe], the homosexual Jew who keeps to Jewish law and fulfills his responsibilities in marriage suffers for the sake of culture and civilization.\(^{198}\) Heroism of this kind is attributed to the biblical Joseph in the Midrash, quoted by Langer too:

The old Agaddah provided an example of this conflict. It is the story of Joseph in Egypt. The Bible reports that Potiphar’s wife tried to compel Joseph to sleep with her. But the Talmudic sages alert us to reports (Sotah 13) that Joseph was also solicited by Potiphar himself to have homosexual intercourse. But what really happened? Joseph can obey neither the wish of his loving master nor the wish of his mistress. The sages transmit an interesting addendum. Although Joseph succeeded in

\(^{196}\) EK, 137–38.

\(^{197}\) EK, 142. Die öffentliche Meinung, die so entstanden ist, wirkt selbstverständlich auch auf jedes Individuum mehr oder weniger einschränkend ein, indem sie von jedem einzelnen verlangt, er möge sich der Gesetzgebung unterwerfen, die ja vor allem deshalb da ist, um seine sexuellen Neigungen zu bändigen und sie mit der Idee der Gemeinschaft und ihrer Erhaltung in Einklang zu bringen. Die Tragik, welche diese Einschränkung für jedes Individuum mit sich bringt, wächst natürgemäß proportional mit der Stärke seiner Triebe.

\(^{198}\) EK, 142.
protecting his male sexual organ from sin, he wasn’t able to maintain total purity.
Joseph, say the sages, spilled ten drops of semen from his ten fingers. If Eros is
prevented from letting itself out in a normal way, it will find less likely means of
getting out in order to free itself from its prison. It ancient times it embodied itself in
the Torah. In the Middle Ages, it dressed itself as the Kabbala. The ten drops of
semen that Joseph emitted became the ten sefirot [divine emanations] of the
Kabbala.¹⁹⁹

Langer recognized the heroism of the Joseph and Potiphar story. He praised Joseph’s
difficult choice to remain faithful to Jewish law despite his desires. Still, we should not take Langer’s
defense of halakha too seriously. Langer’s defense of the rabbinic prohibition as a necessary evil
should be read in the context of the work as a whole. Given his extensive celebration of same-sex
desire and his myriad examples of male-male Eros in Jewish history, Langer’s defense of halakha
seems forced, his throwing of a meager conservative bone to tradition, and to those yashvim who
could not conceive of Judaism as anything but the law of the rabbis. Taken as a whole, however, this
text offers us a much more provocative thesis that same-sex Eros is a dynamic part of Judaism and
Jewish history itself.

By reclaiming a forgotten “homosexual” Jewish tradition, Langer not only corrected Blüher,
but also redefined how Judaism itself is to be understood. Judaism is not merely the normative
prescriptions of the rabbis or a rabbinic explication of the Bible. Instead, Langer emphasized the
practices of the Jewish people, which include a long tradition of male-male Eros in Jewish history.
He does not, as one might expect, construct an alternative, new model of Jewishness beyond the
pale of Jewish culture nor does he attempt to reinterpret Biblical or Talmudic prohibitions to resolve
the problem entirely. Instead, Langer redefined the terms of the issue: rather than resolve how
homosexuals can be accepted into the traditional Jewish world, Langer recovers suppressed Jewish
voices at its historical center—voices that could complement the halakhic norms of the rabbinic elite
with the lived experience of the Jewish people.

To be sure, Langer did not dismiss the biblical and rabbinic legal tradition. But the halakhic
prohibition was only a part of the story. The lived truth of the Jewish experience, which was
reflected in the Kabbala, complimented biblical exegesis and rabbinic law. Indeed, these are all part
of one tapestry, as he points out explicitly:

That there were mystical teachings in ancient Israel is, after all, proved by the many
mystical visions and sayings of the prophets and the Talmud, and not everything
which the old Hebrews believed and taught was codified in the Bible […] The

¹⁹⁹ EK, 142–43. Langer conflated two Midrashim here: in the first, attributed to R. Yohanan in the name of
R. Meir, Joseph emits ten drops of semen to avoid sexual encounter with Potiphar’s wife, but there is no
mention of homosexual temptation (BT Sotah 36b; JT Hor 2:5 (10b); and Genesis Rabbah 87:7). In the
second Midrash in BT Sotah 13b, attributed to Rav, Potiphar purchases Joseph for his own sexual needs.
Langer, quite revealingly, omitted the second half of the Midrash in BT Sotah 13b, which tells that the angel
Gabriel either castrated or caused Potiphar to become impotent (the rabbis call him by the feminized
“Potiphara”). By omitting the impotence charge, Langer exaggerated the rabbinic perception of the Joseph-
Potiphar story as one of homosexual temptation.
formation of the Kabbala cannot be found outside of Judaism but rather in the innermost core of the people [innersten Innern des Volkes].

Langer’s use of the word Volk here was pointed: Hans Blüher asserted that the Jews could only be a race and never a Volk because of their inability to express male-male Eros: “the Jews has failed to develop a political consciousness adequate to the formation of the state precisely because his erotic energies have been focused on the family. The family, moreover, provides the basis not for the Volk, but for the race.” Contra Blüher, Langer pointed to the lived erotic experiences of the Jewish people and insisted that “Eros is the messenger through which God sent us the Torah before the revelation at Sinai.”

V. A Homosexual-Jewish History and the Genre of Homosexual Listing

Langer’s cast of “homosexual” characters in Jewish history mainly appears in chapters four, five, and six. These chapters read like a who’s who of “homosexuals” (an anachronism of course) in Jewish history from antiquity. Langer titled chapter four, where he grouped most of these figures, as “Männerliebe” [love between men]; the term is yet another clear signal of his debt to German homosexual literature where Männerliebe was widely used as yet another euphemism for homosexuality. This usage can be traced back to the 1830s, when the Swiss milliner Heinrich Hössli (1784-1864) penned the first sustained apology for “Greek love” in his massive two-volume Eros: Die Männerliebe der Griechen, ihre Beziehung zur Geschichte, Erziehung, Literatur, und Gesetzgebung aller Zeiten [Eros: The Male Love of the Greeks, Its Relationship to the History, Pedagogy, Literature, and Legislation of All Times].

Langer’s comfort with a wide range of Jewish texts and historical documents, thanks in part to the years he spent with the Hasidim (though he was largely an autodidact), translated into a capacious cast of male-male oriented characters. To be sure, none of these figures had ever (and many have still never) been considered in such a “queer” framework before. They included the following:

200 EK, 141.

201 Hewitt, Political Inversions, 123.


• The intense “love” of the biblical David and Jonathan, which became “a paradigm of love in the Talmud” [zum Vorbild der Liebe überhaupt gemacht worden]; and the “loving friendships” of Moses and Joshua, and Elisha and Elihu;\(^{204}\)

• The attempt at homosexual rape perpetrated by the men of Giv’ah (of the tribe of Benjamin) in Judges 19–21 (which Langer compared to the Sodom story in Genesis 19);\(^{205}\)

• Joseph’s (less-known) sexual encounter with Potiphar (and his wife) as imagined by the Midrash;\(^{206}\)

• Rav Papa’s celebration of the male friendship as superior to love of women: “Climb one step lower and you chose a woman [or wife; ein Weib], climb one step higher and choose a friend. ([BT] Yevamot 63 [sic]);”\(^{207}\)

• Second-Temple Essenes who “abstained entirely from women” but cultivated an intimate homosocial community;\(^{208}\)

• The “male-male love” of the famous Talmudic kbevra Resh Lakish and Rav Yohanan (Langer retells much of their story);\(^{209}\)

• The “idealization” of “physical male beauty” by various Talmudic sages, for example: “when Rav Yehudah bar Hai at the beginning of the Sabbath came out of the holy bath and wore white robes, there says the Talmud, he was similar to “an angel of the army of God” ([BT] Shabbat 25b). Rav Yohanan’s “sexual beauty” [sexuelle Schönheit], was so powerful that when he visited his sick friend Rav Eleasar [Langer’s spelling] and “saw that he lived in a dark house, he uncovered his arm—and there was light ([BT] Berachot 5b]);”\(^{210}\)

• The secret sexual liaisons that accompanied the “intimate friendship” [innige Freundschaft] of Rav Yehudah ha-Nasi [the Prince] and a Roman “Kaiser,” which Langer described as follows: “The Agadah ([BT] Avodah Zarah 10b) tells, among other things, that the Emperor made many visits to R. Yehuda, where nobody else was allowed to be present. When the

---

\(^{204}\) EK, 73; 132-133.

\(^{205}\) EK, 130–31.

\(^{206}\) EK, 142–43.

\(^{207}\) EK, 73-74.

\(^{208}\) EK, 77 and 129.

\(^{209}\) EK, 75–76.

\(^{210}\) EK, 74-75.
Rabbi went to bed, the emperor is said to have bent over, so that he climbed on onto his back [Alts der Rabbi zu Bette ging, soll sich der Kaiser gebückt haben, damit er auf dessen Rücken hinaufsteige]; he said: ‘Oh that I may be a bed sheet under you in the future world!’ The slaves, which accompanied the Kaiser, he killed with his own hands, so that they would not let out the secret of these visits’ [Die Sklaven, die den Kaiser begleiteten, tötete dieser mit eigener Hand, damit sie das Geheimnis dieser Besuche nicht verrieten];

- The explicitly homoerotic Hebrew ghazal poetry of medieval Spain (shirat ha-tzvi);
- The “tragic and gripping love drama” [das tragische und ergreifende Liebesdrama] of the false messiah David Reubeni and Shlomo Molkho, which Langer presents as a story of unrequited love (Reubeni rejected Molkho);
- The infatuation of sixteenth-century Ashkenazi Joseph ben Mordechai (Joseph Malinovski Troki) for his beloved teacher Yitzhak ben Avraham (Isaac b. Abraham of Troki), author of Hizuk emunah [The Strengthening of Faith] lionized by Voltaire;
- The all-male Kabbalist cabal of sixteenth-century Safed, in which Eliahu di Vidas declared the “love of friends” [Liebe zum Freunde] as analogous to the “love of wife” [Liebe zur Frau]; both of which were a preliminary stage to the love of God [Vorstufe zur Gottesliebe]. Di Vidas, as Langer has it, based his pronouncements about male “friendship” on the young men of the circle around R. Yitzkhak Luria and his student Hayim Vital. Di Vidas described the frequency with which young men “suddenly fall in love with a friend,” “not so much [because of] his soul,” but rather because of “his outer appearance;”
- The tortured “inverted” life of Moshe Hayim Luzatto (Ramchal), of eighteenth-century Padua and Amsterdam. Luzatto was “unmarried” and “idolized by his pupils.” Langer described how letters between Luzatto and “one of his most intimate friends” found their way to “the rabbis of Germany.” “The secret of Luzatto’s small circle of admirers” was thus revealed. The Rabbis of Italy were furious and urgently forced him to marry. They did not understand “the way Luzatto’s pupils hung on to him.” Langer described Luzatto’s view on women and family in distinctly German masculinist tones: “He held woman and the act of copulation as the highest hindrance on the way to perfection. The case of all evil is that men beget children!” Luzatto, despite being forced to marry, kept his “association” [or

---

211 EK, 76–77.
212 EK, 77–81.
213 EK, 84-85.
214 EK 81–82.
215 EK, 82–83. Langer on Di Vidas: ‘Bezeichnend ist, dass nach einem seiner Aussprüche bei dem plötzlichen Verlieben in einen Freund, das er als häufig bezeichnet, nicht so sehr dessen Seele als vielmehr sein Ansehen die Ursache ist.’
“intercourse”; Verkehr] with his students, he was excommunicated by the rabbis of Germany, Venice, Poland, Holland, and Denmark as a “false messiah.”\textsuperscript{216}\textsuperscript{217}

- And, finally, Langer’s foremost interest, the homoeroticism of the Hasidic world (which receives an entire chapter of its own).\textsuperscript{218}

When it came to thinking about male-male Eros historically, Langer (like Blüher and many other homosexual theorists) did little by way of contextualizing historical variations of same-sex desire. He did not account for the historical conditions that produced these various constellations of same-sex association. As we can see from reviewing the list above, Langer used a range of terms to describe these manifestations of male-male Eros: “sexual beauty,” “invert,” “man love,” “same-sex or homosexual [gleichgeschlechtlichen] acts and intercourse,” “heterosexual intercourse [heterosexuellen Verkehr],” “loving” and “intimate” friendship,” and he varied between male-male “desire,” “drive,” “orientation,” and “acts,” and so forth. Langer does not consider how this nomenclature might be historically contingent—that is, specific to a time and place; instead, he lumps all of these words together as part of an essentialist and static understanding of male-male Eros that can appear at any moment in Jewish history. His study is thus a case study in anachronism—a fact which is not too surprising given his usage of Eros as a timeless, metaphysical constant in human history. Langer’s vocabulary is also imprecise: not only did he neglect to define these terms; the logic of his usage is muddled. Why, for example, is the eighteenth-century figure Luzatto labeled an “invert” (a nineteenth-century sexological term), while the religious sect of first-century Judea, the Essenes, who “lived without women,” are not?

To be sure, neither Langer nor Blüher was much concerned with impressing the historian.\textsuperscript{219} Neither rigidly distinguished between romantic friendship, loving bonds, and passionate intercourse. Indeed, in line with other German masculinists, Langer celebrated this very fluidity between male-male friendship and male-male sexual desire. The line between friendship and homosexuality was intentionally blurred. The capacious category Eros allowed them to bracket the question of sex—did

\textsuperscript{216} EK, 85–95. Langer writes: “The life and teachings” of Luzatto can serve as proof of Blüher’s idea.” Here Langer meant to validate Blüher’s readings of “inversion” in historical figures that evinced a hatred of women and an aversion to heterosexual intercourse, as Luzatto did.

\textsuperscript{217} He plays on the word “mashakh” twice as the root for “messiah” and “desire,” in reference to both Luzatto and Shabtai Tzvi. Langer described how Tzvi after being trained in the “secrets of Kabbala,” which are its homoerotic secrets, “revealed’ [Langer’s quotation marks] himself in his youth to his comrades as mashiakh (messiah). Through his great educatedness in the ‘secret wisdom’ but more through his great beauty—‘there is no human on earth as beautiful as he,’ said a contemporary.” EK,46. Luzatto is also a false mashiakh because of his appeal to his cabal of youths.

\textsuperscript{218} EK, 97–123.

\textsuperscript{219} I hope to evaluate the historicity of Langer’s homosexual-Jewish history (that is, to follow his framework and evaluate the evidence of male-male Eros in Jewish history) in a future expanded study of male-male love in the Jewish tradition based on portions of this dissertation.
they or didn’t they?—for these historical actors: if Eros was the object of one’s gaze rather than “homosexuality,” one could identify with a greater number of historical actors whose actual sexual behavior was lost to history, while at the same time never closing off the possibility that these actors did engage in same-sex practice, since it was a natural component of the phenomenon.

Throughout Die Erotik der Kabbala, Langer trafficked in something akin to Fredric Jameson’s notion of “mythology.” Jameson argues that what writers who dream of describing history collapse into myths when they cannot gain access to objective historical knowledge. When I describe Langer as adumbrating a homosexual-Jewish history, I stipulate, of course, that his readings of the Jewish past are neither critical nor historicist. His readings rely on suggestive fragments of evidence, usually read anachronistically as part of one unitary history of a static unchanging model of male-male eroticism. Most professional historians today would hardly accept Langer’s history as legitimate; his study often requires the suspension of disbelief. But despite these methodological flaws, and perhaps because of them, they are capable of constructing a homosexual-Jewish historical consciousness. At the very least, Langer sketched a blueprint for a future historical project that will consider an entire range of male-male associations in the Jewish historical experience. More importantly, his list is a moving and powerful record of how an interwar homosexual Jew—without community or inherited identity—fashioned his own homosexual Jewish identity using Jewish raw materials.

In turning to history to explore the issue of homosexuality and Judaism, Langer was hardly out of step either as a Jew or as a homosexual. As the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi famously wrote, for Jews “historicism of one kind or another has been a dominant characteristic of Jewish thought since the early nineteenth century.” Like Jews, homosexuals ransacked the historical record in search of a useable past. Whether they wrote sexological, literary, or popular literature, homosexuals were heavily concerned with the recovery of the past.

The historical dimension of Langer’s project can be fruitfully compared not only to Hans Blüher’s work, but to a broader and distinct genre of listing famous homosexuals in history. This genre was not only an important roadmaps for later homosexual cultural histories, but was an apologetic tool in the political battles to decriminalize homosexuality. These early attempts at genealogical claiming were intended to garner greater respect; they were also written to banish their author’s sense of alienation by “inventing” (to be sure, they would not have used this verb) a cultural tradition. The historian Rictor Norton calls this the “search for cultural unity” and finds evidence for such lists as far back as the sixteenth century. At the fin de siècle, this genre included the

---


221 On broader German-Jewish critiques of historicism, see David N. Myers, Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought (Princeton University Press, 2009).

following pioneering texts: Heinrich Hössli’s two-volume *Eros: Die Männerliebe der Griechen* (published from 1836 to 1838); Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’s *Forschungen über das Rätsel der mannmännlichen Liebe* (1864-1880); Marc-André Raffalovich *Uranisme et unisexualité: étude sur differentes manifestations de l’instinct sexuel* (1896); John Addington Symonds’s *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891) and his and Edward Carpenter’s *Sexual Inversion* (1897); Carpenter’s *Homogenic Love* (1894), *The Intermediate Sex* (1895), and *Ioäus: An Anthology of Friendship* (1902); Albert Moll *Berühmte Homosexuelle* (1910); Xavier Mayne (pseudonym for Edward I. Stevenson) *The Intersexes* (1910); Elisar von Kupffer’s *Lieblingminne und Freundesliebe in der Weltliteratur* (1900); Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (1914), and many others. Other historical lists can also be found in almost any issue of *Der Eigene*, *Die Freundschaft*, *Eros*, and the plethora of homosexual journals and magazines from the 1890s. Marita Keilson Lauritz has shown how homosexual literati in German-speaking lands of this era had formulated what she calls the “gay canon,” including Plato, Plutarch, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Winckelmann, Tennyson, Walt Whitman, August von Platen, etc.224 Even Freud constructed such a list when he consoled a worried mother about her homosexual son in his *Letter to an American Mother* (1935); her son, argued Freud, was hardly “sick” but in glorious historical company.225

Closer to home, the Prague Decadent and homosexual writer Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic also constructed homosexual lists, as when he defended Oscar Wilde in the journal *Literáni listy*:

If somebody who wants to remove Mr. Oscar Wilde’s name from English literature – because ‘he destroyed his future’ by means of homosexuality – would like to be consistent, he will have to remove a lot of names from the history of literature. Would he like to start? Be my guest. *Epaminondas, Socrates, Plato, Zeno, Pindar, Sophocles, Euripides, Alexander the Great, Caesar, Virgil, Horace, Tibull, Titus, Trajan, Hadrian- - -* they should all have been forgotten by humanity because all these famous men were – as has been historically exactly determined – homosexuals.226

As Roar Lishaugen, a Karásek scholar, writes, “for the rhetorical needs of the moment, Karásek presented a catalogue of famous homosexuals and demonstrated simultaneously his full confidence


\[225\] Norton, 217.

in the fact that such lists were of absolute historical veracity.”\textsuperscript{227} It would be appropriate to include Mordechai Langer among these pioneering fashioners of homosexual historical memory too.

VI. \textbf{A Sociology of Jewish Homosexuality: Hasidism as \textit{Männerbund}}

Langer portrayed Hasidic social life in \textit{Die Erotik der Kabbala} as the ultimate Jewish \textit{Männerbund}. Without stating so explicitly, his description closely followed the contours of Blüher’s argument. Two features of the Blüherian model stand out in Langer’s presentation: first, he borrowed Blüher’s distinction regarding the differing roles played by heterosexual and homosexual men in the \textit{Männerbund}. Second, Langer emphasized two types of male-male erotic relationship—pedagogical Eros, including the role of the Führer in the \textit{Männerbund}, and mutualistic Eros between peers—which the \textit{Männerbund} facilitated.

We recall that Blüher believed homosexual men were natural leaders and educators because they were divorced completely from the distractions of women, home, and family. Heterosexual men play ancillary roles in \textit{Männerbunde}. As young men their same-sex drive is strong (recall too that all men are born bisexual in Blüher’s view), and they are therefore more active in male-bonding groups. But they ultimately turn heterosexual, and as adult men they exist between the home and male society. The reverse is true, of course, for homosexuals, who take over the leadership of male society, lead the state, and educate the younger generation. Langer makes an identical distinction for Hasidism, as in the following description:

The Hasidic community is divided into two parts: into the \textit{Bal-battim} (more precisely \textit{Baale Batim}, i.e. lords of the house \textit{[die Hausberren]}) and the members of the \textit{khevre} (\textit{Khevra} means community), also known as \textit{yoshvim} (i.e. the sitting ones \textit{[die Sitzenden]}).

We are not going to occupy ourselves here with the first. They are harmless patriarchs \textit{[harmlose Familienväter]}, whose goal is to enrich Jewry \textit{[Judentum]} with many sons and daughters. (According to the Talmud an uneducated man should lie \textit{[beïwohnen]} with his wife daily, in order to have as many kids as possible; whereas the educated, should not sleep with his wife more than once per week). Furthermore, the \textit{Bal-Batim} must financially support their \textit{Rabb’n} (Rabbi), with his great court, as well as the \textit{yoshvim}. From time to time they visit the \textit{Rabb’n}, for example on festival days, or to ask for specific advice about important life steps […] they spend a few days […] and go home happy to their “tents” \textit{[“Zelten”]}, to their women and many children […]

Langer appropriated a well-known distinction in \textit{yeshivish} [yeshiva slang] between \textit{ba’ale batim} and \textit{yoshvim} (Langer also calls the latter \textit{khevre}), but inflected this distinction with German masculinist significance. Ordinarily the distinction between these two categories relates exclusively to their occupation: \textit{ba’ale batim} work and \textit{yoshvim} learn. Drawing on a literal definition of \textit{ba’ale batim} as

\textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
“lords of the house,” Langer emphasized that these “uneducated” men were tied to the familial sphere (their “tents”) and were preoccupied with procreation. But they still play an ancillary role in supporting the *yeshivim*, the elite core of the Jewish Männerbund. The *ba’ale batim* provide economic support that sustains the Hasidim. They also return to the *yeshivim* for holiday visits, where they nostalgically indulge in the social world of their childhood. But the core of Hasidic life—its leadership, its institutions, and its social practices—are in the hands of the *yeshivim/khevre*, as Langer described:

Not so the “*yeshivim.*” They—as their name indicates—‘sit’ continuously in the residence facility [*Residenzstätte*] of the rabbi; they live a communal life, they eat and pray, and also learn together. They completely leave their worries [*die Sorgen*] about the “life of the hour” [*“Leben der Stunde”*]. Not because they were so rich, but because they knew to satisfy themselves with as little as possible, thanks to their great devotion to the rabbi and to the *chevre* […] Their whole life passes as in a dream. In holy joy, in mutual love and peace, they spend their days [*In einer heiligen Freude, in gegenseitiger Liebe und in Frieden verbringen sie ihre Tage*].

Like the homosexual core of the Männerbund, the elect members of die Gemienschaft der Eigenen, and the mystical participants of the Georgkreis [Stefan George Circle], the elite *yeshivim* live isolated and separated from the sphere of the family. They spend their days in “holy joy” and preoccupy themselves with higher living; they study and celebrate, divorced from the fleeting evils of everyday existence. Following Blüherian logic, Langer posited that even within this core elite there are those of “greater” and “lesser souls” [*gibt es in der Chewre (sic) auch innere “Stufen” von “größeren” und “kleineren Seelen”*]. The greatness of each Hasid’s soul is tied directly to his capacity for same-sex Eros.

Like the *Wandervogel* lauded by Blüher, Langer praises his *khevre* for its “military discipline” [*Die Disziplin in der Chewre ist eine echt militärische*]. In the “*beishamidrash*” [the study hall], each “*khaver* [friend]” hooks up with an older student, who helps him with his studies:

As soon as he [a new Hasid] arrives and it is determined that he is serious, he is greeted with open arms by the “*Chevre.*” Soon he finds himself in the middle of a circle of friends [*Freundeskreis*], who “draw near” [*“annäbert” (mekarev ist)*] to him through various tenderness [*Zärtlichkeiten*] and it does not take long to find an older youth [*Jüngling*] to whom he bares his soul in secret [*zu dem er schon länger insgeheim seine*]

---

228 Literally “lord of the house,” the term means something more like “bread-winner,” but it is used by *yeshivah* students as “one who works” and “one who is not devoted to study.”

229 EK, 105.

230 EK, 106.

231 EK, 107.

232 “*Mekarev ist*” is Langer’s fusion of German and Hebrew meaning “is drawing near.” He juxtaposed “annäbert” [*the quotes are his*] with “(mekarev ist).”
Seele trägt; he makes him a proposal to study together; which he accepts with great pleasure [größter Freude]. How blessed he feels.\textsuperscript{233}

As Langer has it, the Hasidim were not coy about the nature of this “baring of souls,” which they compared openly to falling in love:

For the special case when a man falls in love with another [man] at first sight, the Hasidim have a beautiful explanation that recalls Plato. They say that it is because these two souls sat together in paradise, before they came to this world, and they have now recognized one another (Noam Elimelech).\textsuperscript{234}

The Hasidim are, in Langer’s view, highly aware of the male–male Eros that binds them, even if they lack the vocabulary of German masculinism, sexology, and psychoanalysis to describe it, as we recall from this passage:

To understand what kind of love [Liebe] dwelled between the “yoshvim” [Talmudic scholars; literally: “those who sit”], one only has to step into the beit ha-midrash (house of study), where they are enveloped with their studies [wo sie sich mit ihrem Studium beschäftigen]. Here sit two young men (bakhurim), with beards just beginning to cover their chins, “studying” [emphasis his] assiduously over thick Talmud folios. The one holds the other by his beard, looks deep into his eyes, and in this manner explains a complicated Talmud passage. And there, two friends (yedidim) pace around the hall deep in conversation, while embracing one another [sie halten einander umschlungen]. (During meals one can see that they always dine out of the same bowl). In the dark corner stand a pair. The younger of the two rests his back against the wall, the elder has the entire frontal part of his body literally pressed against him [der ältere liegt förmlich mit der ganzen Vorderseite seines Körpers an ihn gedrückt]; they look lovingly in each other’s eyes, but keep still. What could be playing out within their pure souls? They themselves don’t even know [Sie wissen es selbst nicht].\textsuperscript{235}

Here it is clear that, like Blüher’s, Langer’s first model of same-sex Eros is a mutualistic one between youths (admittedly between older and younger youths, but relatively mutualistic nevertheless). This love between yoshvim mirrors the love between the Knaben [boys] of Blüher’s Wandervogel.\textsuperscript{236} To be sure, there are differences: the Wandervogel celebrated the outdoors and the body; the yoshvim sit and study while they look deep into each other’s eyes. Yet the internal logic of how Eros operates is the same for both.

\textsuperscript{233} EK, 116.

\textsuperscript{234} EK, 118-119.

\textsuperscript{235} EK, 108–9.

\textsuperscript{236} Indeed, Langer used the word Knaben to describe Hasidic youth in addition to Jüngling. Knabenliebe and Jünglingsliebe [love of boys] are other common term used in German masculinist letters.
But what of the potential for sex between yosvim in love? Surely, all this beard holding and bowl sharing might lead to something more explicit and legally problematic? The Hasidim, Langer argued, were aware of this too:

[…] two boys cannot sleep with each other in the same bed, although the Talmud only forbids the lying together [Beisammenliegen] of a Jewish boy with a non-Jewish [boy], so that the Jew does not learn the homosexual act [gleichgeschlechtlichen Akt]. The Hasidim are aware that the possibility for homosexual intercourse is greater by them than by the bale-batish Jews [dass unter ihnen die Möglichkeit eines gleichgeschlechtlichen Verkehrs viel näherliegender ist, als bei den “bal hauschen” Juden]. There are similar measures serving the same goal in the Talmud and the Shulkhan Arukh. A proof that among Jews, Blüher’s so-called “inversion” was present to a large extent. For example, the Shulkhan Arukh (Rama) forbids visits to a bath, where the naked uncircumcised [nackte Unbeschnittene] bathe, because the site of an uncircumcised member would arouse desire [da der Anblick eines unbeschnittenen Gliedes die Begierde erwecke] (Yoreh De‘ah, Hikhot Akum).237

Note that for Langer the extra legal prohibitions set up by early-modern halakhic authorities were not an obstacle to reconciling Judaism and homosexuality, rather the very opposite; they were yet another indication that homosexuality existed historically in the Jewish record to prove Blüher wrong: for why else would extra precaution be required? Notice, too, that in the same breath that he took exception with Blüher, he also allied with his worldview: it is the yosvim who are most prone to “homosexual acts,” rather than the ba’ale batim (heterosexuals).

In general, Langer’s Hasidim are aware of their particular sociology, even if they cannot name it. Their institutions and social organization encourage “homosexual acts”—and they know it. But while required to obey the law, Hasidim were not too strict about punishing the sinner either:

If a boy masturbates [Onaniert ein Knabe], it is not rebuked—even though it is a great sin—because one knows that all rebuking would have negative consequences[…]

The Hasidim tell a beautiful legend concerning the sin of “the useless spilling of semen” (through pollution, Onanism [die Sünde des “vergeblichen Ausscheidens des Samens” (durch Pollution, Onanie]). Until the Ba’al Shem’s time [i.e. until the advent of Hasidism], a quorum of judges, [which was] made [up] of the souls of tzadikim who in their worldly life had never tasted the flavor of this vice, sat at the gates of heaven. They strictly judged all souls that arrived there. [Those] who were stained with this vice could not enter the “King’s gate.” But in contemporary times [letzten Zeit], only few could enter heaven because few could restrain this evil urge. Now it says in the Talmud (BT Bava Kama 79b): “No regulation should be demanded, which the majority cannot keep.” Therefore the holy Ba’al Shem […] replaced the judges with those who had masturbated in their youth, but who had purified themselves […] It is no longer so strict, so that the youth of our sinful age can come to heaven […]

237 EK, 114-115.

238 EK, 113-114.
The conclusion Langer drew from this legend is perhaps his most revealing biographical admission of the entire text. He quoted Psalm 79:8 and explained its meaning: “Do not count our deeds [i.e. do not judge us for deeds], which among the first generations were vices, as transgressions, for we are too weak to resist our drive [Trieb] and those who would enter heaven would be few in number [if you did count them].” In a chapter entirely devoted to same-sex Eros in Hasidism, Langer still felt compelled to use the sin of masturbation as a pretext to express his defense of homosexuality. While the homoerotic love between yoseovers was speakable, an outright defense of homosexual acts was not, though the implication is clear: the drive to commit some sins is simply too strong to be overcome!

Sinners or not, for Langer the Hasidim promote same-sex Eros with every deed. Male love thrived within the khevra [two students paired for learning], but also within a broader set of social practices of Hasidic life too:

Then the Hasidim drink with each other ‘lekhayim!’ (“To life!” —a Hebrew greeting [Gruß] for drinking of alcoholic drinks); they join hands; embrace and kiss each other; say to one another, “Sweet brother! Sweet brother!”; they dance (the Hasidim drink and dance far more than they eat! The dance consists of men who hold each other by the hand or the shoulder, build a circle, and sing for hours in a simple peculiar rhythmical dance step [sich singend oft studenlang in einem einfachen eigentümlichen Tanzschritt rhythmisch bewegen], and their love knows no end [und ihre Liebe kennt kein Ende].

Whether embracing or kissing, or drinking and dancing, Hasidic love knows no end—just like the circular shape of its dance. To be sure, the Hasidic court was no democratic institution, despite its penchant for “friend circles” and circle dances. Like the Männerbund and the Georgkreis, Langer’s Hasidism was a hierarchical and elitist institution where each was assigned a place. In the middle of it all (literally, in the case of a Hasidic dance) stood the Hasidic rebbe, the holy tzadik, who takes the place of the Blüherian Führer:

[The] Hasidim are convinced that the whole world stands because of them and their rabbi [auf ihnen und ihrem Rabbi die ganze Welt steht]. Every word the rabbi says is a deep secret for the Hasid […] All of the rabbi’s actions are observed closely and understood as the work of God [und als Gottesdienste betrachtet]. Because, if the rabbi is

| Robert Alter: “Do not call to mind against us our forebears’ crimes. Quickly may Your mercies overtake us, for we have sunk very low.” | Psalm 79:8 | מָרֵךְ יְהוָה רָחִים וּכְלַהָ נָא | אל תִּזְכָּר לָנוּ עֲוֹלַי נֹת רִאשֹׁנִים Psalm 79:8 | Rechne uns nicht die Taten, welche bei den Ersten (Geschlechtern) ein Laster waren, als Sünde an, denn wir sind zu schwach, um dem Triebe trotzen zu können und arm an Zahl wären deshalb die, welche in den Himmel kämmen! | EK, 114. | EK, 120. |
sad, it is probably because of our sins; if he is happy, it is a sign that there is joy in heaven. [...] The rabbi’s every custom becomes law for the Hasid [...]242

The yoshvim adore their rebe, who holds the entire social and spiritual edifice together. In Hasidism, the rebe or tzadik is the charismatic leader who possesses the spiritual power to facilitate devekut, a high-level mystical state of cleaving to God. As a concept, devekut derives from Lurianic Kabbalah, but Hasidism universalized it. Hasidism taught that all Jews could achieve the mystical feats promised by the Kabbalists through the mediation of the tzadik. The Hasid was to cleave to his rebe, who in turn would help him cleave to the divine. In Langer’s formulation, the mystical bonds between rebe and Hasidim are also erotic bonds.

Although sex between men is impossible according to halakha, the rabbi-pupil relationship was of “a similar nature with the [sexual] union between man and wife.” This, argued Langer, is the “secret of the soul of [its] teachings [das Geheimnis der “Seele” der Lehre]:” “the union of two lovers is the foundation of the whole teaching of Judaism, whether it is the love of both sexes or of those of the male sex alone.”243 The bond between rabbi and student, and the learning that is produced as offspring, has theurgical significance: it positively effects the operations of the divine sphere (engendering the reconciliation of God with the Shekhina, to put it in mystical terms).

What is more, the theosophic map of the godhead incorporated male-male Eros between rabbi and pupil into its topography. As is well known, imagining the shape and operations of the godhead is a constituent element of almost all mystical traditions. In Jewish mysticism, the various divine emanations [sephirot] are gendered and anthropomorphized (each sephira corresponds to a body part) and so their interactions are always potentially coded erotically. Without drowning the reader in this jargon, we should note that Langer argued that the sephirot Nezakh and Hod, which correspond to the testicles, represent same-sex Eros between a teacher and pupil in this poetico-topographical map of the divine.244

And still, the tzadik-Hasid relationship is an example of male-male Eros between rabbi-pupil, but on steroids. Hasidism, after all, is the Jewish Männerbund; and in this intense framework where masculine society is totally divorced from the sphere of women, the tzadik obtains a tremendous amount of spiritual power and influence. The tzadik is the Jewish Führer, the leader who, we recall

242 EK, 107-108.

243 “[...] die Vereinigung zweier Liebenden als der Ursprung der ganzen Lehre des Judentums angegeben, ob es sich nun um Liebende beiderlei Geschlechtes oder um solche des männlichen Geschlechtes allein handelt.“ EK, 72. „Das Geheimnis der “Seele” der Lehre“ can be found in EK, 70.

244 EK, 171. Langer’s readings of same-sex Eros in Kabbalah do not go as far as Elliot Wolfson’s contemporary work. For example, he does not think about the female aspects of the godhead as part of a “one-sex” model in which the Shekhinah too is essentially masculine, as Wolfson argues for example in Language, Eros, Being, 329. Langer does however equate the erotic bond between male teacher and male pupil to the sexual union of man and wife, which engenders the unification of God and Shekhinah. I hope to explore these differences in a future expanded study.
The boy’s soul, suddenly taken by an inexplicable yearning [unerklärigen, starken Sehnsucht; alternatively: “lust”] for the rabbi, finds no peace at home. Not only in his nightly dreams, but also—and this is for the Hasidim a sign of grace [Gnade]—while awake the shining form of the rabbi appears before his eyes. Finally he decides. He leaves a beloved and comfortable home—often against his father’s will and his mother’s tears—and travels to the city of the rabbi, in order to “cleave” to him (to be dovek) forever [um sich an ihn “anzuschmiegen” (dovek zu sein) für ewig].

And how blessed he feels when the Rabbi once turns his holy eye [sein heiliges Auge] to him, or calls him by name, and gives him shiraim (leftovers) from the food; which became holy through his holy mouth [die durch seinen heiligen Mund geheiligt wurde]. As soon as the time arrives in which the father wants to marry him off, he leaves the khevre in order to fill the great command of “be fruitful and multiply.” Shortly thereafter he returns to the khevre. Soon his young wife comes crying, begging that he be sent back home. The young man returns to her, produces children and—returns to the rabbi and khevre, perhaps forever. “The cause of his union to the rabbi [Anschlusses an den Rabbi] is that he loves him so, that his soul is bound to his [dass seine Seele mit der seinen verknüpft ist], until [his] love of women becomes nothing [bis dadurch die Liebe zur Frau zu Nichts wird] (Likute Maharan). The concern for the family he leaves to God; not that he has no feeling for them, but it says in the Talmud ([BT] Kidushin 82a) that the birds also have no concern [Sorge] and do no work and yet God does not let them go hungry.245

The tale of the boy who leaves home because of his “inexplicable yearning” for the rebbe, is no mere anecdote. Langer would later retell this story (up until the part about marriage) as his own autobiographical account in the first chapter of his Nine Gates to the Hasidic Mysteries (1938). There Langer tells that while he later found his years among the Hasidim to be the happiest in his life, he first had difficulty fitting in at Belz, where the Hasidim distrusted his “Western” ways, even returning home at one point during his first year of study.246 At the time, Langer thought to remain at home for good, frustrated with his unbearable loneliness among the Hasidim, but was visited one night in the family kitchen by the Belze Rebbe, Yissachar Dov Rokeach, through a prophetic vision, which inspired his return.247 He described the appeal of the Belze Rebbe as follows:

245 EK, 117-118.


247 Ibid., 13. Dov Sadan recalled that even at the end of his life, while suffering from illness, Langer believed that if he could only touch the Rebbe of Belz, he would recoup his health and return to normal life. See his testimony in Dror, Me’at tsori.
The saint never looks on the face of a woman. If he must speak to women—as, when he received a kvitel—he looks out of the window while he speaks. He does not even look at his own wife, a somewhat corpulent woman, but still is beautiful. On a later occasion, when the holy man was alone with his wife, it was only natural that the lad from Prague should seize this rare opportunity of peeping through the keyhole when no one was watching. She had come to ask her husband’s advice about their domestic worries, of which they had their full share. Even on this occasion that saint looked out of the window, with his face turned away from her, as though he were talking to a strange woman, not his wife. The Talmud tells of one devout man who did not notice that his wife had a wooden stump instead of a leg, until their funeral…That man was a teacher. Thus far the Talmud.

These autobiographical links certainly go a good ways toward identifying why Langer spends such a substantial portion of Die Erotik der Kabbala explicating the homoeroticism of the Hasidic world. Langer pointed out that the Belze Rebbe “never looks on the face of a woman.” This too was no mere anecdote. We recall from chapter one that his brother František twice described Langer in similar terms! It seems to me that this too was no accident. It was František’s coded reference to Langer’s homosexuality. The proof for such a claim comes from Langer’s own hand in Die Erotik der Kabbala, where Langer directly linked the homoerotics of Hasidism to their refusal to look or speak with women:

Although a few women have had high esteem in the Hasidic movement, the woman was largely closed out of Hasidic society […] One never talks to a women, looks her in the face, or dines with her at a table. Where the yeshivim gather, women may not show themselves. To hold a woman’s hand is the greatest violation [als der größte Verstoß] against sensitive Hasidic etiquette [gegen die empfindliche chassidische Etikette].

248 Nine Gates, 12.

249 Can the veracity of Langer’s observations vis-à-vis Hasidic homoeroticism be verified? Certainly Hasidism’s early enemies would have agreed. The first to charge Hasidim with homosexuality were its eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideological opponents, the Mitnagdim. The Hasidim were accused of promoting homosexuality by David of Maków, a student of the Vilna Gaon (spiritual father of Mitnagdism), who wrote: “they all gather together at night sleeping in one room and who knows what ugly deeds transpire.” David of Maków, Shever Poshim: Zut Torat ha-Kanaot, published in Mordecai Wilensky, Hasidim u-mitnagdim (Jerusalem, 1970), especially p.76a. See also Gershon David Hundert, Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Geneology of Modernity (Berkeley, Calif., 2004), 181, n. 2 and 202; and David Biale, Eros and the Jews, 145–48. Gedalyah Nigal’s Sipur dibuk be-sifrut Yisra’el [Stories of Possession in the Literature of Israel] (Jerusalem, 1994) also contains an account of dybuk possession of a young Hasidic man, who committed homosexual acts.

250 EK, 118. Langer, as mentioned, argued that Luzatto’s “antipathy to the other gender” and “undervaluing of heterosexual intercourse does not point to a lack of eroticism, but is rather a sign of the presence of
And still, we should not exaggerate the autobiographical links here. Langer’s description of the Hasidim, despite his peculiar personal story, is a very distinctive variation of a central-European Jewish literary genre, which romanticized the Jewish East, especially its Hasidim. As we have seen, many of the figures Langer knew personally at this time (Kafka, Brod, Buber, Hugo Bergmann, and on), as well as other famous Jewish intellectuals (S. Dubnow, Y.L. Peretz, M.Y Berdichevsky, A. Zweig, etc.), were turning their gaze East, toward their “Oriental” brothers (and to a lesser extent, sisters) in Poland and Russia. The fascination of central-European (mostly German-speaking) Jews with the East did not begin with Langer’s generation. As Steven Aschheim has demonstrated, myths about East European Jews played important roles in the self-definition of German Jews from at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. Whether they were vilified or romanticized, Ostjuden were widely used to reinforce German-Jewish self-image. Part of the fascination with the “Oriental” East stemmed from the fact that German Jews themselves were regularly pegged by friends and foes alike as “Orientals” and “Asiatic.” In the early nineteenth century, some Jews internalized these messages, but projected them upon their eastern brethren. By pegging Ostjuden as primitive, uncouth, and un-European they could more easily think of themselves as conforming to German ideals of cultivation and refinement. Many German Jews also feared that immigrants from the East might disrupt their own integration into German society and generally treated them with a condescending disparagement. In general, Jews were anxious to rid themselves of any association with Oriental traits, as Walther Rathenau called for in his “Höre, Israel:"

[…] Look at yourselves in the mirror! This is the first step toward self-criticism. Nothing unfortunately, can be done about the fact that you look frighteningly alike […] Neither will it console you that in the first place your cast Mediterranean appearance is not very well appreciated by the northern tribes. […] As soon as you recognize [these faults] you will resolve to dedicate a few generations to the renewal of your outer appearance."

This phenomenon, as John Efron describes, is ‘a kind of inner neocolonialism’ in which there are good and bad Jews, advanced and primitive communities, and in which the larger goal[…] is a revivified and respected Judaism who adherents would find a welcome place within a non-Jewish state."

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, as part of the cultural rebellion of the fin-de-siècle generation against the “assimilation” of their fathers, many Jewish writers undertook a new positive reassessment of the East European Jew. Reversing the terms of his repressed inversion, as shown by Hans Blüher.” In other words, Langer reads behaviors and ritual practices, such as the refusal to look at women, as a sign of same-sex oriented erotic drives. This is true of “positive” mitzvot as well as negative ones. See discussion below.

251 Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923.*


Otherness, they now idealized Ostjuden for their authenticity, their völkisch qualities, their rootedness in an organic community, and for their so-called “Oriental” qualities. World War One only catalyzed this trend, as many Jewish soldiers encountered their brethren on the Eastern Front for the first time. What they discovered was that Polish Jews may have been unsophisticated and primitive, but they were creative, passionate, and mystifying. Martin Buber, whose interest in Hasidism preceded the war, is the most famous example of this trend. In his Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman he wrote that in Poland “the Jew was […] mostly a villager, limited in his knowledge, but original in faith and strong in his dream of God.”254 In particular, a broad fascination with Hasidism developed, whose romanticized social and spiritual life seemed to provide an antidote to many disaffected Jews. Hasidism, then, was not an especially unusual object of analysis; though what Langer made of the Hasidim certainly was, at least from a Jewish perspective.

From a European homosexual perspective, Langer’s focus on Hasidim (to say nothing of his cast of Jewish historical characters) was certainly unparalleled; but in casting his homoerotic gaze toward the sexual culture of “Orientals,” Langer was in excellent company once again. Many homosexual writers projected homoerotic fantasies in their descriptions of the lands of the Mediterranean, especially Italy, Sicily, and Greece; but also Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.255 Many also travelled to these locales in search for venues for homosexual activity. By World War One, the homoeroticized Mediterranean was a well-established cliché in poetry and novels. There is also a fairly decent amount of travelogue literature that has survived too. Langer’s descriptions of Hasidism are strikingly similar to what we find in these homosexual Orientalist travelogues and literary projects. Not only is there a heavy dose of romanticizing, but there is also latent ambivalence about the sexual promise of the Orient. On the one hand, the homosexual traveler often described a seemingly more permissive world in which homoerotic affection was ubiquitous and where the lines between homosexuals and heterosexual men are porous. On the other hand, because of their self-awareness as homosexuals, a product of northern European nomenclature, these writers feel set apart. There is something of this ambivalent ethnographic feel in Langer’s work as well.

VIII. Gender, Zionism, and a Homosexual-Jewish Politics

Langer parted ways with Blüher on the issue of the homosexual’s gender. Blüher’s rigid distinction between the “manly” and the “effeminate” homosexual, which as we know was so crucial for him, is entirely absent from Langer’s work. Langer probably knew that his descriptions of Hasidic mannerisms, with their loving “caresses [Zärtlichkeiten],” “rhythmic dancing,” and “singing” while pouring over Talmud folios, were not quite the pagan body-worship culture of the masculinist Männerbund. Hasidim, Langer described, behave “similar to Arabs [ähnlich die Araber]” and were an

---

254 Translation is from Mendes-Flohr, Divided Passions, 90.

“island of the real Orient” in a sea of “civilization.” For the Orientalising European eye, Langer’s invocation of Arab mannerisms would have been code for effeminacy. In contrast to Blüher, Langer used the terms “homosexual” and “invert” sparingly; when he did, he avoided demarcating a clear distinction between the two. This conceptual break seems to me to be significant. For Langer, at least in *Die Erotik der Kabbala*, it was sexual object choice and not gender that was the determinative consideration in thinking about “homosexual” identity.

To be sure, in this text Langer shared Blüher’s misogyny: women are the historical enemies of male-male Eros. It is the wife who beckons the Hasid away from his rebe. Women are excluded from much of Jewish ritual, which was a historical “victory” of male-male Eros. This is not too surprising an observation given that he believed that many Jewish rituals are a form of phallic worship, which are derived from the male-male-directed drives. If a ritual was designed to release unfulfilled erotic wishes (in this case, same-sex desires), there is no purpose for women to perform such acts to begin with. And of course, he presented all erotic drives, whether male-female or male-male from the point of view of the male: female sexuality is not addressed directly at all. He also argued that male-female Eros is weaker and less esteemed than male-male Eros, which is reflected in the privileged position that Judaism gives to the rabbi-pupil and pupil-pupil relationship, which of course, excludes women. The ultra-strict Hasidim who refuse to even look at a woman are heroes. Even the prohibition on the Biblical prohibition on male-male anal sex is attributed to women.

Finally, though in far more subtle tones than Blüher, Langer also associated women with the ills of modernity and bourgeois “civilization,” all of which were immanently hostile to masculinism.

But while the feminized sphere of assimilated Jewish life is anathema, Langer hoped that Zionism would learn the “secret” of Eros and Judaism. We recall that he was involved with Zionist organizations already prior to his return to Prague. He was thus personally invested in synthesizing Zionism with Judaism and with homosexuality. Langer suggested as much when he offered his history of male-male Eros as “an illuminating guide-post [Wegweisser] for the modern Jewish Palestinian colonists.” Although he was reticent concerning the details of Zionism or the Zionist youth movement, his entire account of Jewish male-male Eros can certainly be understood as a defense of the Zionist project in light of German masculinist attacks. For German masculinists, of course, the state was the *telos* of male-male Eros. By demonstrating that Jewish men were capable of homosocial organization, homoerotic bonding, and homosexuality, Langer had made the case that they were also capable of building a state. The entire range of same-sex expressions and feelings existed among Jews (at least historically, if not in Langer’s own day), and there was nothing immanent to Jews or Judaism that precluded its cultivation and expression. Indeed, Zionists needed to avoid the mistake of “enlightened” Western Jews and reconnect with true Judaism in the East.

---

256 EK, 110, 116, 120.

257 It is possible that Langer’s departure from Blüher on the issue of gender stems from Blüher’s deep association of femininity with the Jews, but this remains speculative.

258 Throughout, Langer slips between the metaphysical abstraction “female-male Eros” and actual women.

259 EK, 95. More exactly he offered Luzatto, as a symbol of this history, as a signpost for Zionism.
Langer’s vision for Zionism, then, entailed setting pre-modern Jewish masculine life (including Hasidism) as a template worthy of replication. Zionism did not have to fix the pre-modern Jewish male nor was it to break from his history.  

_Die Erotik der Kabbala_ was not Langer’s final word on these matters. In the same years that he defended Judaism to German readers, and thereby reconciled Judaism and homosexuality for the first time, Langer also turned his attention to a Hebrew-reading audience. It was to them that he directed a second internal polemic to address the dearth of male-male bonding and male love in Jewish life. He began to draft Hebrew poetry in pursuit of this goal. Why he might embark on such an endeavor is the question which we will consider next.

---

260 As for Hans Blueher, Langer has this to say: „_Von diesem Standpunkte aus betrachtet, bestätigt sich an dem vornehmen Rasseantisemitismus Hans Blühers, welcher den Juden der Gegenwart tieferes Inversionsvermögen abspricht, wieder einmal das talmudische Sprichwort: Kommt man in den Bereich des Hases, so kommt man in den Bereich des Irrtums._“ EK, 129-130.

261 When it comes to Zionism, Langer presents a reversal of Daniel Boyarin’s controversial model (in which Zionism breaks from pre-modern Jewish masculinity) in Boyarin, _Unheroic Conduct_. See my introduction for discussion.
Chapter 3

Jewish Beauty in the Homosexual Mirror: On the Aesthetics of the Modern Jewish Homosexual

I. A Desperate Plea

In 1921, twenty-seven-year-old Mordechai Langer could not get his Hebrew poetry published. Though he had an unyielding faith in his own abilities as a Hebrew poet, Langer had already been refused publication by some of the doyens of Hebrew literary and publishing circles. By 1921, Langer had been drafting poems for about a year and change, although it is not entirely clear when he began composing his first Hebrew verses. He probably began to flirt with early drafts while still living at the exiled Belz Hasidic court in Mukacheve in 1919, just around the time he co-founded a nearby Zionist bakhsbara [preparatory] program to train and relocate World War I Jewish refugees to the Yishuv [Jewish settlement] in Palestine. There is little doubt that by 1920, after returning to his native Prague, Langer engaged himself fully as a Hebrew poet. Within the first year of his new venture, Langer rushed to get his first poems into print, but failed brilliantly. Still, he remained relentless.

On March 31, 1921, following several months of failed attempts to secure publication, Langer tried yet again. This time he wrote in Hebrew to Yaakov Rabinovich, then living in Petah Tikvah, in Jewish Palestine. Rabinovich was a man of tremendous influence within Yishuv publishing circles and an important Zionist essayist, translator, editor, and fiction writer in his own right. He had also for a time been a right-hand aide to Menachem Ushishkin, one of the leading figures of Zionism. Within a year of receiving Langer’s letter, Rabinovich would be a leading editor of the literary journal Hedim, one of several seminal institutions that helped establish the Yishuv as the new center of Hebrew cultural and literary life. In other words, if there was anyone in the Yishuv who could get Langer published, it was Rabinovich.

The two Hebrew writers had met once before, and now Langer was writing to ask for help.262 “You were the first to whom I had shown my poems,” Langer wrote with pride,

and if I am not mistaken, you took an interest in them, for you said as follows to your servant: ‘Your poems are poetry [shirekha shirim]’ and you advised me: ‘Send your poetry to [Yosef] Klausner or to [David] Frishman, because only these two

---

262 Langer met Rabinovich while the latter had visited Prague to attend a conference of HaPoel Hatzair, the non-Marxist, socialist Zionist youth movement. The date of their meeting is uncertain but it was no earlier than 1919.
understand new things [devarim kbadashim] that have not yet been said in our narrow literature [sifrutenu ha-tzarah].

Langer followed his directive, but to no avail. Despondent, Langer showered Rabinovich with the painful details of his rejections; he described Klausner and Frishman’s excuses, as well as those of two other important names in Jewish literary circles, Martin Buber and Yaakov Klatzkin. Their excuses, Langer insisted, were insincere and inaccurate: why, then, he asked Rabinovich rhetorically, had they determined his poems not worthy of publication? A defensive and desperate Langer offered his own explanation mixed with the following appeal:

And now I beseech you sir to try and publish my poems in one of our many newspapers that Eretz Yisrael has been graced with…and especially perhaps with some young editor free of all literary conservatism and predetermined judgments [who] will be able to accept them! Because it is clear to me that it is not because of their external form […] rather it is their content, it and only it, which caused my poetry to not be willingly accepted by our “great ones” [gedolim].

Rejection is never an easy pill to swallow. Certainly, part of the rebuff may have been sheer bad luck, the natural difficulty faced by an unknown poet trying to get his first break, but part was surely a result of the aesthetic peculiarities of Langer’s poetry. However, while its aesthetic may not have helped matters, as a whole Langer’s verse was far from un-publishable (since when, after all, has the greatness of verse been a prerequisite for publication anyway?). Langer was not entirely correct that it was his poems’ “content” that was the reason for their rejection, but he was certainly onto something.

That Langer’s self-assessment was less objective is fortunate for the historian since, in his frustration, Langer mounted an unsolicited defense of same-sex erotic expression, his poetry’s “content.” Pulling no punches, he cut to what he perceived was the heart of the matter:

Can it be [ba-yitakhen] that in our present generation, which is all hate and all rage and animosity, a man appears and sings lyric of comrade-love [ahavat re’a], lyric like that sung by the suitors [ha-ogvim] for their actual lovers [ahuvoteyhem mamash]?! Has this abomination not been done in Israel since the days of [King] David who eulogized his friend Jonathan: “I grieve for you, my brother, Jonathan. Very dear you were to me. More wondrous your love to me than the love of women!” How strange this elegy [kinah] rings in our cold age, an elegy of sublime and exalted human feeling that has been extinguished from the Hebrew heart in the tragedy of their bitter exile, may it be swift...And now here I come, upon my soul, to awaken [le-orrer] this feeling...
again, this comrade-love [abavat re’a] in these, our enlightened days—can it be [ha-yitakhen]? 266

Heavy-handed, to be sure, Langer’s defensive plea reveals his desperation. Unfortunately, there is no record of Rabinovich’s reply. If there were, we might have gained insight into what Rabinovich made of this letter, and if he had any idea of what Langer was talking about: how it was exactly that poetry would “awaken this feeling again;” what “comrade love” was; how it had been “extinguished in the Hebrew heart;” and why Langer would want to awaken it again in the first place? What we do know is that it would take another twenty years before Langer published any of his Hebrew poetry in the Yishuv. 267 His pleading, it seems, fell on deaf ears.

Fortunately, the historian has the tools with which to make more sense of Langer’s defense that Rabinovich probably could. We already know that Langer was well read in the German masculinist tradition in homosexual letters, and was deeply influenced by the theoretician of the German Wandervogelbewegung, Hans Blüher. We know that Blüher’s antisemitic assertion that Jews were incapable of homoerotic and homosexual association (and that therefore, they were incapable of building a nation-state) had roused Langer to publish a rebuttal as part of his Die Erotik der Kabbala, published in 1923. And we know that Langer agreed in part with Blüher’s critique of the dearth of homoerotic bonding and homosexual association in contemporary Jewish social life. So when we read of Langer’s hope of restoring what “has been extinguished from the Hebrew heart” in “these enlightened days,” we recognize that Langer was borrowing Blüher’s distinctive language. We can surmise that when Langer wrote of his desire to “awaken this feeling” through poetry he was somehow laying the homosocial bedrock upon which a reconstituted Jewish nation-state could be built.

But how? How exactly could poetry “awaken this feeling again” in the “Hebrew heart?” What did poetry have to do with homosexuality and homoerotic bonding between men? Why did Blüher’s claim that Jewish men were incapable of homosexuality and homosocial association incite an aesthetic response in Langer? Why was a lyric of “comrade love” necessary for the Hebrew heart? By what logic was Langer reconciling a literary celebration of comrade love with Jewish nationalism? And what did Langer mean by “comrade love” anyway? If it were simply a “sublime and exalted feeling,” why had it been extinguished within the Hebrew heart? And what did it have to do with “those suitors who wrote to their “actual lovers?”

Langer’s letter to Rabinovich is a remarkable document. Had this letter not survived, the case could still be made for a deep connection between Langer’s poetry and his study of Jewish sexuality Die Erotik der Kabbala. The historian could also have demonstrated how totally ensconced Langer’s aesthetic project was in the wider cultural and aesthetic concerns of emancipatory-era homosexual letters and culture (especially German masculinism), as this present study does over the

---

266 יכ имениה שבדרוני הזה שבל של שבל תואר כוכב ראית עז אומר שיש לשבות עז אברם על כאבון י시험 את זה יהודית... על שולחן א błום על פנים יתת על הברך של ימי יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על בברך היודית... על שולחן א błום על פנים יתת על הברך של ימי יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על יתו בבראש יתת על ית

267 Langer did, however, manage to get two rather coded homoerotic poems published in Europe in the 1920s. He also published his first volume of poems in Prague, where few if any could read his poetry.
next chapters.\textsuperscript{268} There is sufficient evidence in Langer’s poetry and other projects to warrant such a historical reading. But thanks to the existence of Langer’s letter to Rabinovich, there can be no doubt that he was concerned with the wider homosexual discourse on aesthetics and art when it came to his Hebrew poetry as well. As this chapter demonstrates, Langer deployed several distinctive turns of phrase, “comrade love,” “awaken this feeling again,” “extinguished from the Hebrew heart,” as well as other ideas, rhetorical formulas, and assumptions, which he drew directly from contemporary German homosexual discourse and translated them into Hebrew.\textsuperscript{269}

In shedding light on the meaning of Langer’s letter to Rabinovich, this chapter tells the story of the ideological and cultural work that Langer explicitly attributed to his poetry. It recovers the historical impetus that pushed him to produce a Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew at this particular historical moment. This chapter, in other words, deals with the question of why Langer produced a Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality and why it was politically and culturally significant from the internal vantage point of homosexual emancipatory politics and discourse on Jews.

In narrating Langer’s particular story, this chapter draws attention to a broader historical development that has gone largely unnoticed in Jewish and LGBT historiography: how the masculinist wing of the German homosexual emancipation movement defined itself, its ideology, and its culture in opposition to Jews and Jewish culture in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In chapter one, this dissertation traced this story in terms of the German masculinist attack on Jewish history, theology, and politics. In this chapter, the dissertation interrogates more deeply German masculinist writings, focusing specifically on their attack on Jewish aesthetics, art, and culture.

German masculinists defined homosexual subjectivity (the modern organization of the homosexual as a subject) in aesthetic terms. They believed homosexuals possessed a unique aesthetic sensibility and that homosexuality constituted an aesthetic way of living. In their attempts to situate homosexuality within a wider cultural-aesthetic scheme, German masculinists employed a strategy of excluding Jews and engaged in a bitter attack on Jewish aesthetics and art. Arguing that Jewish men lacked a homosexual aesthetic sensibility, German masculinists negated the very possibility of a Jewish homosexuality. In defining themselves against Jews, German masculinists created a new need to assert a modern homosexual Jewish identity. Their exclusion and attack on Jewish aesthetics, in other words, made the idea of a distinctly Jewish homosexual art and culture thinkable for the first time.

Mordechai Langer rose to the challenge of creating a distinctly Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality that would in part answer the German masculinist critique of Jewish men. By recovering the discourse on homosexual aesthetics that Langer responded to, this chapter argues that we can understand Langer’s poetry in part—and I emphasize only in part—as a political and ideological form of resistance to antisemitism.

This chapter thus reconstructs two poorly-studied but extremely significant dimensions of the German homosexual rights movement: the role that “Jews” and “Judaism” played as critical

\textsuperscript{268} See chapter one for description of the historical figures this dissertation refers to throughout as “German homosexual masculinists.”

\textsuperscript{269} The few scholars who have taken up Langer’s Hebrew writings, including Miriam Dror, have missed the implications of Langer’s letter entirely.
conceptual tools and foils in German masculinist self-fashioning and the intertwined role that homosexuals attributed to aesthetics and aesthetic sensibility in their construction of homosexual subjectivity, identity, and culture. It is within this story that Langer’s Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality must be situated.

II.  

Freundesliebe in Hebrew

Let us return to Langer’s anguished defense to Rabinovich and read it once more:

Can it be [ba-yitakhen] that in our present generation, which is all hate and all rage and animosity, a man appears and sings lyric of comrade-love [abavat re’ä], lyric like that sung by suitors [ba-ogrim] for their actual lovers [ahuvoteyhem mamash]?! Has this abomination not been done in Israel since the days of David who eulogized his friend Jonathan: “I grieve for you, my brother, Jonathan. Very dear you were to me. More wondrous your love to me than the love of women!” How strange this elegy rings in our cold age, an elegy of sublime and exalted human feeling that has been extinguished from the Hebrew heart in the tragedy of their bitter exile, may it be swift...And now here I come, upon my soul, to awaken [le-orrer] this feeling again, this comrade-love [abavat re’ä] in these, our enlightened days—can it be [ba-yitakhen]?

To begin with: what did Langer mean here by “comrade love?”

In his letter, Langer walked the tightest of ropes, trying to both remove himself from “abominable” associations while defending his poetry’s celebration of “comrade love.” He distinguished between lofty feelings and debased acts by distancing his own expressions of “a sublime and exalted feeling” from “those suitors who wrote to their actual lovers [emphasis mine].” But Langer’s denials (and his implicit moral condemnation of those who actually acted abominably) should not be taken too seriously. Even without recourse to any extrinsic historical evidence and even without prior knowledge of Langer’s exploration of Jewish Männerliebe in Die Erotik der Kabbala, we can recognize Langer’s denial in this letter as disingenuous on its own intrinsic terms. The distinction Langer drew between feelings and acts in this letter is threadbare: Langer categorized his own “comrade-love” lyric as part of the very same tradition of same-sex erotic verse that at times celebrated (and as he implicitly suggested, perhaps enabled) “actual” same-sex sexual practice. He acknowledged that those “suitors who sang to their actual lovers” were compelled by the same “sublime and exalted human feeling” he took up in his own poetry. The relationship between sublime feelings, the expression of those feelings, and actual acts had been, at the very least, historically slippery. Nevertheless, he hoped to “awaken this feeling again”—a feeling that, yes, Langer acknowledged was tied up historically with “actual” same-sex practice. Langer, who probably anticipated the weakness of his defense, cried out to Rabinovich: “Has this abomination [toevah] not been done in Israel since the days of David who eulogized his friend Jonathan...?” “Abomination,” was Langer’s tongue-in-cheek allusion to the prohibition of male-male anal intercourse of Leviticus 18:22 (“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”) and again in Leviticus
By referring directly to the halakhic and social taboo, Langer tried to distance himself from “abominable” association (at least with the physical act). But instead, his allusion backfired: by invoking the Biblical text, he undermines the very disassociation he asserted. He undermined his argument by calling attention to the slipperiness of the distinction between kosher feelings and sinful sex. By alluding to the Bible, Langer discloses that “comrade love” is not simply a stand in for intense and loving friendship; it reaffirms the link between his lyric and what is abominable, pointing to the subversive potential of celebrating “comrade love” lyrically. Langer’s was a weak and insincere defense, if there ever was one; but it was not, as we shall soon see, atypical of homosexual activists of his day.

“Comrade love” is my English translation of Langer’s Hebrew neologism “ahavat re’a.” Langer used ahavat re’a in two ways: first, as a genre of literature—he “sings lyric of comrade-love [ahavat re’a], lyric like that sung by suitors [ha-ogvim] for their actual lovers [ahuvoteyhem mamash];” and second, Langer used “comrade love” as a type of higher exalted and sublime feeling (which again, has historically been tied up with actual same-sex sex) as when he writes, “here I come, upon my soul, to awaken [le-orrer] this feeling again, this comrade-love [ahavat re’a] in these, our enlightened days.” This double usage of “ahavat re’a” as both literary genre and transcendent spiritual feeling is no accident. Ahavat re’a was Langer’s translation of the German term Freundesliebe, the favorite euphemism of German homosexual masculinists, who, like Langer, used it as both a category of homoerotic German literature and as a euphemism for sexual love and desire between men.

Freundesliebe, literally “friend-love” or “love of” or “between friends,” was an artifact of the second half of the eighteenth century; a term which had first been used during the height of the cult of intimate same-sex friendships. Cultural historian and German literary critic Robert Tobin, attributes the original coinage of the term to Jean Paul, the late eighteenth-century Romantic author who celebrated the cult of friendship in his own work. Passionate and long-lasting friendships during the eighteenth century were an accepted social institution that paralleled and complemented “heterosexual” marriage, especially in West-Central Europe and the United States. While marriage regulated sexual activity, a new ideal of friendship emerged to provide a more egalitarian, enriching, and expressive social experience. The eighteenth-century culture of friendship was an outgrowth of Enlightenment ideas of egalitarianism, brotherhood and rational love that accompanied contemporary gender transformations including the emergence of clearly-defined social spheres for...

---

270 NRSV: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.
Robert Alter: It is an abhorence.

men and women. In Jewish historical memory, for example, Moses Mendelssohn’s intimate friendship with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing symbolized the new possibilities afforded by Enlightenment, the entrance of Jews into European high culture, and the promise of a German-Jewish cultural and social symbiosis. Within these intensely passionate relationships, as historian Harry Oosterhuis has described, friends “wrote each other passionate letters, dedicated real love poems to one another, embraced and kissed each other warmly and shed many tears when they had to take leave of one another or met again after a long absence.” Physical intimacy (but not actual sex) within these “romantic friendships,” as historian Jonathan Katz and others have called them, was de rigueur.

Given the peculiarities of the German Enlightenment, the vibrant growth of Romanticism from within it, and the spread of the German Pietist revival during the last decades of the eighteenth century, it is not too surprising to find a particular German variant on the broader phenomenon of the “cult of male friendships.” In the German-speaking orbit, the cult of friendship was loaded with more “anti-rational” implications; the bonds of friendship were described as facilitating the cultivation of the soul, a way of approaching divinity through spiritual love, and offering a spiritual and at times ecstatic alternative (even a transcendent escape) from the hyper-rationalism and materiality of everyday modern life. This mystically-inflected variant on the cult of friendship was fostered within universities with the creation of “Societies of Friends” and was celebrated in literature, especially during the Romantic Sturm und Drang (but beyond as well). Still, even among German Romantics, “the ideal emotional and intellectual relationship went hand in hand with physical sensations.” In brief, male friendships were highly sensual while infused with spiritual significance.

What’s crucial for our purposes is how German homosexual masculinists appropriated Germany’s “century of friendship” (ca. 1750-1850), as well as the term Freundesliebe, for their own ideological and political purposes. German masculinists appropriated Freundesliebe in three ways: first, they appropriated it as a proto-homosexual historical precedent for the emergence of modern homosexual identities and subculture; in other words, as a historical moment in which they could locate the emergence of proto-homosexual figures, whose deviant desires were expressed within (and hidden by) the social context of intensely passionate male friendship. Second, they extended the literary genre of Freundesliebe to include literary expressions of same-sex love back to antiquity; and third, they appropriated Freundesliebe as a euphemism for intensely sensual and erotic same-sex


274 In the US, by contrast, Walt Whitman’s “comrade love” and adhesiveness also had mystical dimensions, though it remained firmly tied to democratic values.

275 Oosterhuis, 10.

relationships that included same-sex sexual activity and sexual relationships that also extended back to antiquity, though there was some variation in usage among homosexual activists.

Variations on Freundesliebe were used to name many of the new German homosexual emancipatory institutions, including its periodicals, clubs, associations, and conferences. There was some variation in how the term was used, but these were minor and, to the outside observer, irrelevant. No matter how much any one specific activist or organization emphasized spiritual love over sex; sensibility over physicality; or masculinity over gender-inversion; the term Freundesliebe became indelibly associated with the homosexual emancipation movement as a whole. Emancipatory-era periodicals, for one, included: Der Freund, Das Freundenschaftsblatt, Freundschaft und Freiheit, and Die Freundschaft: Mitteilungblatt des Klubs der Freunde und Freundinnen. As Florence Tamagne writes, Die Freundschaft in particular was well-known abroad and “became the symbol of German homosexuality” for both Germans and foreign homosexuals. An issue of Die Freundschaft, in which its editors called for the decriminalization of homosexuality (the repeal of paragraph 175 of the German constitution) was banned. Other issues included historical portraits of “homosexuals” in history. But most blatantly, classifieds allowed German homosexuals in these publications to meet one another and connect. Alongside these periodicals, German homosexuals formed Freundschaftsvereine (Friendship Associations) from 1919, which offered concerts, debates, conferences, sporting events, and socials. In 1920, several of these associations unified under the Deutscher Freundschaftsverband (DFV) including the Berliner Freundenschaftsbund and the Hamburg, Frankfurt-am-Main, and Stuttgart sections. The DFV had hoped to oversee all homosexual organizations (to no avail) and place the entire homosexual rights movement under its masculinist leadership. Its activities were public and it held conferences such as the May 27 and 28, 1921 Kasel conference and the April 15-17, 1922 Hamburg conferences.

Masculinists preferred the term Freundesliebe for a number of reasons. First and foremost was simply its utility for public relations: Freundesliebe masked “homosexuality” behind the acceptable tradition of male friendship and literary explorations of homosexuality behind an established genre celebrating the “Eros of friendship” to mask their real concerns. Second, Freundesliebe converged well with the masculinist tendency (with variation between individual thinkers, as we have seen) to view same-sex love as a universal phenomenon that applied (to varying degrees) to all men (though Langer’s most important interlocutor Hans Blüher, as we have seen, emphasized “homosexuality” as a minority phenomenon among an elite group of men as well); in other words, Freundesliebe was expansive enough to reflect a continuum between the social and the sexual. Third, Freundesliebe was preferred in order to distinguish masculinists from the stigma of effeminacy and biomedical degeneracy they associated with terms like “homosexuality” and “uranism.” One of the more famous instances of “Freundesliebe” appropriation was Elisar von Kupffer’s 1899 publication Lieblingminne und Freundesliebe in der Welilituratur, in which von Kupffer organized an anthology of “homosexuals” in literary history (yet another example of the projects of “homosexual” historical

277 Tamagne, A History of Homosexuality in Europe, 73.

278 Of course, as we have seen in chapter one and two, for Blüher and Langer, the homosexual was still a distinct type of person, even if homosexual feelings could manifest between “straight” friends.

279 Lieblingminne (chivalric love), Männerliebe (see chapter 2) and Knabenliebe were used as well. For an introduction to terms see Paul Derks, Die Schande der heiligen Päderastie : Homosexualität und Öffentlichkeit in der deutschen Literatur 1750-1850 (Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1990).
listing explored in chapter 2). In typical masculinist fashion, Kupffer used the term *Freundesliebe* to represent a broad phenomenon that included both “gender-inverts” who desired men and non-gender-inverted men (what Blüher would call “real homosexuals”) who were sexually inclined towards other men. Kupffer used *Freundesliebe*, in other words, as a catch-all term from which he could then distinguish sex variance (same-sex sexual object choice) from gender variance. A fourth motive behind the masculinist preference for *Freundesliebe* was to emphasize the spiritual dimensions of the phenomenon over carnal desire and debased same-sex sex. By drawing on the language of the Romantic-era “cult of male friendship,” German homosexual masculinists (who were, in essence neo-Romantics) tried to elevate their desires, their identities, and their communal culture by tying them to the spiritual dimensions of passionate friendship.

Still, while the spiritual dimensions of *Freundesliebe* were essential to their worldview—and we will return to this subject shortly—the physical dimension of *Freundesliebe* was hardly denied. Peter Hamecher, writing a review of volume one of Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* in *Der Eigene* in 1899, used *Freundesliebe* and homosexuality interchangeably: “It was in the stormy period of my fifteenth year that the image of *Freundesliebe* (love of friends) first appeared before my eyes in flaming color and I lost all feeling for woman as a sex […] In a short time I found I was excellent in the role of a “champion of the equal rights of homosexuals equal with the other sexes[…]”. Thirty-one years later, in his 1930 defense of *Freundesliebe*, “*Freundesliebe als Kulturfaktor: Ein Wort an Deutschlands männliche Jugend*” [Friend-Love as a Cultural Factor: A Word to Germany’s Male Youth], Adolf Brand, certainly one of the most famous and visible homosexual activists of the masculinist tradition in Germany, argued vehemently against legal prohibitions on homosexual activity: “One must say to the other that the prohibition of all same-sex relations for male youth is a monstrous swindle of the people and a severe mortal sin against nature […] All should finally know that natural and moderate sexual satisfaction of young lads and men among themselves is no sin, but rather a clever outlet…”

Although it was published several years after Langer’s letter to Rabinovich, the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* manifesto is representative of how the term *Freundesliebe* had been employed by masculinists since the turn of the century. In article 13, the GdE called for the “rebirth of *Freundesliebe*” in the following terms: “The GDE advocates above all the moral and social rebirth of the love of friends, the recognition of its natural right to exist in public and private life, just as it existed, promoting art and freedom, in the time of its highest regard in ancient Greece.” Article 14 went on to explain the “social” (i.e. national) significance of the “love of friends;” while article 15

---


281 Peter Hamecher, “*Liebe.*” *Der Eigene*, 1899, no. 6/7, 236-238.

282 Adolf Brand’s 1930 defense of *Freundesliebe* appeared later than Langer’s but also drew on David and Jonathan, see Adolf Brand, “*Freundesliebe als Kulturfaktor: Ein Wort an Deutschlands männliche Jugend*” [Friend-Love as a Cultural Factor: A Word to Germany’s Male Youth] *Der Eigene* 1930 (no. 1), 1-8. An English translation is provided by Oosterhuis and Kennedy eds., Homosexuality and Male-Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany, 145-154.

called for an international movement to unify its members. In article 16 the GdE drew the connection to aesthetic and literary production as follows: “The G.D.E. claims for the artist and writer the unconditional right to celebrate the love for a friend just as highly as the love for woman, and through word and picture to represent and glorify friend-love and the beauty of youths…” In article 18, the GdE called for the repeal of Paragraph 175, which criminalized sodomy. In sum, *Freundesliebe* was a synonym for homosexuality, even if its referent was not entirely stable.  

Langer knew this language well. His decision to translate the German term *Freundesliebe* was strategic. Of course, part of his recourse to translation was simply practical: Hebrew in 1921 simply had no word for “homosexuality.” Hebrew’s closest cognate was the *halakbic* category *mishkav zakhar*, literally “male sex” or “sex [with a] male” (the subject is already assumed to be male). *Mishkav zakhar* is the *halakbic* category used throughout rabbinic literature, which refers exclusively to same-sex anal intercourse. For a writer trying to shed the taint of “abominable” taboo, *mishkav zakhar* certainly made little sense; let alone standing in for a modern category of person. What Hebrew did have was the sixteenth-century Kabbalistic and later eighteenth-century Hasidic term “*ahavat khaverim*” (the love of friends). As Yehudah Liebes has described, in Lurianic Kabbala, intimate contact between male kabbalists, for example in prayer groups, was given mystical significance as a pre-condition toward unifying with God. This celebration of intimate friendship was expanded far beyond the small circle of sixteenth-century Safed Kabbalists (a group we will be seeing more of later) to become a doctrinal pillar within certain sects of late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Hasidism. The leading Hasidic master the Magid Dov Ber of Mezyrich (1704-1772) was said to have spread this idea among his followers, arguing that intimate contact between Jewish men was parallel to the upper unity of the *sephirot*. And while most Hasidic sects emphasized the relationship between Hasidim and the *tzadik*, some like Avraham of Kalisk, a student of the Magid, argued that intimate friendships were a necessary condition to unity with God (in tandem with traditional *dveikut*); which he based in part on the verse: “And when they will all be like one person God will dwell in them.” As we have seen, Langer described the Hasidim in distinctly homoerotic terms and believed that mysticism and sexuality mapped the same erotic psychology. In his letter to Rabinovich, Langer may have had *ahavat khaverim* in mind, but preferred to turn up the erotic volume by using the more evocative *ahavat re’a*. The Hebrew term *re’a* was far more expansive and sexually suggestive a term than either the German *Freund* (at least before its

---

284 See also the following masculinist studies of *Freundesliebe*: Edwin Bab, *Frauenbewegung und Freundesliebe. Versuch einer Lösung des geschlechtlichen Problems.* (Berlin: Der Eigene Verlag, 1904); Alexander von Gleichen-Russwurm, *Die Freundschaft. Eine psychologische Forschungsreise* (Stuttgart: J. Hoffman, 1912); Adolf Brand, *Die Bedeutung der Freundesliebe für Führer und Völker. Ein Flugblatt für männliche Kultur* (Berlin: Adolf Brand, 1923); Hans Dietrich [Hans Dietrich Hellbach], *Die Freundesliebe in der deutschen Literatur. Nachdruck der Ausgabe Leipzig 1931* (Berlin: Rose Winkel Verlag, 1996). The association between *Freundesliebe* and homosexuality has been sustained until the present, see for example, Nicolai Clarus, *Mann für Mann: biographisches Lexikon zur Geschichte von Freundesliebe und mannmännlicher Sexualität im deutschen Sprachraum* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010).


association to homosexual politics) or the Hebrew *khaver* or even my own English translation of *re’a* as “comrade.” Though *re’a* usually denotes “friend,” it can also refer to a lover. Perhaps the most famous example of *re’a*-as-lover comes from Song of Songs, where the lover’s epithet for the Shulamite is *ra’ayati* and the corresponding masculine form *re’a* is used for the male lover (5:16). The erotic valence of *re’a* was solidified by rabbinic tradition, which described bride and groom as *re’im ahuvim* in the Jewish wedding ceremony. There were, therefore, far less suggestive choices than *re’a* that Langer could have chosen from. *Abavat re’a* was a formulation expansive enough to encompass a range of same-sex feelings; a category that could encompass both what transpired between “actual” male-male lovers (like what transpired between those “suitors,” as Langer put it) as well as those who merely felt a “sublime and exalted feeling” but did not act upon it. Because of its allusive texture, *abavat re’a* was a satisfactory Hebrew equivalent to *Freundesliebe*. The term allowed Langer to avoid the taboo language of “abomination;” it elevated the carnality of same-sex desire and imparted the masculinist emphasis on a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual. With *abavat re’a* Langer could speak indirectly and safely about a phenomenon that was sexual but which was coded and hidden within the language of spiritual love (the “Eros of friendship”) and a tradition of Rabbinic allegory.

I have translated *ahavat re’a* as “comrade love,” because it is also highly possible that Langer had the great American poet Walt Whitman’s “comrade love” in mind. Whitman was a cult celebrity among emancipatory-era homosexuals taken from the epoch of Romantic (and romantic) friendship (we will soon meet yet another in the art historian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann). The masculinists in Germany specifically listed Whitman as one of the forefathers of their movement despite Whitman’s democratic and liberal inclinations, and despite Whitman’s own somewhat disingenuous denial that his Calamus poetry condoned homosexuality. Suffice to say that, whether or not Whitman initially intended the language of “comradeship” and “adhesiveness” to refer to homosexuality or not (though many fine scholars believe he did), by 1921 Whitman’s vocabulary had been marshaled by homosexual activists as code words for their own agenda (as were also Whitman’s biography and poetry). Whether Langer had read Whitman, or had appropriated his ideas through surrogates like John Addington Symonds or Benedict Friedländer, is unclear.

But regardless of whether Langer was channeling Song of Songs, *Freundesliebe*, Walt Whitman, *ahavat khaverim* (which, of course, Langer would describe in homoerotic terms in *Die

---

288 As Chana and Ariel Bloch have suggested, the use of *re’a* by both lovers in Song of Songs highlights the mutuality and reciprocity of their relationship. Ariel Bloch et al., *The Song of Songs: The World’s First Great Love Poem* aft.by Robert Alter (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 145.

289 In contemporary Hebrew, the term is also used as a synonym for marital “spouse.” I have not yet been able to determine its earliest usage in this manner.

290 Lest we have any remaining doubts, we recall Langer’s observation in *Die Erotik der Kabbala* that Hillel did not reveal the “secret of male Eros” that is the true meaning of the verse “*Ve’ahavta le’reakha kamokha.*” There he also writes, “Here I have translated the Hebrew “*re’a*” not with the common “neighbor” [*Nächster*], but as “friend,” which conforms to the original definition as seen in Gen:38:12. The Vulgate also translates it as “*amicus,*” friend [*“amicus, Freund*]. In the Bible it often has an erotic meaning (e.g. Jeremiah 3:1, Hosea 3:1, Deuteronomy 5:16. In Deut. 13:7 it has a male erotic flavor. [*hat es gar einen männlich erotischen Beigeschmack.*]” EK, 126-127.

Erotik der Kabbala), or channeling all of these references at once, Langer’s claim to Rabinovich of merely reviving “a sublime and exalted feeling” was disingenuous. All of these references were concerned with the “actual” physical expression of love as much as the metaphysical— with ‘singing the body electric,’ as Whitman famously put it. For Langer, the language of spiritual love was crucial in making sense of his inner world and in showing how male-male love could be morally and spiritually fulfilling. But it was also a way of playing it safe in a period in which most writers coded their literary texts to protect themselves from social and even legal prosecution. There is little doubt that Rabinovich could not sense as much. Even if Rabinovich had no knowledge of the intertextual valences of Freundesliebe and even if by chance he also missed the internal contradictions of Langer’s spirited defense and even if the erotic connotations of the Hebrew ahavat re’a were lost on him, all Rabinovich had to do was take a good look at Langer’s poetry to come to the same conclusion: Langer was not merely celebrating a sublime and exalted feeling.

Instead, Rabinovich probably saw through Langer’s denial for what it really was: a confession. The letter exhibits Langer’s safe way of speaking about homosexuality using euphemism as well as the rhetorical tools of distance and denial. This kind of coded denial-confession was common course among homosexual writers well until the Stonewall riots of 1969, as has been well-documented now for several decades by scholars studying LGBT cultural history of the long-nineteenth and twentieth-century. Scholars of LGBT cultural history will immediately recognize the style of Langer’s defense as historically typical; but in Hebrew, at least as far as I have been able to locate, it is the first instance of its kind.

The most famous example of the coded denial-confession was Oscar Wilde’s during his 1895 sodomy trial. Like Langer’s defense to Rabinovich, Wilde’s famous speech was prompted by the reading of a poem about homosexual love (of course for Wilde, during cross examination). It even seems fairly possible that Langer imitated Wilde’s rhetorical style, since the transcript of the trial was widely read and available to him. Wilde’s defense was already popular before the turn of the century. It was quoted, reread, and imitated by homosexuals (activists and non-activists) well beyond the Anglophone orbit and was well known in Czech Decadent and Symbolist literary circles well before the interwar period. Langer would later allude directly to Wilde, when he wrote in his poem “As it Dies Inside” [Kigvoa Penima] of “the secret love that I dare not see to completion.” Still, the link to Wilde is not definitive, since as we shall see, it too was imitated by many other activists, including German masculinists, who Langer had also certainly read.

At his second trial, Wilde’s prosecutor famously challenged him to explain what his lover Lord Alfred Douglas had meant when Douglas wrote of “the love that dare not speak its name” in his poem “Two Loves.” In just about the same key as Langer, Wilde responded:

‘The love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an older for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of

---


293 Adolf Brand, for example, in his Freundesliebe als Kulturfaktor (cited above).
Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect...It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the “Love that dare not speak its name,” and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, where the elder has intellect and the younger man has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.  

Wilde’s justly famous gift of the gab is missing from Langer’s shorter plea to Rabinovich, but the two are still remarkably similar in style and ethos. Both reject the shame that Douglas had described in his poem: “the love that dare not speak its name” is that same “sublime and exalted human feeling” described by Langer. Wilde’s “beautiful,” “noble,” and “spiritual” form of “affection” is that “comrade love” that Langer described as misjudged “in these our enlightened days” or as Wilde put it, “in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood.” Both suggest that part of the drive to produce “gay” love poetry is political: as Richard R. Bozorth describes of Wilde, “to speak it in the face of forces that would make it unspeakable in every sense;”  

including in the face of those institutions that “sometimes puts one on a pillory for it.” For Langer, the political interest is to “awaken this feeling again” within the Hebrew heart, in spite of the “enlightened” forces; to perhaps initiate an end to “bitter Diaspora”; and against “our present generation, which is all hate and all rage and animosity” that have “extinguished [it] from the Hebrew heart.” Both argue that this love was consonant with the spiritual values of their respective (and sometimes overlapping) traditions. And both were being disingenuous when they claimed to be referring only to an idealized feeling. Both figures, to use Richard Bozorth’s formulation, were “not telling the whole truth;” both provided “a tendentious construction of [a] literary tradition;” which hid the carnal behind a screen of idealized feelings and aestheticized beauty. Bozorth’s apt analysis of Wilde’s coded speech is applicable to Langer’s plea as well:  

In fact, notwithstanding Wilde’s idealizing speech, the complex relations between body and spirit [emphasis mine] not only shaped Plato’s exploration of the ethical, emotional, and philosophical implications of Eros [sic] in Symposium, but tensely animated Shakespeare’s sonnets, as well as some of the most influential poetry of same-sex love down to Wilde. [Wilde’s] emphasis on beauty and the soul […] and his invocation of Plato resonate with the homoerotics associated in the late nineteenth century with ‘Greek love.’ Whether or not the (homo)sexual coding was apparent to the court, Wilde was not so much taking a courageous stand against unspeakability as exploiting it to speak sexuality and the body as subtext. 

---

296 Bozorth, 204.
Langer, like Wilde, spoke sex and the body as subtext. By distancing himself from the physical and propping up the spiritual, Langer had hoped to make himself more palatable for publication. But the dynamic between body and spirit, which Bozorth describes, “animated” Langer’s poetry as well.

The spiritual language of their defenses aside, both Wilde and Langer took up a second major argument: that the poetry under discussion was not marginal smut but part of a normative tradition at the center of the canon. For Wilde it functioned historically as “the basis of philosophy;” while Langer protested that he had neither imported a foreign custom nor created a tradition _ex nihilo_; he had merely initiated a return to a _Hebrew_ literary tradition, one “extinguished from the Hebrew heart in its bitter exile.” Both looked to historical literary precedent to legitimize their projects: both invoke David and Jonathan as archetypes, which trite as it might seem today, was already widespread among homosexual writers of the fin de siècle, used by the likes of André Gide, D.H. Lawrence, Edward Sackville-West, Walter Pater, Theodore Winthrop, and Magnus Hirschfeld, to name but a few.297 Wilde mentioned the famous homoerotic sonnets of _Shakespeare_ and Michelangelo, but Langer avoided specifics when he referred to “the suitors.” Earlier in his letter to Rabinovich, however, Langer compares his lyric to the (homoerotic) love poetry of the medieval Spanish Hebrew poets, the poetry of “Yehudah Ha-Levi and his friends” as Langer put it, many of whom were indeed composing homoerotic love poetry. Langer, as we shall see, would imitate the medieval Hebrew Spanish homoerotic style in several poems. There is not much historical evidence to suggest that the Spanish Hebrew poets composed to “their actual loves” [ahuvoteyhem mamash], as Langer emphasized. Langer may have imagined that to be the case, since the medieval Arabic poetry that it imitated was produced within a social environment where same-sex practice was actually taking place.

There is yet another telling difference between them: Langer makes no mention of Plato or the Greeks. Of course, we should be cautious of making too much of this silence. And it is surely not entirely fair to compare Langer’s short and private letter to Rabinovich with the public speech given by Wilde. But the historian familiar with defenses of male-male love cannot help but notice that the most commonly marshaled historical example, which usually appears first on any respectable “great gays in History” list is missing here.298 And because the formulation of Langer’s plea to Rabinovich is so similar in kind, not only to Wilde, but to the pronouncements and political arguments of Symonds, Pater, Brand, Hirschfeld, Friedländer and many others, it seems to me that the omission of the Greeks is at least worthy of note. And probably not an accident.

Langer’s omission of the Greek past is even more significant when we consider the importance of Greece to German masculinist ideology and specifically to its conception of _Freundesliebe_. Adolf Brand’s 1930 defense of _Freundesliebe_ spells out the connection with ancient Greece concisely:

> It is not to be wondered at that in ancient Greece among the male youth who thought well of themselves it was considered as a dishonorable shame not to possess a friend and lover. Every young man contested with his peers to show himself ever more love-worthy and desirable and to distinguish himself in all the manly virtues, so as to be loved by the idol and hero of his soul and thereby conquer his lasting

297 Of course, we saw Langer do this in _Die Erotik der Kabbala_ as well.

298 Indeed, Langer is highly conscious of the difference between Hebrew and Greek in several comments he makes in EK.
friendship. For the enjoyment of such Freundesliebe was considered by every young Greek of free and noble birth as a proud and worthwhile goal and was seen as a testament to his beauty and the nobility of his race.

Let us therefore take ancient Greece as model and also finally grant Freundesliebe that place among us, in public as in private life, that it deserves, so that in our days too, both in a moral as in a social viewpoint, it again attains alongside woman-love the same equal right and high evaluation that it already had at the time when Hellas, precisely in its expressly male culture, stood in the greatest esteem and highest blossom.

The male youth of Germany, which in a ridiculous way is now completely forbidden by law every same-sex intercourse, must by this general sweeping away of all old musty prejudices itself courageously make the first beginning.

No German youth should let it happen to him that the right of self-determination over body and soul loses its validity for him as soon as it is a question of Freundesliebe. 299

Greek love was the archetype of Freundesliebe. Why then, does Langer make no mention of Plato or the Greeks? Why did he not point to the most famous and most obvious example of Freundesliebe in the historical record when he defended his own lyric of abarat re’a?

The answer is tied up with Langer’s assertion that this “sublime and exalted feeling” had been “extinguished from the Hebrew heart in its bitter exile.” The answer is tied up, in other words, with Hans Blüher and the German masculinist attack on Jewish aesthetics. By 1921, it was crystal clear that Jewish men could take no part in the cultural legacy of ancient Greece. The Jewish homosexual was born, in turn, as an aesthetic identity.

III. Exiled from Hellas: Jews and the Problem of Homosexual Aesthetics

The specter of Hans Blüher’s critique of Jewish masculinity loomed over Mordechai Langer the poet, as it had loomed over Mordechai Langer the historian of “homosexuality” in Jewish history, Mordechai Langer the cultural anthropologist, and Mordechai Langer the psychoanalytic Jewish mystic. And little wonder that it did: already by 1921, when Langer wrote to Rabinovich, Hans Blüher (1888-1955) had waged a fierce attack on Jewish aesthetics that was intimately tied to his attack on Jewish masculinity, (homo)sexuality, and nationalism. 300 Langer was incited to respond with a specifically Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew in part because he absorbed the specific attack that Blüher waged on Jewish aesthetic sensibility and Jewish art. What’s more, Langer


300 As mentioned in chapter one, Blüher’s antisemitic turn is already clear by 1913. Especially relevant to the present discussion is Blüher’s forward to the second edition of Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung (1914); see Hans Blüher, “Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage” in volume 3, in Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung als erotisch Phänomen. Ein Beitrag zur Erkenntnis der sexuellen Inversion, 3 vols., 2nd edition (Tempelhof-Berlin, 1914). His attack on Jewish aesthetics is elaborated in Hans Blüher, Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft, volume 2: eine Theorie der menschlichen Staatsbildung nach Wesen und Wert (Jena, 1919).
would conceive and shape the aesthetic of his own Hebrew poetry (in part) in terms, imagery, and standards inherited from Blüher and the German masculinist movement.

As we saw in chapter one, Blüher believed that all men were originally born bisexual, an idea he took from Freud, but as a natural part of male development (and here he departed from Freud) men settled into only one orientation after puberty, either homosexual or hetErosexual, while the other was suppressed. It was only homosexuals, Blüher argued, those oriented completely away from women and the feminine sphere of the family who could, through erotic bonding with other men, form the core of Männerbund, the male social groupings that formed the origin of the nation-state. Heterosexual men retained their capacity to form homoerotic bonds, but at very weak levels (the reverse, that homosexuals retain the capacity to form weak hetErosexual bonds is implied as well), and as a result, hetErosexual men could only perform supportive roles within the Männerbund. Women and Jews, we recall, were tied to the familial sphere and were incapable of homoerotic bonding and therefore any kind of political association. Both were biologically and culturally incapable of homosexuality; a fact, Blüher argued, that is borne out in the historical record.

The aesthetic dimension of Blüher’s argument included the following: women and Jews lack a particular aesthetic sensibility—the ability to make idealized aesthetic judgments—which was one of the “secondary sexual characteristics” of men, but was most fully developed in its highest form among homosexuals.³⁰¹ Men had a special capacity to think “in images;” they were capable of synthesizing matter and idea and reconciling human physical drives with universal ideals (Blüher, using the language of Plato, spoke of the male capacity of unifying Eros and logos); while women and Jews were tied to the material world.³⁰² A man’s capacity for aesthetic idealization was proportional to his masculinity, which, as we have seen, was also tied to his capacity for homosexual desire. Homosexuals, in Blüher’s worldview, stood at the top of the male aesthetic hierarchy; they possessed a unique aesthetic sensibility that elevated them above normal men. Through recognition, appreciation, and homoerotic desire for the male body, even heterosexual men could elevate the particular needs of individuality, materialism, and the family to live beautifully in intense homosocial and homoerotic associations (like the Wandervogel), and ultimately devote themselves to something even grander: the nation-state.³⁰³ Jews, like women, were incapable of truly appreciating or creating beauty because real beauty was grounded in homoerotic desire. Both, in turn, were incapable of imagining a higher creative synthesis between matter and spirit as real men could.³⁰⁴ Blüher argued

³⁰¹ For some like Hans Blüher, homosexuality was both an aesthetic way of being and living and an inborn sexuality. Still, he shared much with the other masculinists and most crucially, he agreed that homosexuality was in no need of a medical explanation; for Blüher, homosexuality was a higher aesthetic way of living, even if it originated as a developmental (and unchangeable) psychological variation.


³⁰³ Claudia Bruns, Blüher’s excellent biographer summarizes: “In Blüher’s thought, aesthetics functioned as a mediator between sexological and political discourses. The products of male imagination included not only men themselves [that is men as erotic love objects], but also the nation state. Thus, the male [homosexual] leader (der führerische Mann) as politicized artist/subject was supposed to possess the ability to create ‘the nation,’ by producing it and transforming it within the imaginary…” Claudia Bruns, “The Politics of Masculinity in the (Homo-)Sexual Discourse (1880 to 1920),” 316.

³⁰⁴ Claudia Bruns, Politik Des Eros, 2.
that evidence for the lack of Jewish male aesthetic sensibility could be found in the dearth of Jewish homoerotic art. Jews were hostile toward images (Bildfeindlichkeit), and to the most important image of all, the male body. Jews were therefore incapable of creative “intellectual-ness” (Geistigkeit). This was both a racial peculiarity of Jews (who were, again, like women) and a function of their family-oriented religious law, which Blüher argued, promoted a Jewish aversion to visual culture generally and to the male body. Central to Blüher’s claims about the Jewish lack of male homosexual aesthetic sensibility was his opposition between Judaism and Hellenism. For Blüher, it was against Hellenism that “the shortfalls of Judaism [could be] measured,” while the modern Männerbund, and the core elite of homosexuals who would lead it, were a revived Hellenism (neues Greichenthum).

When Hans Blüher asserted that Jewish men had an aversion to visual culture (especially to representing the male body) and were incapable of a higher aesthetic sensibility that expressed itself most profoundly among homosexual men, he hit on a particularly raw nerve within the modern Jewish nervous system since the Enlightenment: the perennial accusation that Jews were somehow aesthetically flawed, averse to beauty and to visual culture, and, therefore incapable of true culture; flaws that precluded the possibility for Jewish emancipation and their viability to fully join European political and cultural life. Already during the Enlightenment, arguments in favor or against Jewish emancipation had long turned on the question of whether Jews were aesthetically compatible with Europeans: those who opposed Jewish integration had found Jewish aesthetic sensibility and Jewish aesthetics flawed, and as a result, they argued that Jews had no place within the nation or within wider European cultural life. During the Enlightenment, even those polemists who argued in favor of emancipation and integration agreed Jewish aesthetic life would have to be reformed, but ultimately believed their humanity would shine through. These Enlightenment debates about Jewish aesthetics framed the question of Jewish citizenship over the course of the long nineteenth century; while concurrently, the problem of proving themselves worthy of citizenship dominated internal Jewish aesthetic self-fashioning for well over a century. Aesthetics, in short, lay at the heart of the modern Jewish experience.

Hans Blüher’s specific charge of Jewish aniconism (the supposed Jewish aversion to visual culture) and his marshaling of the opposition between Hellenist and Jewish aesthetics for antisemitic purposes was not particularly original. At least since the Enlightenment, German philosophers used the Greek past to define modern German cultural identity in opposition to an aniconic Judentum. The charge of a fundamental Jewish aniconism, for example, had already been waged forcefully by German intellectuals like Kant, who saw it as a Jewish virtue, and Hegel, who considered it to be a flaw. But attacks on Jewish aesthetics were given new life and a venomous racial and pseudo-

---


306 By “Hellenism,” I mean devotion imitation of Ancient Greece rather than the specific historical period of Hellenism.

307 Andrew Hewitt, Political Inversions, 43.

scientific fervor thanks to the explosion of modern political and racial antisemitism, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century. Jewish aniconism, for example, was expanded from a cultural deficiency of Judaism to yet another sign of Jewish racial inferiority. Richard Wagner, for example, had the following to say about the supposed Jewish aversion to the visual arts in his notorious, but widely-influential screed *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (1850):

> the sensory capacity for sight belonging to the Jew(s) was never such as to allow them to produce visual artists; their eyes are preoccupied with matters much more practical than beauty and the spiritual content of things in the phenomenal world. To the best of my knowledge, we know nothing of a single Jewish architect or sculptor in our own times; as for painters of Jewish origin, I must leave it to experts in the field to judge whether they have created anything real in their art.\(^{309}\)

Wagner had also antedated Blüher in linking the scarcity of Jewish art to their lack of national territory, since true artistic production depended on an organic connection between a Volk and its land.\(^{310}\)

The idea that Jewish culture was historically averse to visual culture has been definitively debunked. Many studies in the recent past have demonstrated a rich and consistent Jewish production and engagement with the visual arts from antiquity.\(^{311}\) But the myth of Jewish aniconism, kept alive by anti-Jewish polemicists like Hans Blüher, was a powerful force in shaping modern Jewish thought, historiography, and literary production, as scholars in a range of modern Jewish disciplines have recently shown. Whether Jewish thinkers celebrated the supposed Jewish cultural aversion to the body, nature, and visual culture or whether they rebelled against this myth, the charge of Jewish aniconism was a powerful instigator for the production of modern Jewish letters, thought, and culture. As we shall see in examining Langer’s place within modern Hebrew letters in the next chapter, Langer was part of a generation of Hebrew writers attempting to reorient Jewish culture toward the visual world and the body. For now, suffice to say that how a Jew created culture, especially the fine arts and literature, was a question of tremendous cultural and political significance when set against discourses on Jewish aesthetics from within and without.

Hans Blüher’s attack on Jewish aesthetics was in some sense old wine in new bottles. He used traditional anti-Jewish tropes like Jewish aniconism and aversion to the male body; an attack on Jewish aesthetics; and the opposition between Hellenism and Judaism for a sadly familiar purpose: to exclude Jews from German nationalism, which he and other masculinists believed they would lead as an elite vanguard within the German youth movement. But Blüher’s attacks, and the wider German masculinist antisemitic critique it represented, had an even deeper and more personal significance for


\(^{310}\) As Wagner wrote, “A Jew speaks the language of the country in which he has lived from generation to generation, but he always speaks it as a foreigner.” Ibid, 27.

Mordechai Langer. This was because aesthetics and the cultural appropriation of Hellenism played an unusually significant role in how homosexuals were defining their sexual subjectivities and in how the emerging German homosexual community defined its collective cultural life.

3.4 Hellenism, Aesthetic Sensibility, and the Modern Homosexual as Artist

Hellenism, as already intimated, was not merely the cultural property of the German masculinists, but was *the* lodestar for communal and individual homosexual self-definition in the period of homosexual emancipation (1860-1933). Hellenism was the shared framework and point of reference for thinking about what homosexuality was and what homosexual culture could be (or against which it should not be).\(^\text{312}\) Appropriations of the Greek past unified homosexuals by providing a shared framework and point of reference for the emerging community and shaped the (various) self-conceptions of generations of men who were attracted to men.

Certainly part of the appeal of the Greek past was how expansive and accommodating it could be. Scholars of homosexual emancipation have demonstrated that homosexuals adapted Hellenism to (1) a variety of political sensibilities from socialism to liberalism to nationalism to fascism and *völkisch* ideologies; and (2) to a wide range of models of homosexuality, from pederasty and hierarchical models of same sex love to mutualistic models; and (3) to a variety of styles, cultural movements from Romanticism to various proto-modernisms like Aestheticism, Decadence, and Symbolism, and to the fin de siècle Zeitgeist of spiritualism and mysticism (the latter namely through *neo-Platonism*).

At the level of the individual, the Greek past provided many with what Sebastian Matzner has called “linguistic emancipation.” It offered a more self-affirming and positive lexicon with terms like “Greek love” or “Socratic love,” which allowed individual homosexuals a way to avoid the language of pathology and abnormality, on the one hand, and Biblical and theological terminology like “sodomite” or “sinner against nature,” on the other hand.\(^\text{313}\) We have already seen as much in historicizing the widespread use of the category “Eros.” Perhaps the most famous example of the linguistic refuge one could find in the Greek past was Karl Ulrich’s mid nineteenth-century coinage “Urnings” to describe the “third sex;” a term he hoped might redeem the homosexual from the language of sin and medical pathology (Ulrichs based the term “urnings” on Uranian Aphrodite as described by Pausanias in Plato’s Symposium). Along with “linguistic emancipation,” there is also much historical evidence that “individual emancipation” (again, Matzner’s term), or what we might


\(^\text{313}\) Matzner, 67.
call today “coming out” was often mediated through classical reception practices (at least to oneself if not to others).  

For German homosexuals in particular, linking modern homosexuality to the ancient Greek past allowed them to present their identities and their social and cultural life as aesthetically and morally normative and compatible with German national culture and bourgeois aesthetics. After all, in the German-speaking lands of Central Europe, for much of the nineteenth century, the study of classical antiquity was a crucial part of the German ideal of self-cultivation or Bildung, which involved the proper cultivation of aesthetic taste and ethical self-improvement through education, in order to promote the moral and political health of Deutschtum. Educational reformers like Wilhelm von Humboldt promoted the study of classicism and promoted ancient Greece as the aesthetic ideal to be emulated (though the homoerotic and pederastic social world was largely ignored). The story of the “tyranny of Greece over Germany,” of the tremendous impact the reception of Greece played on long-nineteenth-century German civic institutions and its intellectual and cultural history is well known and well-studied. As Suzanne Marchand has beautifully summarized, “above all the Germans admired the Greeks because the Greeks admired, cultivated, and exemplified the beautiful…To be Greek was to worship beauty, and to live a beautiful life, free from the disfiguring conventions and restrictions of the modern world.”

As the great historian George Mosse showed, the nineteenth-century German fixation with Greek aesthetics and specifically the aesthetics of the modern male body was grounded in a broadly shared cultural assumption that physical beauty reflected the moral superiority and the inner character of the individual. Living beautifully or living like a Greek was a cultural imperative driven as much by anxieties about the moral health of the modern subject and citizen as it was about policing and regulating the physical health of the body. The social and economic transformations of modernity engendered new cultural needs for moral stability and the aesthetics of the body came to reflect the moral character of the individual subject. The Hellenic ideal was reclaimed as a regenerative force and a vantage point from which a new national culture could be formed in which physical and moral beauty was set in harmony.

By the twentieth century, the golden age of philhellenism in Germany was well over. In 1890 Kaiser Wilhelm II demanded that his schools educate Germans and not Greeks and Romans, calling for the end of Germany’s long educational prioritization of classicism and classical studies. But among the emerging community of homosexuals, philhellenism never went out of style—and by the interwar period, celebration of the Greek past was well known to be an idiosyncratic feature of

314 Matzner, 66.


316 Marchand, 3.

homosexual culture; which was noticed and mocked in the press and even by those homosexuals who felt the preoccupation with Hellenism to be tired and overwrought. For homosexuals, the nineteenth-century legacy of Bildung and the German philhellenic obsession seemed to offer a way of advocating for homosexual rights and acceptance from within a culturally viable German tradition. By pointing to the Greek institution of pederasty and the homoeroticism of everyday Hellenic life, homosexual writers were challenging the heterosexist use of classicism from within a normative aesthetic, ethical, and cultural “German” tradition. For the masculinists and Hans Blüher in particular, the normativity of Greece allowed them to integrate homosexuality into German nationalism, since Greece was long considered by many nineteenth-century German thinkers to be the special cultural property of Germans.

By linking their modern identities and culture to the ancient Greek past, homosexuals hoped to rid homosexuality of its perverted associations by repackaging it as the driving motor of the best of culture and philosophy (and among German masculinists, to the project of nationalism). They found an intellectual framework in Ancient Greece—a framework articulated most forcefully by Plato in *Symposium* (through the voice of Socrates)—in which homoerotic desire was celebrated as the necessary precondition for aesthetic and intellectual production. Indeed, as quite a number of scholars have shown, Platonism played one of the most significant roles in helping homosexuals conceptualize the relationship between same-sex love and culture.

Plato famously concluded his *Symposium* (385 BC) with Socrates’s monologue on love.318 Throughout the dialogue, all of the various speakers who had discussed the nature of love assumed it meant male-male love (and generally between an older and younger male); Socrates is no different. But Socrates goes on to describe the *telos* of love, which might be visualized as something like an Eros ladder. It begins when a man finds beauty in a male youth and proceeds to educate him. This intense love of one male would ideally bring the lover to appreciate all beautiful forms and ultimately to an abstract love of art and philosophy, an appreciation of the beauty of political institutions: “step by step, the love of fair boys and youths leads ultimately to a love of divine beauty [...] By such stages the pederast becomes a contemplative sage and social philosopher.”319 For Socrates it was only from and through male-male love that one could reach the ideal, the truly beautiful, and the just. Male love—and *only* male love—functioned as the beginning of art, culture, and, ultimately, of politics and spirituality. Socrates’s logic is somewhat intuitive: there is an easy intellectual slippage between human erotic imagination and human conception of the beautiful (and vice versa). But Plato famously left an unresolved ambiguity in his text: what happened to male-male Eros once the male lover-philosopher arrived at the truly beautiful? Did homoerotic physical desire need to be transcended entirely or was homoerotic Eros part of the ideal? Does ideal beauty entail the sexual within it or does the beautiful merely begin with male love but ultimately transcend it entirely? This deeper question became a foundational problem for philosophical aesthetics and has probably been a matter of philosophical debate for as long as the *Symposium* has been read. As Whitney Davis writes, “every generation has produced the Plato and the Platonism that it thinks it needs,” and has differed on whether “Eros is always required in the ideal or as the ideal.”320


Suffice to say that emancipatory-era homosexual writers who appropriated Plato to defend homoerotic desire did so by applying a “materialist” interpretation to *Symposium*. Most homosexual activists were what Davis has aptly called “anti-Platonic Platonists,” that is, they read Plato as celebrating homoerotic desire as an essential part of ideal beauty itself. Obviously, there was a practical side to the textual ambiguity of Plato: it made it safe for use among homosexuals. Homosexuals made recourse to “Platonic Eros” and the language of “transcendence” as code—a cover for speaking safely about homosexuality, as Oscar Wilde did in his trial defense, as we have seen. Homosexuals could marshal “Platonic love” to refer to their deviant desires and claim that they were speaking about “ideal beauty” or as Langer put it in 1921, “a sublime and exalted feeling.” But the language of spiritual transcendence and idealism was not simply a cover or safe way of speaking (though it was surely that as well). Plato also provided these homosexual activists with the theoretical blueprint that elevated homoerotic desire as the foundation of all intellectual, aesthetic, and political life (at least of any real substance).

German masculinists appropriated Plato for their own agendas, and they justified these readings through their second appropriation of the works of the most important “anti-Platonic Platonist,” the Enlightenment art historian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), the “father of modern Hellenism.” It was through Winckelmann that German masculinists drew connections between Platonism and their modern sexual subjectivities and culture. The importance of Winckelmann for these men cannot be overstated. As Davis has correctly suggested, German homosexual masculinism was in essence Winckelmann’s ancient Greece turned into a prescriptive ideological program. Like other German masculinists, Mordechai Langer described his own aesthetic project to Yaakov Rabinovich in distinctly Winckelmannian terms, so it is worth considering Winckelmann’s ideas and language in some depth before moving on.

Throughout the long nineteenth century, those who wished to engage with ancient Greece could not avoid Winckelmann. Winckelmann “spread the taste for Greek art throughout Europe,” and inspired the neoclassical turn in nineteenth-century German philosophy, art, and education described above. Ironically, while Winckelmann’s own desires for men were well known in his own lifetime and even acknowledged by Goethe as essential for understanding his writings, Winckelmann’s “homosexual” biography was largely ignored by later nineteenth-century enthusiasts.

---


324 Davis describes the German masculinist program as a set of “sub-Winckelmannian ideologies of homoeroticist Bildung.” Davis, 234.
while his celebration of Greek aesthetics and his ideal of masculine beauty were also largely emptied of their explicitly homoerotic valence. Like the Platonism it depended on, Winckelmann’s writings were largely sanitized to support a pure “Platonic” reading of an idealized Greek past.

Among homosexual activists and writers of the emancipatory era, Winckelmann’s homosexuality was recovered and the erotic significance of his studies restored. Whether or not their recovery was historically accurate, there is no doubt and no debate that emancipatory-era homosexuals from Walter Pater to Hans Blüher read Winckelmann as constituting his own proto-homosexual self-understanding through his engagement with ancient Greek art. In fact, Winckelmann’s own biography was widely viewed by emancipatory-era homosexuals as the modern incarnation of Plato’s artist-philosopher.

We should be most concerned with what German masculinists found usable in Winckelmann’s studies of ancient Greece. The first lesson that theorists like Hans Blüher and Adolf Brand learned from Winckelmann was that a society that condoned and celebrated same-sex erotic love was the most ideal (and even necessary) for the production of the finest works of art. For Winckelmann, as Whitney Davis has written, the ideal in Greek art, which represented the pinnacle of all artistic beauty, “was constituted in pederasty.” It was within the homoerotic and same-sex-oriented utopia of Greece that the most beautiful works of art were created (in this sense he was refracting Greek cultural history through Plato); their the athletic male body was worshiped, celebrated in poetry, and imitated in sculpture and the visual arts.

For Winckelmann, the gymasia were particularly important as schools of aesthetic and philosophical inspiration; it was there that the nude male body was displayed and enjoyed by older men. These older men were usually lovers of the male athletes, lounging around to gaze at their boys. It was in the gymasia that the athlete’s beauty inspired them to write poetry and create visual representations of their beautiful bodies. One of Winckelmann’s most suggestive descriptions is that of the sculptor who visits the gymnasium to measure the imprint left by the athlete’s buttocks and genitals in the sand of the wrestling arena, which the artist meticulously measures and then reproduces back in his workshop. The artist then places his finished sculpture back into the

---


326 There is a persuasive amount of evidence that supports reading Winckelmann as a proto-“homosexual” figure, which has been presented by Alex Potts, Whitney Davis, Simon Richter, Patrick McGrath, Robert Aldrich, and Stefano Evangelista (among others), though naysayers persist.

327 Davis, Queer Beauty, 10.

328 Winckelmann elevated the male nude as the pinnacle of all art. The Apollo Belvedere was the ultimate ideal combining just the perfect blend of simplicity and grandeur: “eine edle Einfalt und stille Grösse.”
gymnasium (or reads his poetry aloud to the athletes during a workout). The artist-lover, in turn, evokes the athletes’ own desires through the art he has displayed and the athletes are motivated to develop their bodies further in imitation of the art. As Davis describes, the art produced “successfully imitates what artists find beautiful in boys who imitate what men who love them find beautiful and have already imaged in lyric or sculpture.” This created a cycle of imitation (Nachahmung) between art and life that turns around the axis of same-sex erotic desire. The cycle of imitation, grounded in a permissive same-sex erotic environment, ultimately produced the ideal of Greek art. Winckelmann argued that all subsequent periods of art history paled in comparison to this high point of Classicism. If modern art hoped to achieve even a semblance of the beauty captured by the Greeks in this period, modern artists would have to imitate the Greek ideal in art. Winckelmann left unstated the necessary deduction that Greek homoerotic social life would also need to be imitated if the Greek aesthetic ideal were to be revived. This implicit suggestion, however, was not lost on German homosexual masculinists who conceived their movement as a renaissance of Greek male love and aesthetic living. In this sense, German masculinists saw Winckelmann as promoting ancient Hellas as a prescriptive paradigm worthy of imitation, not only for the production of beautiful art but for the revival of same-sex love in modern times as well.

German homosexual masculinists were essentially neo-Romantics. They used Winckelmann to support a broader ideological program, which was characterized by a number of Romantic tenants including: their sense of themselves as constituting a type of artistic genius; their imagining of an essentialist “homosexual” utopia in the Classical past; and their vision for a modern homosexual collective culture at the helm of German nationalism. As neo-Romantics, German homosexual masculinists were rather obsessed with Winckelmann’s imagined and utopic Hellenic past, which functioned as the antithesis of the atomized, materialist, and degenerate present (the latter, of course, was associated with Jews, as we shall see momentarily). Winckelmann provided German masculinists with a readily available Greek past in which homoerotic desire was venerated as just about synonymous with the finest aesthetic judgment and the highest artistic and cultural production. What’s more, in classically Romantic fashion, Winckelmann pointed toward a renaissance of the imagined Greek past through cyclical modes of imitation of the ancient Greeks. By reviving ancient Hellas, modern homosexuals could again situate homoerotic desire at the center of modern cultural life and thus inaugurate the age of Romantic wholeness they had yearned for.

Winckelmann also provided German masculinists with a framework for understanding of homosexuality as a form of artistic genius. The key text for German masculinists in this regard was Winckelmann’s Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst (1763). The Abhandlung is Winckelmann’s thirty-page epistolary essay on aesthetic education. Winckelmann addressed this essay in highly sensuous and erotic language to his “friend” (who was in fact his lover), Friedrich Reinhold von Berg. In the essay, Winckelmann described to Berg the very rare capacity among some men to “feel beauty” [Gefühl des Schönen]. While all men had this capacity of “feeling the beautiful” at some level, it was only a rare elite few who were gifted with the ability to truly “feel beauty” at high enough levels to fully appreciate the male body in all its splendor, as an

all-body experience of sensation \([\text{Empfindung}]\) and sensual titillation (“a soaring and twitching in the skin”).\(^{332}\) In the second half of the essay, Winckelmann argued that one’s capacity to feel beauty needed to be cultivated through homoerotic “friendship” and proper aesthetic training.\(^{333}\) The feeling for beauty was inborn \([\text{angeborenlich}]\), but must be “awakened” \([\text{erwacht}]\) in the male youth. To do so required pedagogical guidance from the initiated. Winckelmann called on Berg to return to join him in Rome to renew their “friendship,” so that Winckelmann could help him cultivate his own feeling. Winckelmann also called on his other readers to imitate him (and Berg) by entering into educative (and erotic) relationships with other beautiful young men. In short, Winckelmann’s \textit{Abhandlung} linked the cultivation of homoerotic desire within same-sex “friendships” with the cultivation of the aesthetic and moral personality. For German masculinists, Winckelmann’s \textit{Abhandlung} was something of a manifesto that taught them that the cultivation of homoerotic desire was coterminous with Bildung.

From the \textit{Abhandlung}, masculinists also learned that not all men were created with the same capacity for aesthetic judgment (since it depended on one’s capacity for homoerotic desire). To possess the capacity to “feel beauty” was, in other words, a special gift of a choice minority. German masculinists built on Winckelmann’s observation and asserted that there was more to homosexuality than sexual desire for other men. They concluded that homosexuals also possessed a shared and unique aesthetic sensibility; homosexual culture (modeled on ancient Greece) was, therefore, an aesthetic and ethical way of living. Of course, among them there were differences of opinion concerning the origins of the homosexual aesthetic sensibility: some like Hans Blüher (following Winckelmann’s suggestion) viewed it as inborn and biological. Hence, Blüher could in turn declare that Jews were racially averse to identification with images and the male body. Other masculinists conceived the homosexual aesthetic sensibility as entirely acquired and a matter of cultivation and choice. But regardless of how they answered the question of why it came to be, German masculinists shared a common definition of homosexual subjectivity that included a higher artistic consciousness and mode of perception that was believed to exist \textit{beyond} or in \textit{tandem} with sexual desire or orientation toward the same sex.

Because of their special aesthetic sensibility, German masculinists argued, homosexuals had a special capacity for genius; they possessed special powers of aesthetic judgment and had a greater propensity to become aesthetes and artists. Obviously part of the German masculinist focus on aesthetics was aimed at deflecting focus away from same-sex desire and sex, which was taboo, deviant, and widely perceived as pathological and sinful. But their belief in homosexuality as a form of artistic genius was also genuine; it allowed them to make sense of themselves as cultivators of beauty, philosophers, artists, and natural political leaders. They employed a discourse of beauty, in other words, to infuse homosexuality with purpose (though again, this discourse also served double duty as code). The discourse on beauty and aesthetics was also a type of compensation for their incapacity to reproduce. As artists, producers of culture, philosophers and aesthetes, and teachers and leaders of the modern nation (reincarnated in the image of Greece), homosexuals would achieve eternal life (or at least some continuity).

There was an important methodological implication to Winckelmann’s (and Plato’s) linking of aesthetic judgment and homoerotic desire: it taught German masculinists to use homoerotic

\(^{332}\) Ibid, 216; Davis 157.

\(^{333}\) Richter and McGrath, “Representing Homosexuality,” 51.
desire as a critical category in interpreting great works of art and literature. In his homoerotic descriptions, Winckelmann demonstrated that homoerotic desire should be utilized as both a method for understanding art and literature. His descriptions of homoerotic poetry, male nude statues and especially of the Belvedere were highly erotic and evocative, so that it was not only the content of Greek art (the male nude) but Winckelmann’s descriptions that legitimated and privileged homoerotic desire. The result was that German masculinists began building their own culture in which, as Foucault might have put it, sexuality was a site of knowledge about literature and art.

V. Hans Blüher and the Creation of the Jewish Homosexual as an Aesthetic Identity

Through their recovery of Winckelmann and Plato, German masculinists appropriated Hellenism as a “counterdiscourse” that legitimized same-sex love and, even more importantly, presented same-sex love as a panacea for all they found disconcerting about modernity. They saw themselves as artist-philosophers who could revive ancient Hellas and heal the degenerate modern fixation on reason as well as the spiritually-decayed civilization of Europe. These homosexual neo-Romantics stressed the importance of finding an alternative to the atomization, hyper rationality, and materialism of modern life. What came under most furious attack was their perception of a mechanistic view of reality, associated with the triumph of bourgeois—read, Jewish—civilization. It was the Jews, German masculinists and all antisemites, who were responsible for and who embodied the contemporary ills of modernity, including the entrance of women into the public and political sphere and the increased visibility and cultural dominance of gender-inverted men.

Hans Blüher’s formulation of this attack was most widely read in the years preceding World War One and was the most important source for Langer’s thinking. His attack on Jewish aesthetics, however, was representative of a wider shift among German homosexual masculinists who increasingly defined their own culture through the prism of antisemitism. By the interwar, most masculinists shared in Blüher’s assumptions in one form or another. Blüher believed that all men, except Jewish men, possessed the capacity for aesthetic idealization (in Platonic terms, the ability to reconcile physical and erotic drives (Eros) with ontological universals (logos)), but it was only homosexual men whose aesthetic powers were developed enough to truly become the redeeming artist and the leader (der führerische Mann) who could redeem culture and thus, the nation and the world. Jewish men, like women, were incapable of aesthetic idealization since they did not possess the male aesthetic sensibility that was fully developed in homosexual men. Jewish thinking was too abstract, rational, and uncreative; their thinking embodied all of negative traits of modernity. As Bruns puts it, for Blüher Jews:

personified rather than overcame the split between Eros and logos in the modern subject, “the Jew” could not construct bonds with other men, could not join the Maennerbund, and could not follow a leader. The Jew—too fixated on logos, and too tied to the materiality of the family—thus bracketed the ideal of the new German

334 There was nothing immanent to Plato or Winckelmann’s ideas, we should note, that necessarily warranted the German masculinist use of Winckelmann for antisemitic, antidemocratic, and proto-fascist work. Individual freedom is celebrated by Winckelmann; the masculinists glossed over this aspect.

335 Bruns, 317.
By negating the possibility for a Jewish male aesthetic sensibility and by denying a proper Jewish aesthetic appreciation of male beauty, Blüher negated the very possibility for homosexuality among Jews because aesthetic sensibility was constituted as an essential part of what homosexuality was. The Jewish homosexual was, therefore, a contradiction in terms.

Blüher's evidence was the dearth of a Jewish Freundesliebe tradition in the visual arts and literature. One could not locate homoerotic desire as the cultural fount for the production of Jewish art, he argued. There was no Jewish celebration of the male body; no enactment of Plato's Eros ladder in Jewish art; and no celebration of male same-sex desire as the gateway to a philosophical appreciation of ideal beauty. Since art and same-sex social life were mutually dependent (recall Winkelmann's Nachahmung), one could not find examples of Freundesliebe as a social phenomenon in Jewish history either. Jews shared no part in the cultural legacy of Hellenism, the “queer utopia” of antiquity in which a symbiotic relationship between art and homoerotic desire was manifest in daily Greek life (as Winckelmann showed and Plato embodied and theorized about). In Winckelmannian terms, Blüher made the following argument: since Jews did not appreciate and did not imitate the Greeks, Jews produced no true art or culture at all. Jewish men were incapable of feeling the beautiful (Gefühl des Schönen); they lacked that special aesthetic sensibility that only an elite homosexual minority could truly feel, and which Winckelmann was the first modern to point to. Judaism and Jewish racial characteristics prevented Jews from creating the social conditions and types of male-bonding institutions from which Greek-like aesthetic living, true culture, and homosexuality would flourish. Jewish culture and Jewish art, like Jewish men, were aesthetically flawed. It was unthinkable then, according to this German masculinist logic, for Jews to have a place in the modern revival of Greek culture that the German masculinists would lead; nor would they have a place within the German nation that fashioned itself in the image of the Greek past. Jews were antithetical to the Greek-German spirit. Jews were antithetical to the cults of beauty, male friendship, and masculinity that German masculinists celebrated (as did much of homosexual culture in Western Europe as a whole in the emancipatory era).

For German masculinists, Jewish materialism was tied to the hated middle-class, the values of liberalism, and the decadent modern world, which Jews both created and symbolized. Even the Jewish national movement, Zionism, was by masculinist logic destined to fail. Because Jews were aesthetically flawed and because they could not produce true culture grounded in homoerotic desire, they were also incapable of politics and culture. Their nation-state would never materialize because a national movement without the leadership of homosexuals and without the building blocks of male bonding, “comrade love,” and homoerotic desire was unthinkable.

---

VI. Against Blüher: Poetry as an Ideological Weapon

Mordechai Langer took in the Blüherian critique of Jewish aesthetic sensibility and art, just as he had taken in Blüher’s attack on Jewish history, Jewish theology, and contemporary Jewish masculinity. In his letter to Yaakov Rabinovich of 1921, Langer revealed that Blüher’s attack on Jewish aesthetics had also penetrated his thinking. In its distinctive language, in its ideological agenda, and in its assumptions about art and sexuality, Langer’s plea to Rabinovich belied his intellectual debts to Hans Blüher and the German Masculinists. He concurred that the all-male sphere of the Maennerbund, with its homoerotic bonding and intimate male friendships, was a desideratum for Jews. And he agreed that the revival of male-male association was a necessary precondition for the success of Jewish nationalism.

First Langer bemoaned the dearth of a Jewish Freundesliebe genre in modern Hebrew literature. He lamented his unfortunate luck of “appear[ing]” in a “generation, which is all hate and all rage and animosity” that did not appreciate the subject of his poetry. “How strange this elegy rings in our cold age,” he wrote, “an elegy of sublime and exalted human feeling that has been extinguished from the Hebrew heart in the tragedy of their bitter exile, may it be swift...” Langer, following Blüher again, wrote of something aesthetically lacking within modern Jewish culture; he even implied that the lack of a Freundesliebe tradition would be a problem for Jewish nationalism (it had been extinguished from the Hebrew heart, after all).

However, as he would in Die Erotik der Kabbala, Langer rejected Blüher’s fatalism and racism. Excluded from sharing the cultural legacy of Hellenism, Langer asserted that there had once been a Hebrew literary tradition of Freundesliebe (ahavat re’a) in Jewish history. His own poetry was a part of that lost tradition, that “lyric of comrade love, lyric like that sung by suitors for their actual lovers” that included “David who eulogized his friend Jonathan: “I grieve for you, my brother, Jonathan. Very dear you were to me. More wondrous your love to me than the love of women!” Contra Blüher, Langer declared that male-male Eros could indeed be revived among Jewish men and Hebrew culture restored to the homoerotic days of old. Langer would lead this revival with his own poetry: “And now here I come, upon my soul, to awaken this feeling again, this comrade love in these, our enlightened days!”

Surely, had we no knowledge of Langer’s heavy intellectual debt to Hans Blüher and the German masculinists, Langer’s defensive plea to Rabinovich would have sounded merely like high-sounding nationalist rhetoric, even if a peculiar one. He assumed that his attempt to make his poetry more palatable to a Hebrew literary establishment failed because that establishment was marked by “conservatism and prejudice” (Langer’s phrase). In 1921, most literary arbiters still expected Hebrew literature to speak to the revival of the nation. Hebrew poetry was to inspire collective action, to take up communal problems, and to reconfigure Jewish culture toward revitalization of the whole. Hebrew literature was to avoid, at all costs, the particular, the individual, and the personal for its own sake. Langer, therefore, needed to explain the collective import of his personal, inward turn to a Hebrew literary establishment that viewed such subjects as self-indulgent at best.

There is no question that Langer did have to deal with the problem of nationalism in defending his poetry to Rabinovich; he felt he had to convince Rabinovich that the subject of “comrade love” had significance for the nationalist agenda of Hebrew letters. But to do so—and this is the point—to reconcile same-sex love with the nationalist conventions of modern Hebrew literature, Langer utilized a distinctly German-masculinist language, logic, and ideology. Hans Blüher
and the German masculinists had already presented an answer to the problem of how to reconcile homosexuality with nationalism. They inverted the marginality of the homosexual and placed him at the center of culture, politics, and nationalism. Langer now sought to translate and transplant German masculinist ideology on behalf of Zionism. He would invert margin and center in a Jewish key, arguing that “comrade love” had once been at the center of Hebrew literary culture, but had been lost. His poetry was not marginal to the project of nationalism, but at its center, and thus like normative Zionist cultural politics, Langer’s project was one of both new creation and restoration of the old. Just as German masculinists like Hans Blüher were trying to revive ancient Hellas in modern times, Langer would help revive a lost Hebrew culture that like ancient Hellas celebrated same-sex love.

Langer assumed that sexuality was a legitimate critical category in assessing and categorizing literature. He drew a direct line between an author or artist’s sexuality and the art he produced. Langer disclosed as much when he compared himself to those “suitors who sang to their actual lovers.” There is an assumption here that courtier poetry can be read as a site of knowledge about courtier sexuality (or at least courtier sexual practices), as well as vice versa: courtier sexual practices can be used as a critical category in the interpretation of their poetry. Even though Langer brought this up in an attempt to deny a link between his own sexual behavior and his poetry, Langer’s denial actually affirmed the link. Sexuality, as Langer demonstrated, was an appropriate critical category for thinking about the production and interpretation of art and literature; it is at least a question worthy of consideration. In this respect, Langer fit comfortably within his generation of emancipatory-era German masculinists who were inaugurating sexuality as an analytic tool in the study of art and literature. German masculinists were busy mapping out a literary tradition in which homoerotic desire was seen as constitutive and privileged factor in the production of art (and in the life of the artist). This intellectual context is significant, as it allows the historian to justifiably link Langer’s own homosexuality to the content of his poetry.

Another related assumption that Langer shared with German masculinists was the mutually-constitutive relationship between homoerotic social contexts and the creation of great art, philosophy, and culture (a la Winckelmann and Plato). Langer assumed that there was a symbiotic relationship between aesthetic sensibility and homoerotic feeling. Langer indicated so when he presented his own comrade-love poetry as a vehicle through which to inspire the revival of “comrade love,” this Winckelmanian “sublime and exalted feeling,” among Jews. Langer asserted to Rabinovich that he hoped to “awaken this feeling again” with his poetry, drawing directly on Winckelmann’s erwachen (as did German masculinists throughout the journal Der Eigene among other publications). What’s more, as the artist-politician (a la Blüher’s logic), Langer had taken upon himself the leading role in awakening this feeling again or, in Winckelmannian terms, to restart the cycle of Nachahmung (of cyclical imitation of the Greeks). Just as German masculinists like Hans Blüher were trying to revive ancient Hellas in modern times, Langer would help revive a lost Hebrew culture that like ancient Hellas celebrated same-sex love. Presumably, Langer was in a position to do so because he was already in possession of the capacity to “feel beauty” that he hoped to awaken among other Hebrews.

Let me be clear: it would be crass to reduce Langer’s motivation in writing Hebrew poetry over the course of twenty years to a purely ideological one—even to a motive he referred to fairly explicitly in his own hand. And it would be even more crass to reduce the “meaning” of his poetry using a purely ideological interpretation. I intend no such thing. Langer’s Hebrew poetry is no simple mirror of German homosexual masculinism, or for that matter any other ideology. His poetry
is not a versification of German masculinism in Hebrew. Still, with mindful of avoiding a reductive explanation, this chapter argues that any serious reading of Langer’s poetry and consideration of what first incited him to write needs to take his disclosure to Yaakov Rabinovich in 1921 seriously; the impact of the Blüherian challenge was real and formative for him as a Hebrew poet, just as it had been to the writing of Die Erotik der Kabbala (which Langer was probably already drafting at the same time he wrote his first Hebrew poems).

Langer created a Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew at a moment when a wing of the German homosexual emancipation movement was defining itself as an aesthetic way of living and, what’s more, in opposition to Jewish aesthetic culture. German masculinists refracted the internal problems of homosexual emancipation through ideas and (mis)representations about Jewish men, informed by race science and antisemitic discourse. Because they were exiled from the cultural orbit of German masculinism, from the legacy of Hellenism, and thus from German nationalism, Jewish men who desired men needed to create a theoretical alternative that accounted for the role of aesthetic sensibility in definitions of homosexual subjectivity. Hans Blüher’s specific attack on Jewish aesthetics informed Langer’s decision to create his Hebrew lyric of ahavat re’a. In this, Hans Blüher was again midwife to a new cultural identity, the modern Jewish homosexual, now formulated as an aesthetic identity.

Langer, in a mode of resistance, turned inward to represent a Jewish male homosexual voice in Hebrew verse, which he built from the language of the Jewish and specifically Hebrew textual Because of how deeply imbricated the question of homosexual subjectivity and homosexual aesthetics were in things Jewish, as it were, Langer’s creation of an aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew was an act of significant cultural import and political resistance—in part a form of redress to Blüher’s claims about Jewish art, Jewish male subjectivity and sexuality. It is to Langer’s poetry that we now turn.
Chapter 4

Mordechai Langer’s Jewish Aesthetic of Homosexuality in Hebrew: Part I

I. A Jewish Aesthetic of Homosexuality in Hebrew

Between the wars, over the span of twenty-three years from 1920 to 1943, Mordechai Langer, writing in Prague and Jewish Palestine, introduced the male homosexual experience to Hebrew and Jewish letters. He created the first distinctly Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew. In referring to a “Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality,” this chapter argues a number of interlinked but distinct points.

Langer crafted a representation of the male homosexual’s voice by attempting to meet a set of normative aesthetic standards and conventions within the Hebrew literary tradition. Langer did not create his Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality ex nihilio: Langer depicted a poet coming to grips with his same-sex desires using a religious, mystical, and nationalist vocabulary drawn from pre-modern Jewish and Hebrew letters. He also located homoerotic literary precedents in the centuries-long Hebrew canon, drew inspiration from them, and at times, even imitated them. These precedents included the homoerotic Hebrew poetry of the Golden Age of Spain (10th-12th centuries) and medieval homoerotic mystical poetry, including the poetry of Israel Najara of the sixteenth-century Lurianic Circle at Safed.

Still, Langer’s project was ultimately different from that of the Hebrew and Jewish historical predecessors from which he drew inspiration. Langer was a homosexual poet, while those predecessors he identified with knew nothing of the homosexual as a category of person in its modern reified sense, since neither the term nor the concept had existed then. In enlisting centuries-old homoerotic Hebrew precedents, Langer sought to give voice to a modern category of person unknown to the Jewish past.

Langer understood himself as participating in a distinct homoerotic lyrical tradition within Hebrew and world literature and described his poetic endeavor as an attempt to revive the Jewish Freundesliebe genre in Hebrew literature. In this respect, Langer was not only the first modern poet to seriously take up the subject of male homosexuality in Hebrew verse and to think about the meaning of same-sex desire in Jewish terms; he was also the first modern Hebrew writer to think about the history of homoerotic expression in Hebrew literature as a distinct tradition. For German

---

337 As throughout, by “homosexuality” this dissertation refers exclusively to male homosexuality.

338 Of course, there has been more than one way that modern subjects have defined and experienced homosexuality in its “modern reified sense.” Here I use the singular “sense” for rhetorical convenience, but in fact there are multiple ways that modern subjects have organized their sexual subjectivities. And indeed, Langer used more than one model for organizing same-sex relationships in his poetry (e.g. mutual and pederastic). See my introduction on this issue.

339 See chapter three for a discussion and definition of Freundesliebe.
masculinists, the revival of *Freundesliebe* was a matter of national significance. Langer’s creation of a Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality was a form of ideological redress to the German masculinist attack on Jewish aesthetics and the exclusion of Jewish homosexuals from their cultural orbit. As per the terms of interwar German homosexual discourse, as laid out in previous chapters, Langer’s aesthetic project asserted a place for Jewish homosexuals both within the world of homosexual letters and within the new Hebrew public sphere.

Langer’s Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew had ideological and political stakes during this period given the antisemitic attacks on Jewish homosexuals and Jewish men waged by German masculinists. But Langer was also quite capable of thinking beyond ideology: the voice of the male Jewish homosexual he left behind is complex, capable of irony, deception, skepticism, and even camp. Still, Langer’s dominant mode of expression was not subversive; as a whole, his approach was to seek accommodation with normative Jewish aesthetic, religious, and nationalist conventions. What’s more, the voice he left behind had not entirely come to grips with his sexual subjectivity and his place in the world. On the path to self-understanding, he drew on religious, mystical, and national tropes to universalize the poet’s deviant desires and set them within a broader normative framework. It is not clear that he ever resolved the issue of homosexuality for himself.

For Langer, the experience of the Jewish homosexual involved more than sustained same-sex erotic desire for other men. Langer also paid attention to the male homosexual’s inner affective world, his imagination, gender-experience, aesthetic sensibility, and capacity for spirituality. His poetry involved subjects like how the poet makes sense of his place in the world, the difficulties of self-realization and self-naming, issues of shame and sin, his inability to have children or build a family, the homosexual sensibility (including aesthetic, gender, and spiritual sensibility), the performative nature of social roles, the fleeting nature of pleasure, and the nature of same-sex love. Exploring these dimensions of homosexual experience was as important to him as finding ways to articulate his sexual fantasies in writing.

But there is more: this chapter will argue that Langer was a homosexual poet in yet a second respect: he used a specific set of modernist poetic devises shared by homosexual writers to broach the subject of same-sex love in verse. Langer used many of the same representational formulae, metaphors, coded language, style, and poetic strategies used by homosexual poets like Stefan George (who wrote in German), Arthur Rimbaud (French), Federico García Lorca (Spanish), Otakar Březina, and Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (Czech), as well as others. To versify the Jewish male homosexual’s experience, Langer did not have to invent a way of speaking about the unspeakable whole cloth. Langer built the first “Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew,” in other words, not only out of Jewish and Hebrew raw materials (past and present), but also by incorporating poetic strategies from the burgeoning body of homosexual literature beginning at least from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Among the shared literary devices that homosexual poets like Langer enlisted were elaborate metaphors, codes, references, allusions, settings, forms, and even distinct manners of speaking that enabled them to take up the homosexual experience safely (or at least, in a manner they thought safer) by masking the subject of their poetry to the willfully blind reader. One

---

340 See chapter one for discussion of German homosexual masculinist ideology.

341 I emphasize this because the history of homosexual culture and experience—homosexual phenomenology—encompasses far more than same-sex sex. In this sense, this dissertation follows historian David Halperin’s concern with homosexual sensibility in Halperin, *How to Be Gay.*
of the primary goals of the present chapter will be to outline and then demonstrate these devices, all of which mediated the historical voice of the male Jewish homosexual. By identifying and demonstrating this distinctly homosexual mode of representation in Langer’s own writing, it is possible yet again to situate him within fin de siècle homosexual letters.

In effect, homosexual poets used a common set of devices to address two readers at once: an initiated reader who was in on the poet’s “open secret” or open to the possibility of interpreting his verse as deviant (a minority of readers), and a non-initiated or non-receptive reader who could interpret his poems in non-sexual ways (the majority). To be sure, Langer’s strategy of speaking to two readers at once was only partially effective: the subject of homosexuality was (and is) at times unavoidable. In several poems, he pushed his active metaphors to the breaking point, making it almost impossible for even the non-initiated reader to willfully ignore his poetry’s homoeroticism (although recognizing its homosexuality is another matter). Langer recognized that his poetry crossed lines of respectability and he anticipated public discomfort with them.

This chapter will explore how Langer attempted to meet the many challenges of representing homosexuality in Hebrew verse for an interwar Jew with commitments to Jewish nationalism and religious observance. It demonstrates how he tried to circumvent social and religious taboos; how he straddled the line of respectability; and how he handled the stigma of the subject’s ugliness, pathology, sinfulness, and its assumed foreignness to Jewish and Hebrew culture and its aesthetic norms. It will explore how he tried to come to terms with himself without clear or stable definitions or inherited cultural knowledge of what to make of his desires and inner world. And it will retrace how as many others like him, Langer recognized the new organization of sexual subjects produced within the late Victorian public sphere, but took an active role in shaping its meaning and terms on his own. Through the strategic use of metaphoric expressions and other literary devices he created a safe imaginative world in which he could give the homosexual a voice through a distinctly Jewish cultural and religious vocabulary.

Through close readings of Mordechai Langer’s corpus of Hebrew poetry, we shall recover a voice that until now has remained silent to the historical record: that of an interwar Jewish male homosexual who actively sought accommodation between homosexuality, Judaism, and Hebrew culture. As all historians and literary scholars know, no primary text, whether it is designated “literature” or otherwise, functions as a simple unmediated reflection of an individual’s sensibility. Langer’s corpus of Hebrew poetry is no exception. To retrieve the historical voice of the Jewish homosexual from Langer’s verse, this chapter will consider how Langer navigated aesthetic conventions, formulaic prescriptions, and literary devices—the terrain usually reserved for scholars of literature—to carve a space for the male homosexual within Hebrew and Jewish culture, on the one hand, and for the Jewish male within homosexual culture, on the other hand.

The literary critic Dov Sadan once observed that Hebrew fiction writers who wrote in a language not used for everyday speech had set the imaginative stage for its rebirth as a spoken language: “through an as-if Hebrew reality,” wrote Sadan, “they arrived at a Hebrew reality.”342 It will be surprising to some to discover that on the precipice of that rebirth, a relatively marginal Hebrew poet from Prague was imagining what a male homosexual voice would sound like in Hebrew for the first time. The effect of carving out this aesthetic place in Hebrew culture, perhaps, was to assert a place for the Jewish homosexual within the religious, national, and cultural world of modern Jews.

342 Quoted in Robert Alter, Modern Hebrew Literature (1975), 9
The “modern Jewish revolution,” to use Benjamin Harshav’s now-classic periodization for the transformation in Jewish social and cultural life in the years 1881-1948, was roughly coterminal with the revolution in the modern homosexual experience in the age of its emancipation. Literature played a tremendous role in both. Modern Jews and homosexuals enlisted literature to explore the nature of their subjectivities, to speak to one another through code, to reflect on their shared (and varied) experiences, to imagine a world in which their feelings could be shared openly, and perhaps most crucially, to carve a space for themselves within the European cultural imagination. As Andrew Hewitt has written, for homosexuals “writing itself becomes a form of positing, a reification, a location of a ‘there’ where homosexuality might subsequently ‘be’ separate from a world of social and legal proscription and medical intervention.” Homosexual literature, as Max Kramer aptly describes, was “a textual forum for a novel reality, a forum for practices and identities that society expected to remain on the sidelines.” For homosexuals, literature was as crucial as the medical report, the psychoanalytic case study, the scandalous press exclusive, the political pamphlet, the police report, or the legal brief in shaping the self-identification of homosexuals. It is, therefore, not merely the stuff of literary criticism, but an essential body of primary sources for the historian.

“Modern Jewish literature is the repository of modern Jewish experience,” Ruth R. Wisse has written, “it is the most complete way of knowing the inner life of the Jews.” How lucky then to have evidence of how the new organization of homosexual subjectivity penetrated into the modern Jewish historical experience. Langer’s enactment of the homosexual voice in poetry points to the emergence of a distinctly Jewish homosexual identity, a new social type that would become widely recognizable in the Jewish world from the second half of the twentieth century.

II. Revealment and Concealment in Homosexual Poetics: Speaking to Two Readers at Once

That it is possible to categorize Mordechai Langer as a “homosexual poet” in the sense that he had shared in a common set of emancipatory-era (1860-1933) homosexual literary practices is thanks to several decades-worth of scholarship in the field of LGBT cultural history, literary criticism, and queer theory. This body of scholarship, which has grown tremendously in the past three decades, has shown how literature played one of the most important roles in shaping the emergence of modern homosexual self-consciousness and culture in West-Central Europe, beginning (at least) from the 1860s. Offering a panoramic overview of this literature would, of


345 Kramer, 1. See full citation in note 15 below.

course, require a multi-volume study in itself. A torrent of individual monographs, published since the early 1970s, have told parts of this story, focusing on homosexual literature in a particular language, among a particular wing of the homosexual rights movement, or on a particular author’s work. However, a sustained synthetic overview of the literature of this period as a whole, and its role in the history of the formation of homosexual subjectivity, identity, and community, remains a desideratum.

Thankfully, however, Max D. Kramer has recently provided an invaluable comparative framework for historicizing and interpreting emancipatory-era homosexual poetry. Drawing on the work of Kramer and other’s working in the field provides a point of departure for contextualizing and interpreting how Langer shared (and at times departed from) a common set of strategies used by emancipatory-era homosexual poets.


349 It may seem that I have narrowed Kramer’s thesis by speaking of “homosexual poetry” rather than “queer poetry,” as Kramer does. Kramer asserts that his framework is “queer” in that it encompasses a range of sexual practices and identities that do not fit neatly within the category “homosexuality.” I am sympathetic to some of the political concerns of queer scholarship and understand the scholarly preference for “queer” when discussing contemporary LGBT culture. Still, I prefer to avoid anachronistic language in this study. I maintain that the word “homosexual” can also be used to reflect a dynamic burgeoning set of experiences; it was not merely a static monolithic term controlled by nefarious doctors. Kramer’s study is de facto an analysis of homosexual poetics: it deals almost exclusively with representations of same-sex desire and experience among three writers who were exclusively oriented towards men. Kramer readily admits as much in the course of his excellent study.
Scholars have long noted Kramer’s central “line of argument” that “in the Modernist era the poetic treatment of deviant sexuality relied on the creation of metaphors.” Michael Bronski argued thirty years ago that “because of social and legal injunctions against homosexuality, many artists and writers could not be public about their sexuality and their work was infused with a plethora of signs and codes that allowed the like-minded to identify with one another.” And Jeffery Meyers argued several years before Bronski that “the clandestine predilections of homosexual novelists are both an obstacle and a stimulus to art, and lead to a creative tension between repression and expression.” In what seems in hindsight to be an inflated claim for the late 1970s, Meyers went on to aver that “the emancipation of the homosexual led to the decline of his art” (by “emancipation” Meyers means “when the laws of obscenity were changed and homosexuality became legal”). Certainly there is a kernel of truth to Meyer’s overstatement: homosexuality’s status as “open secret,” which could only be spoken of in code, was not necessarily always a liability for the production of homosexual literature. As William A. Cohen has written, “the conventions of sexual unspeakability serve writers as a productive constraint,” affording homosexual writers “abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse—richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent.” But, while the encoded, metaphoric, and often ambiguous nature of much emancipatory-era homosexual literature has long been noted, it is only recently that scholars have begun to offer a satisfactory explanation for how this coding worked. Max Kramer’s study helps fill this gap for poetry: his study contextualizes homosexual poetics within the much broader transformations in the use of language that characterized fin-de-siècle literary modernisms.

Homosexual writers in this period sought ways to represent their experience while circumventing social and religious taboos, and at times, legal proscriptions and censors too. All homosexual writers had to straddle the lines of middle-class respectability (even if they tried to subvert it) and all had to think about meeting normative expectations regarding art, beauty, and the proper representation of masculinity and desire. Homosexual writers had to contend with the assumption of homosexuality’s aesthetic stigma, including its alleged ugliness and association with degeneration, pathology, foreignness, as well assumptions about its incompatibility with nationalism. Any writer who raised the issue needed to contend with the reigning assertions of homosexuality as perverted, criminal, abnormal, ugly, unnatural, and sinful; and they needed to do so, not only

350 Kramer, 1.


353 The homosexual’s dependence on metaphor has long been recognized. In his classic study, Robert K. Martin posed the question as follows: “What would homosexual poetry be like without oppression?” See Robert K. Martin, The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), xviii. See also his expanded second edition, (University of Iowa Press, 1998). Two other important studies that employ the concept of homosexual coding are Dowling, Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford, 92 and Dellamora, Masculine Desire, esp. 58.


355 Kramer, 1.
because of the internal needs of self-definition, but because the topic itself was thought unfit for high-cultural discourse (in other words, because it was considered smut). What's more, they had to reconcile their own self-definitions with the explosion of mostly hostile public-sphere discourses on homosexuality created within the major institutions of the public sphere (medical, legislative, juridical, journalistic). All homosexual literature was in this sense ideological: just by way of bringing up the subject itself, a writer was pushing the boundaries of middle-class respectability and civility.

Homosexual poets looking for ways to represent their experiences safely found a hospitable habitat within modernist literary movements like Decadence and Symbolism. Langer was heavily influenced by Decadence and Symbolism in Czech and other languages, and to a lesser extent, by German-Jewish Expressionism. Writers associated with these literary movements challenged traditional assumptions about art and beauty and reacted against the positivist core of nineteenth-century Realism and Naturalism. Though they owed much to their forebears (as all literary movements do) both Decadence and Symbolism emphasized “the artifice and play of language itself” and sought to subvert attempts at mimetic representation of the modern world, which they viewed as decayed. Both movements rejected the immemorial Western premise that art is a “representation of things seen” (to use Alberti’s classic medieval formulation), and both rejected the notion that language was a direct signifier of the world outside it. Like most modernists, these artists dismissed what they perceived as middle-class assumptions about the common moral basis of beauty, and many rejected the liberal belief in Western civilization’s progress as well.

Both movements were closely related (and in France and Bohemia, for example, the two movements were almost synonymous), but they differed in the subjects they took up. Decadence celebrated the dark, ugly, immoral and destructive elements through elaborate images of decay, the living dead, and depictions of seedy urban subjects, androgynous figures, and moral degeneration. Symbolist poets turned away from the world toward the supernatural, which they asserted could be accessed through living metaphors, images, and, of course, symbols. Both movements were also interested in subjectivity, one’s “personalized view of the world” and inner feelings, mental world, spirit, and erotic desires. Symbolism made metaphor the tool through which the mysterious, the invisible, and the unknowable could be accessed; it used symbols and images to penetrate the imagination, spirituality, mysticism, and sexuality—those areas of experience that language was limited in


357 Arthur Symons described their anti-realism as follows: “…this endeavor after a perfect truth to one’s impression, to one’s intuition—perhaps an impossible endeavor—has brought with it, in its revolt from ready-made impressions and conclusions, a revolt from the ready-made of language, from the bondage of traditional form, of a form become rigid.” Ibid, 859.

358 Weir, Decadence and the Making of Modernism, 15.

encapsulating. As Arthur Symons put it, the Symbolists “would flash upon you the ‘soul’ of that which can be apprehended only by the soul – the finer sense of things unseen, the deeper meaning of things evident.”

Along with their rejection of traditional assumptions regarding the beautiful and the relationship between art and life, modernist writers were part of a larger transformation at the end of the nineteenth century in the quality of metaphor in Western literature. As Kramer describes, the majority of fin-de-siecle readers remained resistant to the new modernist uses of metaphor. For most readers at the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, metaphor was still seen as an inessential linguistic flourish, a form of ornamentation that was not taken too seriously. A writer’s employment of metaphor was not understood by the “majority reader” as creating something new. This majority reader considered metaphor “an unwarranted, decorative literary citation expressing something inessential to the true-to-life understanding of the poem.” In other words, metaphors were understood as elaborate ways of saying things that already existed in language and that could be said in simpler terms (but were not for the sake of aesthetic embellishment). The ways that a poet elaborately put things could be brushed off to poetic license or just ignored as unintelligible.

Kramer shows that writers associated with proto-modernist movements like Decadence and Symbolism infused metaphor with a significance that it did not previously have (although Romanticism laid the groundwork for this change). Metaphors were not employed to simply embellish statements that could have otherwise been said less poetically; nor were they merely a creative device with which a writer could draw an affinity between two known things that otherwise would be different. Writers associated with these movements used metaphors in innovative ways: to communicate original ideas; to speak about experiences that were not simply “out there in the world,” or which were already being described in other ways. Instead, writers marshaled metaphors to tell of (as well as to evoke and to enact) new experiences that either (1) could not be fully captured in language (like spiritual excitation or sexual desire) or (2) had not yet been described in language correctly or (3) that only a minority of readers would be familiar with. They were using


362 Kramer’s argument regarding the transformation in metaphor also relies on a sophisticated and heavy use of structuralist/poststructuralist vocabulary, as well as Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the “living metaphor,” which I have preferred to avoid in the present study for the sake of brevity and clarity, but at the expense of Kramer’s theoretical sophistication. See especially Kramer, 46-98. To summarize in Ricoeurian and Derridian terminology: Kramer understands the historical transformation in the understanding and use of metaphor at the fin de siecle as a playing out of Ricoeur’s thesis. Writers begin to use metaphor as a “textual event” that is
metaphor, not to embellish the known world, but to give access to an "unknown world with the vocabulary of a known one."

As a result of the new use of metaphor, an opportunity opened for writers to carve out a space in literature to represent the marginal, aesthetically non-normative, and subaltern experience in a piecemeal and highly ambiguous fashion. Homosexual writers in particular found this transitional moment in literary history well-suited for their needs. They were at the forefront of modernisms of all kinds, especially Decadence, Symbolism, and other neo-Romantic modernist styles. One cannot think of modernism without Pater and Wilde; Hofmannsthal, Mann, and George; Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Gide; Woolf and Stein, to name but a few. To be sure, homosexual writers possessed an expansive imaginative range: their writings took up subjects well beyond the purview of the homosexual experience. But these writers also took advantage of the new literary emphases on obscurity and elitism, the cryptic use of metaphor, as well as the self-referential modernist obsession with language, to carve out an aesthetic space for the homosexual’s voice in literature.

For homosexual poets, metaphor played an especially important role: it allowed writers to distance themselves from deviant associations and hide their representations of deviant sexuality, while at the very same time speaking their experience to the initiated. Kramer points out that the ways that modernists used language was seen as deviant by most readers since it was “a form of rupture” with the normative use of language as an unproblematic mirror of the world. In this respect, modernist metaphor “shared a common conceptual foundation for readers” with deviant sexuality: homosexual writers who wanted to come to terms (or enact or represent) their desires were naturally drawn to modes of representation that were equally deviant in their relationship to the traditional use of language. For a minority of readers, however, these metaphors communicated a common code that they recognized as representing their own experience. Through indirect, obscure, and ambiguous representations, images, and codes, homosexual poets were able to make themselves known to each other and to carve out a place within history and culture at a moment of regulation and selective silencing.

Kramer goes on to demonstrate, through a comparative study of three homosexual poets, Arthur Rimbaud, Stefan George, and Frederico García Lorca, how these poets enlisted a common set of literary devices to take advantage of this transitional moment. Mordechai Langer also used these shared poetic devices. Distinctly, however, Langer used a specifically Jewish set of images and vocabulary to create the same effect. Given that any individual poem uses multiple devices at once, it will be helpful to quickly outline these strategies before turning to the poetry itself:

not a “replaceable substitute for what could be said literally…in a normal, conventional way” but rather as a “living metaphor.” This means that these writers: “restructure the world within the movement of a dynamic textual structure anchored in the parole or the spoken, idiosyncratic discursive language, and transgresses the limits of the official langue defined as a closed normative system.” Kramer, 530. Ricouer’s “living metaphor” can be found in Paul Ricoeur, The Role of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language Trans. Robert Czerny, et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) and ibid, La métaphore vive. (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

Kramer, 150.
Metaphors of Secrecy, Silence, and Dreams: Homosexual poets consistently referred to homosexuality as “the secret.” They also represented it as ineffable, unspeakable, and using metaphors related to silence. “The love that dare not speak its name,” of course, is the most famous example of the widespread poetic representation of same-sex love as unspeakable and as secrecy. Keilson-Lauritz describes this pithily as: “das Reden vom ‘Geheimnis,’ vom ‘Unsagbaren,’ ‘Namenlosen,’ und ‘Unaussprechlichen.’” The linkage between sexual knowledge and secrecy was also reinforced from the turn of the twentieth century by the spread of psychoanalysis, which too saw all secrets as essentially sexual secrets. Homosexual poets who drew on the metaphors of secrecy and silence to represent same-sex love also benefited from a well-established pre-modern tradition within Western mysticisms in which the “secret” was linked to sexual knowledge. As Elliot Wolfson has shown, in the Jewish mystical tradition, “the secret” is at times linked to the specifically homoerotic posture between mystic and God. Another closely-related trope or “distancing discourse” was the dream. The poet’s encounter with his male beloved is repeatedly described by the poet who is dreaming, just waking up, or falling asleep. The dream, like silence and secrets, is a distancing effect that shielded the poet by creating space between him and what was depicted. Langer was also well aware of the psychoanalytic significance of the dream as wish, as well as the association of dreams with prophecy. Both of these associations add multiple layers of ambiguity to his descriptions.

Codes, Symbols, and Language Play: Representations of the male anatomy, male love, and same-sex sex are highly encoded and metaphoric. In Langer’s poetry, same-sex desire is conveyed through representations of mystical and ecstatic rapture, metaphors of violent conflict, illness and decay; or through the elegiac mode of mourning and loss. Botanical metaphors and animals are used as symbols of the male anatomy or in place of the sexual encounter between the poet and his beloved. Symbols, double entendres, and language play were also used to convey the subject.

The Homosocial Setting: Same-sex desire is often represented from within homosocial settings like martial scenes, love triangles (with women), or as celebrations of the “Eros of friendship.” But by embedding homosexual content within homosocial settings, the poet was doing more than protecting himself; he was also attempting to elevate homosexuality beyond crude carnality. Many writers, like George and Langer, both of who affiliated with elements of the German masculinist tradition, did not find the boundaries between the homosocial and the homosexual particularly important. Langer, as we have seen, followed Hans Blüher in asserting both a continuum

---


366 See further discussion in chapter two. Wolfson, Through a Speculum that Shines; and idem, Language, Eros, Being. Jeffrey J. Kripal has demonstrated that the homoerotic posture between mystic and God is true of most Western mysticisms. See Kripal, Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001).
between the homosocial and the homosexual and in asserting that there was a distinct minority of men that were oriented exclusively towards men. What’s more, they both believed that homosocial settings like male-bonding associations and the German youth movement were essential to the self-discovery and aesthetic living of homosexuals (see chapters one and three). Love triangles with women do not appear in Langer’s poetry; in fact, women hardly appear at all.

(4) **Genre Imitation:** Modern homosexual poets imitated pre-modern genres in which homoerotic expression was common. In doing so, the poet could protect himself by claiming to have merely imitated a widely-accepted and normative literary form. In addition, genre imitation fit with the broader historical turn of emancipatory-era homosexuals like Langer, who were “imagining” an essentialist homosexual history (see chapter two). Several genres were of particular importance for Langer: (1) the medieval Hispano-Hebrew *ghazal* and the pederastic tradition more broadly; (2) medieval Hebrew mystical poetry; and (3) the funeral elegy.

(5) **“Queer Quotes,” Allusions to Homosexual Culture, and Reading as a Homosexual Practice:** Homosexual poets connected to other like-minded readers through allusion to a common set of references, aspects of emancipatory-era homosexual life (like scandals, blackmail, slums, etc.), homosexual slang, and to familiar homosexual meetings places like parks, saunas, and slums (Langer refers to parks and slums, but not bath-houses or saunas). In addition, homosexual poets referenced other “homosexual” authors (past and present) and those particular periods and cultures (like ancient Greece or Rome) in which male love was common. As has been discussed in earlier chapters, emancipatory-era homosexuals had established a “gay canon,” a common set of references and readings that they appropriated as part of their cultural lineage. Writers referred to this canon to communicate their coded subject to like-minded readers. Even the act of reading itself is depicted as a social practice through which sexuality is discovered and mediated. Reading is also represented as a way of communicating erotic desire to the same-sex beloved. Other homosexual practices that are referred to include homosexual “cruising,” gazing, and (Uranian-style) peeping. Notably absent from Langer’s poetry is any direct reference to the Hellenic tradition, although he does imitate the pederastic model.

(6) **Indirection, Ambiguity, Obfuscation:** In general, homosexual poets took great pains to create ambiguity at every level of the poem: in regards to the gender of the speaker (though Hebrew grammar works against such ambiguity); in relation to the nature of the relationship between the poet and his beloved (friend or lover? Man or God?); and in terms of what is taking place in the poem. The poet embeds homoerotic content in spiritual and religious language as well as the

---


language of friendship, mourning, conflict, and violence. Suggesting allegory is a particularly useful tool for the homosexual poet in deflecting accountability.

(7) Universalizing Frames and Social Roles: Poets represented the homosexual, his desires, and his experience using representations of a number of recognizable social types like: the mystic, the artist, the social outcast, the dandy, and the androgyne. While it is certainly true that these social roles were mocked by some homosexual writers; for many, depicting the homosexual as the possessor of inborn aesthetic gifts, or as having a higher spiritual consciousness was a way of making meaning of themselves as subjects. It allowed them to locate their place in the social world and within religious and national cultures. Emancipatory-era theorists (from sexologists to jurists to literary figures) claimed that the homosexual possessed a distinct sensibility and homosexual subjectivity was constructed around more than same-sex desire; it was also built upon a framework of feelings, preferences, and behaviors such as aesthetic sensibility, a double soul, a special gender affect, that existed in tandem with same-sex sexual desire. Four sets of social types are especially prevalent and important for Langer:

a) The Mystic and the Prophet
Framing the homosexual as a mystic proved quite useful to many homosexual writers for several reasons. Most Western mystical traditions contain sexually transgressive elements (even if only in theosophic symbolism or in metaphors of ecstatic communion with God). As a result, homosexual writers marshaled mysticism to communicate deviant messages, which could be written off by some resistant readers as “just mystical metaphor.” Mysticism and sexuality, of course, are sisters of a kind: both discourses put ineffable and elusive experiences into words, and mystic experience has often been represented in strongly erotic terms. But more importantly, many homosexuals conceived of themselves as possessors of special spiritual powers, a double soul or a sex-variant soul, and a heightened spiritual consciousness. Langer used mysticism in a number of ways. At times he represented same-sex love as ushering in personal and collective salvation (including devekut or Unio Mystica); while at other times, he represented same-sex love as a spiritual and physical conflict driving him toward self-annihilation. Still, in other representations, Langer frames the homosexual as a mystic in order to present him as a normative Jewish hero: either as the agent of tikkun or as a “suffering servant” whose suffering is of world-redeeming importance. Mystical representations of same-sex love also often contain a prophetic dimension: Langer, like other homosexual poets, announced a new redemptive category of male love that will reign at the end of days or that exists in another world.

---

369 Michael Bronski identifies five characteristics of homosexual writing, which produced/enacted the modern “gay male sensibility:” the homosexual “cult of the imagination” (camp); “the cult of beauty;” “the cult of male friendship;” “the cult of dispossession;” and “the cult of the dandy.” I have absorbed and synthesized Bronski’s ideas into my own categorization scheme. See Michael Bronski, Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility (Boston: South End Press, 1984). Kramer and Lishaugen do not use my framing categories.

370 For examples in homosexual literature: H.G Cocks, Nameless Offences, 157-200; and Frederick S. Roden, Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture.
b) The Loner in Exile and the Childless Social Outcast

The homosexual was also typecasted in the role of the sick, degenerate, and hysterical social pariah. His physical and psychological condition in “this world” (as opposed to the world above, beyond, or at the end of days) was represented as tragic, miserable, unnatural, and unbearably lonesome. The poet is divorced from the rest of society; he repeatedly exiles himself from the city and “normal” life. He even compares himself to heterosexual couples and mourns his sterility and infertility. His condition is repeatedly depicted as inalterable. Sometimes this was simply a trope: by “embedding” the subject in “actual or alleged condemnation of homosexuality,” as Keilson-Lauritz writes, the subject could be broached in the first place. Decadent tropes of moral decay allowed the poet to convey the subject while distancing himself from moral and legal censure. Undoubtedly, for many homosexual poets, this also allowed them to enact conflicted feelings about desires they were coming to terms with and had difficulty verbalizing (and for many, never resolved).

c) The Philosopher, the Artist-Aesthete, the Pederast

The homosexual poet often framed his desires as an occasion for philosophical reflection or artistic creation. Following Plato and Winckelmann, many portrayed homoerotic desire as the foundation of art and culture. This found its expression in poetry in the imitation of the pederastic tradition, where the poet positions himself as a philosopher-artist whose encounter with his beloved boy inspires him to write or reflect. Langer, as we shall see, depicted poetry as a substitute for his inability to reproduce. I also contend that it was his refuge from the pain of desire, loneliness, abandonment, and the fleeting pleasures of same-sex love.

d) The Androgyne, the Hermaphrodite, the Dandy

Though the androgyne has a long literary history, at least since Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Plato’s *Symposium*, it became extremely popular in late-nineteenth-century literature. At the same time that thinkers such as Johann Jakob Bachofen and Wilhelm Fliess constructed Occultist theories of gender and sexuality, which heavily privileged hermaphroditism as a superior form of masculinity, Decadent writers took up the androgyne as a way of challenging the rigid bourgeois division between the sexes. For many homosexual writers, the androgyne was used as a cover to represent the homosexual, who was widely conceived of as a gender invert (though not exclusively so). The effeminate male and the dandy would also have been recognizable to some readers as a mask for the homosexual in literature. God is also often portrayed as the ideal hermaphrodite (though he is usually a male-privileged hermaphrodite). Langer, unlike other homosexual poets, however, did not offer his readers an androgynous character or figure like Stefan George’s *Algabal* or Rimbaud’s Pan in *Antique*. Langer did, however, play with gender roles (though sparingly). At times, he allowed for the possibility that the poet’s voice he had represented was female (speaking to a male beloved), but in general Langer did not employ gender inversion. Instead, he enacted a highly effusive and at times overwrought voice that staged a distinctly “effeminate” male homosexual voice.

(8) Style, Camp, and the Voice of the Male Homosexual

---


Naturally, one would expect to find a heavier poetic representation of the homosexual's style and voice in an age when explicit depiction of same-sex love and sex was difficult. Enactments of the male homosexual sensibility were not widely recognizable to the majority yet as part of the homosexual experience, but would be recognizable for those in the know. Specific ways of representing the voice of the poet could function as a way of conveying messages to a minority of readers who could identify with the poet's voice (and would be read differently by most readers). Highly effusive and theatrical styles evoked a distinctly homosexual manner of speaking and acting (including camp), sometimes associated with the dandy. At times, the highly dramatic staging of shame or spiritual excitation provided a pretext for communicating same-sex desire.

Having articulated the various literary modes and strategies employed by writers to represent homosexual subjectivities, we are now ready to move to Langer and study in detail how he adapted these devices to create his Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew. The chapter is subdivided into seven subsections, each focusing on a particular set of strategies for speaking to two readers at once, as well as on a different aspect of the homosexual-Jewish experience. In each section, we begin by introducing the literary strategy, which is situated in its broader homosexual and Hebrew historical-literary context. Given that several of Langer's strategies involve historical appropriation (for example, the medieval Hispano-Hebrew *ghazal*), we will have occasion to discuss, as we have in chapter two, pre-modern historical sites of Jewish homoerotic literary expression. After each strategy is historicized and introduced, I turn to closely read a Langer poem (and at times more than one). These close readings are crucial for drawing out the historical voice of the Jewish male homosexual and go well beyond demonstrating the strategy at hand.

Almost all of Langer's surviving poetry was published by him in two volumes. The first, “*Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot*” [Lитurgical and Love Poems] appeared in Prague in 1929; while the second volume “*Me’at Tzori*” [A Bit of Balm] was published posthumously in 1943 will the help of Max Brod in Tel Aviv, though Langer reviewed the final proofs before his death. Together these two publications, contain thirty-four original poems. Langer also published three satirical poems separately from these volumes. We do not know if Langer wrote other poetry. One can assume that he did, but these are presumably lost. I have translated all of Langer’s two published volumes of poetry for the first time and I have included them as an addendum to this chapter.

---

373 Like any reasonable argument, the present thesis is not based on any one individual piece of data, but on a convergence of mutually-reinforcing evidence. The present chapter focuses on evidence within Langer’s poetry itself, but should be evaluated in tandem with Langer’s other writings and biography (i.e. the rest of the dissertation). This is a crucial point: it is essential to keep an eye on the convergence of the evidence in his poetry as this chapter moves forward, since in isolation some interpretations will seem more subjective than others. My argument, however, does not depend on any one specific detail. The homosexual poet’s strategy was to create ambiguity and to speak to two readers at once, so that individual pieces of evidence—a metaphor here or a symbol there—can be interpreted allegorically or as dealing with some other subject. That was the point. But although Langer left the resistant reader room to ignore his deviant subject, he simultaneously constructed a pattern using all of the above-listed strategies and frames to communicate the homosexual experience to Hebrew readers capable or willing to pick up on that pattern.

374 Five poems from the first volume were reprinted in the second volume of 1943.

375 See Dror, 65-67.
Not all of Langer’s poetry takes up the homosexual experience, though about two-thirds does. The non-Hebrew reader should note that the object of the poet’s erotic desires is always male, since my English translations cannot convey the beloved’s gender without adding pronouns to the text. In some poems, the homoeroticism of the verse is fairly clear, while in others it is entirely coded. For example, Langer’s poem “On the Poetry of Li Tai Pei” does not at first glance appear to have anything to do with male love, unless one knows that the great Han-dynasty poet, who wrote in the “pedoerastic” tradition, was a favorite author among many homosexual reading clubs in Germany and Central Europe during the interwar.

Let us begin with the title of Langer’s first volume, since it points us in the direction of the slippery ambiguities and canny codes that characterize his poetry as a whole. The book is titled \textit{Piyutim ve’shirei yedidot} [Liturgical and Love Poetry]. The phrase \textit{shirei yedidot} [love songs or love poems] draws on Psalms 45:1 and 84:2. In Psalms 45:1, the phrase refers specifically to an erotic love song [\textit{shir yedidat}] composed as an epithalamium, a song or poem written in honor of a bride or bridegroom. In this case it is for the king’s wedding described in Psalm 45 (“For the lead player, on \textit{shoshanim}, for the Korahites, a \textit{maskil}, a song of love”). As Robert Alter comments on this passage, the term \textit{yedidot} is related to both \textit{dod} (lover) and \textit{dodim} (love-making) and is distinctly erotic. In its second Biblical usage in Psalm 84:2, the Psalmist used \textit{yedidot} to describe the dwellings of the Lord, which Alter translates as “How lovely Your dwellings O LORD of armies!” While the term retains its

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
Robert Alter: For the lead player, on \textit{shoshanim}, for the Korahites, a \textit{maskil,} a song of love. & \textit{לומְנֹת עִלַּ-שֹׁשַׁנִּים לִבְנֵי-קֹרַח מַשְׂכִּיל שִׁיר יְדִידֹת} \\
\hline
Robert Alter: How lovely your dwellings, O Lord of armies! & \textit{מַה-יְדִידֹת מִשְׁכְּנוֹתֶי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

erotic charge even in this second liturgical usage, a modern poet drawing on the term could have it both ways: he could maintain the erotic connotation of shirei yedidot while also maintaining its liturgical connotation. Indeed, by combining shirei yedidot with piyyutim, a term which generally refers exclusively to liturgical Hebrew poetry, Langer cooled down shirei yedidot by several degrees. By juxtaposing the two, he seemed to promise that the “love poetry” to follow were allegorical prayers as well. Langer even employed the term piyyut somewhat disingenuously since none of his first-volume of poems are actual piyyutim, unless one defines piyyut loosely to mean “poetry” or “religious poetry.” It seems to me that this was a deliberate attempt at playful obfuscation.

The term yedidot is ambiguous in yet a second, more subtle respect. When yedidot is read without vowels, it can easily be confused with yedidut [friendship]. To an untrained eye or to the willfully blind, Langer may have appeared to have referred to friendship (or perhaps to have made a mistake). To be sure, the lines between yedidot and yedidut are slipper in themselves; and the terms are clearly etymologically related. In fact, Langer used yedidut [friendship] to describe his relationship with his erotic beloved in his poem “Angels Will Sweeten with Song” (to be discussed below). His choice of shirei yedidot for his first title, in other words, was strategic. With it, Langer playfully straddled the lines between same-sex friendship and same-sex erotic love, and between God and the male erotic love object. In so doing, Langer saw himself as following in the path of the sixteenth-century poet Yisrael Najara, who was notorious for pushing the boundaries between erotic love poetry and liturgical poetry. We shall see this kind of suggestive playfulness again and again: it both points to the broader argument at hand—that Langer employed literary strategies to obscure and disclose the same-sex erotic content of his poetry—and reflects Langer’s ideological affiliation with German masculinism, which, as we recall, maintained same-sex love and sex on a continuum with same-sex friendship.

Let us now finally turn directly to Langer’s poetry.

III. Secrets, Dreams, and Silence: Representing Homosexuality as Ineffable

Obscuring meaning is well known to scholars as modernism’s favorite pastime. Modernists, as Hugo Friedrich has written, “compel language to take on the paradoxical task of simultaneously expressing and concealing meaning.” For Symbolists like Stéphane Mallarmé, art that was intelligible to the masses was derided as “The Universal Theory of Ugliness” or “The Aesthetics of the Bourgeois” (the latter was his highest form of insult).

Symbolists, as well as other modernists influenced in the wake of Symbolism, followed Mallarmé in doing everything in their power to “shut out the intrusions of unqualified readers.” Art, as Norton summarizes Mallarme’s position, was “a mystery that is accessible to rare individuals” and “should withdraw into an esoteric domain so as not to be contaminated or defiled by contact with the unwashed multitudes.” As Mallarmé famously quipped, “The man may be a democrat… [but] the artist splits himself in two and must remain an aristocrat.”

Modernist poets like Stefan George and Arthur Rimbaud, following Mallarmé, are well known for portraying their poetry as mysterious and replete with secrets, which they expected only an elite readership would decipher. In addition, modernists make recurring and explicit reference to “the secret” or to secrets in their poetry. References to secrecy and secrets also became indelibly linked to secrets about sexuality and especially to homosexuality—the “secret of secrets.”

Although homosexuality appeared more openly and with increased frequency during the interwar period, and at times was referred to explicitly, it did not quickly shed its association with secrets and silences. Kramer, for example, has recently demonstrated how Arthur Rimbaud, Stefan

381 The following are excellent inroads into the vast literature on modernism and have been helpful to me: Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane eds., Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930 (London: Penguin Books, 1991); Peter Gay, Modernism: The Lure of Heresy (New York: Norton, 2008); and Peter Childs, Modernism 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

382 Hugo Friedrich, The Structure of Modern Poetry: From the Mid-nineteenth to the Mid-twentieth Century (Northwestern University Press, 1974), 140.


384 Ibid, 51.

385 Ibid.


387 Of course, in some sense, much of literary criticism is based on the premise that all literature (modernist or otherwise) hides a potential secret and conceals meaning by withholding information from its readers. But for modernists, who promoted anti-realist projects, obscurity became art’s raison d’etre.

388 The term is Kramer’s.
George, and Federico García Lorca use “the secret” as a code to refer to same-sex love and erotic desire in their poetry. In the Anglophone orbit, the same was true for poets like Hart Crane, Gertrude Stein, and W.H. Auden, the latter of whom has been described as “leaving his secrets hidden in plain sight.”

Like other modernist homosexual poets, Mordechai Langer was well aware of the sexual and homosexual significance of “the secret” and he used it in many of his poems. In “As it Expires Inside” [Ki-gvoa pnima], the poet paid homage to Oscar Wilde, describing his “secret love [ahavah khashait],” that he “did not dare to love to completion.” Employing a kabbalistic term in “To My Comrade” [El re-ee] the poet represented his erotic desire for his male “comrade” by recognizing the divine secret, “the secret of Eyn Sof” in the eyes of his male beloved. In “A Thread of Grace” [Khut shel khesed] the poet described how “in secret my soul cries over its destiny” to live without (homosexual) erotic fulfillment.

In his epigraph to Piyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot [Liturgical and Love Poems], Langer presented the entire collection, which is made up almost entirely of homoerotic poems, as a mystery:

כאמור ת throwError ספרך טפח וספת, תأمن, ואל יעדך: הַיּוֹת מִרְצָא בְּלָשׁוֹן הָשָׁבֵע הַלּוֹתוֹת. אוֹתָיו? – כל מִרְצָא אֲמַר מֵישֵׁךְ שָׁמוֹת לְךָ אֲלֵךָ.
לְפָנֵי çoּךָ נָשְׁמצָה לְפָנֵי אוֹתָיו הָעֶלָּמִים שִׁדְרַכְם זָהָב בְּלָיָל זוֹ, עַבְרָה יִקְוֶה נָשְׁמוֹת.

After you read my work seven times, you’ll say, perhaps fairly: ‘This is a bad book; though ONE [emphasis his] incident brought pleasure to me.” Which? Each one of you will say something different…each in accordance with the roots of his soul and in accordance with the radiant worlds toward which his soul flew, specifically on this night.

In this epigraph, Langer hinted that he did not anticipate that all of his readers would understand the meaning of his poetry. What “pleasure” the reader might find in his lyric depended on the “root of his soul” (but, of course, only bid! The reader is assumed to be male).

That Langer linked “the secret” with the language of Jewish mysticism was no accident. In Die Erotik der Kabbala Langer explicitly linked the esoteric knowledge of the Jewish mystical tradition with sexual, and specifically homoerotic, knowledge. As a result, the metaphor of the secret proved a doubly useful code: on the one hand, it was linked to the homosexual experience by contemporary modernist poets; on the other hand, it was linked to the erotic worldview of the Jewish mystical tradition. Indeed, other homosexual modernists like Stefan George were also aware of the mystical significance of “the secret,” which is widespread in Western mystical traditions.


390 Dror, 16.

391 Jeffrey J. Kripal, Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom.
In a clever poem “To the Poet” [La-Meshorer] published separately from his two volumes in 1941 (two years before his death), Langer described writing poetry as a form of keeping and disclosing secrets about deviant sexuality. In the poem, Langer offered advice to the beginner on how to keep his (!) poems interesting: “write in extreme detail about sexual inclinations and about misgivings that are deep within your soul,” Langer prescribed, and do not worry, it’s “no big deal if you lie a little!”

Along with his use of “the secret” and his representation of homosexuality as unspeakable, Langer also uses the distancing discourses of sleep and dreams from which desire is articulated. He often depicts the poet as being disturbed from sleep, falling asleep, or dreaming. They are “distancing discourses” in that they create space between Langer and the content of the poem. Langer, as we know, was well-versed in psychoanalysis (and by the early 40’s was also certainly familiar with Surrealism, which penetrated the Czech avant-garde); he seems to have benefited from the Freudian symbolism of dreams as wishes. The point, however, is the same: the poet’s desires cannot be spoken of directly; they can only be mediated through silences, dreams, and sleep.

Langer’s poem “Charming Lad” is a wonderful example of how the poet represents his same-sex desires as ineffable, using the metaphor of secrets and the “distancing discourses” of silence, the dream, and several other of the devices outlined above. Let’s read it closely below:

**Charming Lad**

On a city park bench the calm of secrets pervaded.
I sat there myself, you sat there yourself, charming lad.

The heavens broke out in a wondrous divine song,
the wind, pure and soft, pales like your face, charming lad.

But then--oh no! Two birds, a couple,
by chance arrived from somewhere,
before our eyes, entwined, they make love gracefully,
charming lad.

In the night of your eyelids my light expired,

--- בלילה עפונות אורות הזעם.

--- Only: "אלה הטבות הפר×</text>
in the dusk of your cheeks my sun set upon me, charming lad.
On a city park bench gloom reigned.
I continue to sit, I dream—you’ve already left, charming lad.

Oh as this day, before you even expect it, must don its twilight cloak, so man’s happiness is tied up in garlands of the bitter-end, charming lad!

Here is a poem that is full of secrets. The poet addresses his song to his charming lad. He begins with a description of the “calm of secrets” that settled between them on the city park bench. By the end of the poem, the reader discovers that his use of the plural in “secrets” was no accident: the poet has been keeping several secrets from both the beloved and the reader. The true nature of these secrets is only partially revealed, and what is more, the reader discovers that the poem itself, in all its formal elements, has been an accessory to the keeping and revealing of those secrets.

The poet’s first secret, which he reveals toward the poem’s finale, is that he has been dreaming, though just when he began dreaming is left ambiguous. On the one hand, the poet hints he may have been dreaming the entire time (the operative clue being “I continue to sit, I dream”). On the other hand, the poet suggests a transition into sleep in the preceding couplet: “In the night of your eyelids my light expired, in the dusk of your cheeks my sun set upon me.” The reader is left wondering: when did the poet begin dreaming? Was the encounter merely a fantasy? At the very least, the poet has presented the possibility that he has been addressing an imagined beloved within a dream. The effect here is to create two layers of ambiguity (to suggest a dream and then to undermine that suggestion), which doubles the distance between Langer and the content of the poem.

A second closely-related secret is that the beloved is not actually present to hear the poet’s address to him. The poet reveals that he has been addressing his charming boy who has “already left.” Furthermore, the poet has been using the poem’s formal structure to dupe his reader: not only does he address his “charming lad” directly at the end of every verse couplet, but each couplet rhymes so that “charming lad” stands out rhythmically. This construction strengthens the illusion that the charming boy is present. For the poet, creating the illusion that the beloved is there is crucial because it distracts from the silence that characterized the encounter itself. The poet only speaks to the beloved after he is already gone. He was incapable of speaking during their meeting or if he was, is now incapable of representing what was spoken as language. The silence between them during their rendezvous is heightened through a stark contrast: the heavens that broke out in song. In the Hebrew, the verse “The heavens broke out in a wondrous divine song,” reads literally as “a wondrous divine song the heavens spoke.” The Hebrew diberu [spoke] (which keeps the rhyme scheme “ru”) calls out to the reader, drawing her attention to what has not been taking place “on the city park bench:” namely, speech. The encounter between the poet and the charming lad, then, is described through multiple distancing devices—the poet speaks after the fact, (perhaps) while dreaming, and describing what took place between them as shrouded in silence.
The encounter itself is described in the poem’s first five stanzas; it is followed by a sixth in which the poet draws a final conclusion based on the previous five. The encounter in the first five stanzas can be divided neatly in two: in its first half, the poet describes their initial meeting before the arrival of the birds (stanzas 1 and 2). The mood is characterized by stillness, transcendent elation (“divine song”), purity (“soft and pure”), and spiritual and physical “calm” (the Hebrew ruakh is a pun denoting both wind and spirit). The meeting’s rapturous beginnings are then disturbed by the transitional appearance of the birds (stanza 3), which is then followed by the second half of the encounter. In its second half, the poet’s mood devolves sharply into “gloom” and decay (stanzas 4 and 5). This dramatic shift in mood is linked directly to his erotic appraisal of the beloved’s face, which is expressed as a conflicted, painful, and self-destructive passion (“in the night of your eyelids my light expired, in the dusk of your cheeks my sun set upon me”). The poet’s mood then worsens upon the beloved’s departure. In the final stanza, the poet reflects philosophically upon the encounter and shifts into yet a third mood; he transitions from the gloom and decay of stanzas 4 and 5 to the climactic register of imminent and bitter death. This third mood is evoked when the poet draws a final philosophical conclusion that “man’s happiness” is not only fleeting, but “tied up in garlands of the bitter-end.”

What is it about the arrival of the birds, in the transitional stanza three, which is so seemingly unnerving and upending for the poet? In Hebrew, the birds are ahavim, which when used as a verb can mean “making love” or “flirting.”\(^\text{395}\) I have chosen “making love” for my translation, but it seems to me that the ambiguity of the Hebrew is telling in itself. By drawing on ahavim, the poet can be suggestive and careful at the same time; it is another example of his playful revealing and concealing. But regardless of just how much sex the birds were having, there is no doubt that something sexual is being signified with the arrival of the birds.

What is it about the sexuality of those birds that is so disturbing for the poet? Do the birds function as a metaphor for a “real” sexual encounter that has taken place between the poet and his charming boy, but that cannot be spoken of explicitly? Or have the birds merely awakened a latent sexual desire within the poet (and perhaps the beloved)? Or do the birds perhaps enact the poet’s fantasies that cannot take place between the poet and his charming lad? Is the poet sublimating his desires through the birds or is he using the birds to disclose what he has done? Or is he envious of the birds because they can make love and fly away while he is trapped in a love which cannot reveal its name?

The poet ultimately keeps these answers to himself, though he is quite adept at teasing the reader through suggestive metaphor and language play. From the poem’s very beginning, Langer

\(^{395}\) I have chosen to translate *ahavim* as “making love” because of Langer’s consistent invocation of the Song of Songs throughout his poetry. “Ahavim” does not appear in the Song of Songs, but in Proverbs 5:19, which draws on the same animal imagery and style of the Song of Songs. The verse reads “Love’s doe, a graceful gazelle, her breasts ever slake your thirst, you will always dote in her love.” Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: Norton, 2010), 215. Alter comments on “Love’s doe, a graceful gazelle” as follows: “The ‘love,’ attached to ‘doe,’ *ahavim,* suggests lovemaking rather than the emotional relationship, *ahavah.*” Though the phrase “ayelet ahavim” does not appear in the Song of Songs, its relationship to it was recognized by rabbinic tradition. For example, the great sixteenth-century kabbalast and poet Shelomo Alkabetz, who composed the classic piyyut “Lekha Dodi,” titled his justly famous commentary on the Song of Songs “Ayelet Ahavim.” The term *ahavim* is also used in Proverbs 7:18 and Hosea 8:9, where it refers explicitly to sexual intercourse.
blurs the poet’s actions, feelings, and desires with metaphors from the natural world (and vice versa). On the one hand, verbs normally reserved for nature are used for the arrival and departure of feelings and moods (e.g. the calm of secrets pervaded [sharata]; in the dusk of your cheeks my sun set [shimshi shaka’al]). On the other hand, nature is personified with verbs like “the heaven’s spoke” or “the wind paled.” In addition, nature is used to represent both the spiritual and physical mood around them. Langer, thus blurs nature with the “plot” of the encounter and blurs the physical and the spiritual—psychological. In doing so, the poet has effectively constructed an elaborate screen to obscure what really took place (while hinting provocatively). When the poet declares, for example, that “in the dusk of your cheeks my sun set upon me,” he allows for both a psychological—spiritual interpretation and a physical-sexual one. What the reader can be sure of, however, is that the poet was not especially concerned with the distinction between same-sex desire and same-sex action, since neither can be definitively ruled out.

Langer drops other suggestive clues through word play. In the poem’s final stanza the poet rhymes the words yishak and khushak which function as double entendres. Yishak in the phrase “sut niqipo yishak” [must don its twilight cloak], is used here in a fairly obscure way to mean “wears” or “dons” (in the sense of nashak as “to don armor”). But yishak also means “will kiss” and “will touch.” Khushak, like yishak, plays on two meanings. In the poem’s last verse, khushak is used to mean “bound” or “tied up” (”man’s happiness is tied up in garlands of the bitter-end”). But khushak also evokes kheshek or desire. These word plays—which draw on the Jewish-mystical significance of kheshek and neshikah as well—suggest that the poet is again expressing his desires (or what took place) through metaphors of conflict, pain, and as leading him to death. In the final verse the poet declares that happiness is tied up with “garlands of the bitter-end,” but in evoking kheshek [desire] the poet might be hinting that it is his desire for the charming lad that leads to death or alternatively, that he is desiring death since his lad is now gone (perhaps to escape his desires). Langer’s juxtaposition of khushak and yishak was no accident: the terms are related in the Jewish mystical tradition and what’s more, their Jewish-mystical connotations reaffirm this link between sexual desire and death. Kheshek refers to the mystic’s state of Divine rapture, when he is totally focused on God (one of the highest levels of deveikut). During this state, the mystic’s soul can be pulled from his body; his death in such a state is known as neshikah shel elohim or “the kiss of God.” We will encounter this trope again and again throughout Langer’s poetry: the poet’s desires are articulated as a conflict that is overpowering, self-destructive and deadly. This, of course, is suggested earlier in the poem in the distinctly Decadent image of the poet’s light expiring in the night of the lad’s eyelids and his sun setting in his cheeks, declared earlier.

By not pinning down the meaning of his metaphors, the poet, in characteristic modernist form, clearly prefers that the reader focus on the language of the poem itself. In fact, one might read this entire poem as describing (and enacting) the problematic relationship between language and sexuality for the modern subject. This line of interpretation would read the arrival of the love-making birds as representing the move away from the calm of unspoken secrets. For the poet, the arrival of the birds marks the move toward signification and awareness of his (perhaps previously unconscious) desires. The birds, in other words, represent a transition from the safety of silence toward the danger of representation and speech. The initial meeting between poet and lad was euphoric and transcendent: “the heavens,” after all, broke out in a wondrous divine song. What the poet leaves

396 For nashak as a verb meaning “to don armor” see Chronicles 1 12:1-2. In the sense of “to touch” or even “to glue” see Ezekiel 3:13.
unstated, but suggested, is that the initial meeting was euphoric because in its early stage, sexuality was left buried within the “Eros of friendship;” the true desires of the poet had not yet been spoken or given symbolic form.

Once those birds show up, however, it’s all over: what was unspoken, what was buried within the poet are represented in symbolic form by the birds. The “calm of secrets” that originally pervaded the urban “garden” (recalling the bliss of Eden before sin, of course) has been corrupted by the poet’s emerging self-awareness. One of those secrets was the secret that the poet was keeping from himself, but which the birds have forced him to come to terms with. Their arrival marks the beginning of the poet’s self-discovery of his non-normative nature. But the poet depicts this self-knowledge in fatalistic terms: he cannot return to the calm of previous secrets, he cannot reverse what the birds have showed him; he is imprisoned by his self-awareness of his desires, which he represents as pain.

But the poem’s fatalistic finale is not the end of its story. All is not gloom and doom. The poet—oh no!—has been keeping yet one last secret. The reader capable of appreciating the Hebrew original might have noticed how the sound of the poem tells quite a different story from its content. First, the poem’s shifts in mood occur rapidly, even manically. The poem shifts from transcendent elation to decay to despair and to evocations of death so quickly that the effect of this poem is emotionally overwrought (one might even say melodramatic). Even the poet’s “oh no!” [ḥoy avayl], traditionally used to express distress, seems excessive and affected. Some literary critics and cultural historians point to this type of “excessive sentimentality,” as characteristic of quite a bit of homosexual letters of similar age. Some identify it as the unfortunate by-product of the “closeted” and repressed homosexuality of the pre-Stonewall gay experience, the “necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object,” to use Neil Bartlett’s language. In other words, since the poet can only fantasize about sex, his representations gush with disproportionate amounts of feeling.

In “Charming Lad,” however, the poet’s extreme and overwrought mood shifts clash dissonantly with the poem’s other formal properties—its rhythm, rhyme, syntax and meter—which together create a folksy, light, even charming, nursery-rhyme-like song. The effect is such that while the poem’s mood shifts abruptly and harshly from extreme to extreme, its sound (bounded by the formal properties that manage how the poem can be read) remains something of a jingle. Though the poem’s mood and content devolve rapidly, the sound of the poem is light and cheerful.

Let me give examples using the poem’s syntax and rhyme. We have already noted how by repeating “charming lad” at the end of each rhyming verse couplet, the poet tricks the reader into assuming the beloved is present. In the Hebrew, “charming lad” is reversed as “lad-charming,” which is made up of elem (boy or lad) and chen (charming). Chen functions as an adjective here, but the word is also a noun meaning charm or grace. When the poem is read out loud, the word “charm” is sounded at the end of each stanza like a bell, over and over, in audible contrast to the devolving.

397 On the Jewish “oy!” (interchangeable with “hoy”) in Hebrew literature, see H.N. Bialik, “Shirateinu Ha-tse’erah” [Our Young Poetry].

398 Neil Bartlett, Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde, 175.
mood and content of the poem. Both the rhyming of couplets in each stanza and the recurring high note of “chen” after each rhyme creates the aural impression of a jingle or folksy tune.

Putting it all together, the poem is marked by rapid overwrought mood shifts, dramatic turns, effusive expressions, (“oh no!”) coupled with a playful sound and refraining “charm.” The dissonance between form and content, it seems to me, sends the reader a different message than that of the poet’s bleak address alone. This is the poet’s way of winking at the reader, as if to say “don’t take this all too seriously.” In other words, the effect of this style, it seems to me, is to produce irony.

Irony is yet another tool that the homosexual poet can use to speak under conditions that severely limit direction expression. Irony tells the reader that there is a subtext to this text. It gives the reader a light jilt: telling her to read the poet’s representations—his use of the secret and the dream, the nature metaphors, and the depiction of desire as painful and decaying—for what they really are: scripts and tropes that the poet is performing or parroting because he cannot express himself directly. By creating an ironic effect, the poet can puncture the authenticity and artificiality of having to represent same-sex love as ineffable and self-destructive. As Stanley Fish, echoing Stefan Mallarme’s legacy has very recently put it: “The artist who deploys irony tests the sophistication of his audience and divides it into two parts, those in the know and those who live in a fool’s paradise. Irony casts a privileged vantage point from which you can frame and stand aloof from a world you are too savvy to take at face value. Irony is the essence of the critical attitude, of the observer’s cool gaze; every reviewer who is not just a bourgeois cheerleader…is an ironist.”

We shall return to the significance of irony for homosexual poets, later in our discussion, but for now suffice to say that literary critics and cultural historians of the modern LGBT experience have long pointed to irony (and its more flamboyant sister, camp) as the dominant mode of “gay” male cultural expression because of its capacity to undermine and resist.

The poet’s final secret, we might say, is that he is self-aware not only about his sexuality, but about the stock devices he must employ to impart his self-knowledge to the reader: representing homosexuality as unspeakable, describing love between men as fleeting or impossible, and depicting his self-knowledge as a homosexual subject as tortured and deadly. This is a poem, in other words, about the difficulties of representing homosexual love in language. In some sense, it might be seen as a poem about gay love poems.

One does not have to agree with every one of my readings to recognize the larger point. The experience of the modern homosexual is represented through metaphors and devices, which obscure its subject, create distance between the author and the poet’s voice, and preserve the illusion that the poet is really talking about something else.


400 For an inroad to camp and irony in modern gay literature, see Fabio Cleto, Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: a Reader (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
IV. **Langer’s Ghazal: Homosocial Settings, Genre Imitation, and Golden-Age Hispano Hebrew Homoerotic Allegory**

“Angels Sweeten with Song,” is a particularly clear example of Mordechai Langer’s use of three devices in the service of obfuscation and disclosure: homosocial settings, genre imitation, and allegory. Let me emphasize that my use of “obfuscation and disclosure” is not rhetorical hot air: these strategies did more than conceal and deflect. They also simultaneously conveyed meaning to the minority like-minded reader. This reader either understood the poet’s minority experience or was open to such interpretation and picked up on his hidden subject. For example: in the poem at hand, Langer drew upon a set of Biblical allusions that suggest his poem is an allegory. Yet at the very same time, these same allusions also bear on the nature of male love described by the poet.

The homosocial setting performed a similar function. By embedding his poem’s homoeroticism within friendship, martial, or male-bonding settings, the poet took advantage of the ambiguities inherent within intense male association. The poet could therefore distance himself publically from its outrageous content by claiming to be merely celebrating the “Eros of friendship,” as we saw Langer do in his letter to Rabinovich. In keeping the boundaries between friendship and homosexuality porous in his representations, Langer was not only taking cover, but also hoping to render same-sex love recognizable—and recognizably beautiful and normative—to all.

Third and finally, the same revealing and concealing function was true of genre imitation. Langer, like other homosexual poets, presented “Angels will Sweeten with Song” as an imitation of the medieval Hebrew genre, known as ghazal. While other emancipatory-era homosexual poets at times parody pre-modern homoerotic traditions, Langer did not use parody. By imitating a canonical form, he could protect himself from censure by claiming his work as “an exercise in style.”

At the same time, however, genre imitation was also a tool of identification. It enabled Langer to imagine that others like him existed within the distant past. It allowed him to demonstrate that homoerotic desire and male love was part and parcel of the Hebrew literary tradition and was at the center of normative cultural production. Genre imitation meant embedding his representations of homosexuality within a widely-accepted conventional tradition. Thus, Langer could carve a space for himself within his own culture without recourse to subversion or to challenging aesthetic norms using non-normative tactics. More simply, it was a way of negotiating a place for something ugly without redefining conventional ideas about beauty. Genre imitation allowed the poet to renegotiate the homosexual’s marginality—not by challenging cultural norms, but by reclaiming the homosexual’s pre-existing place within the cultural canon.

As a poet, Langer’s historical gaze ultimately settled on two sites in Jewish history: the homoerotic Hebrew love poetry of medieval al-Andalus and the mystical love poetry of sixteenth-century Safed. Due to the robust scholarly and popular attention to medieval Spanish-Hebrew love poetry since the 1950s, Langer’s interest in the homoerotic part of this tradition might seem natural. But there was nothing self-evident about his elective affinity in the early 1920s. Although the study of this literature was already well under way, almost all references to it by Jewish intellectuals,

---

401 Kramer, 269-270.
whether scholarly or otherwise, evaded its homoerotic content entirely. As Hayim Schirmann put it in his pioneering work on the subject in the 1950s, scholars before him “took pains to deny this fundamental fact.” With the rarest of exceptions, Jewish commentators and critics prior to Schirmann saw the poet’s male love object “as a good acquaintance of the poet’s, suppressing any erotic allusions, or they assumed him to be a girl, addressed as a man either for reasons of decorum or in compliance with a certain literary fashion.” This despite the fact, as Dan Pagis pointed out, that almost half of all Hebrew-Spanish love poems of this period (1000 AD to 1300) were addressed to men. The young male beloved was a stock character that appeared hundreds of times.

Langer’s identification with the homoerotic content of medieval Spanish-Hebrew love poetry, then, was unusual and unique. Though Langer was not the very first modern Jewish critic to take the homoerotic content of medieval Hebrew love poetry at face value, he was among the very few who did. And as far as we can tell, Langer was the first Jewish writer to explicitly draw a connection between his own homosexual identity and this medieval Hebrew tradition. Similar acts of historical identification would only be replicated by gay Jews at the end of the twentieth century.

While Langer’s reception of homoerotic Hebrew love poetry was pioneering in the context of modern Jewish history, it was not uncommon among contemporary homosexual literati. While intellectuals of the Jewish public sphere avoided confrontation with the homoerotic content of medieval Hebrew love poetry, emancipatory-era homosexual intellectuals did not. Quite a number of emancipatory-era homosexual poets, for example, looked to the Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and other “Oriental” variations on the ghazal for inspiration (and sometimes imitated them). August von Platen, a major figure of the “gay canon” among German homosexuals (especially masculinists), published his collection Ghaselen already in 1821. The ghazal was a favorite of nineteenth-century English Uranians and their non-Anglo equivalents. For example, in German and Czech, writers such as John Henry Mackay (Sagitta), Stephan George, and Jiri Karazec ze Levov wrote in the ghazal-inspired “pederastic tradition.” Frederico Garcia Lorca famously imitated the ghazal in his 1934 “Gacelas” poems in his collection Divan del Tamarit [The Tamarit Divan], including his revealingly-titled “Ghazal of Desperate Love,” the “Ghazal of the Love that Hides from Sight,” the “Ghazal of Dark Death,” the “Ghazal of Marvelous Love,” and others. In addition, homosexual anthologists and historians, from Heinrich Hoesli to Elisar von Kupffer, as well as writers in Die Freundschaf and Der Eigene and other major German-homosexual periodicals, drew attention to the Arabic and

---


403 Dan Pagis, Hebrew Poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 64.

404 On Mackay, see Andrew Hewitt, Political Inversions, 130-170.

Persian *ghazal* (they were especially enamored with Hafis and Sadi). Langer’s homosexual appropriation of the Hebrew *ghazal*, in other words, put him in good homosexual company once again.

In terms of understanding Langer’s project, determining definitively whether or not medieval Hebrew love poetry reflected actual social practice is not particularly significant. Langer may or may not have imagined that these poems reflected actual same-sex practice, but for him, as for most emancipatory-era homosexual writers, the question of how much sex they were having was not really all that important. Like other homosexual writers of the emancipatory era, Langer was looking for models that would shed light on where his sexual subjectivity fit within the wider cultural field: what was the aesthetic, spiritual, and political significance of homoerotic desire? What meaning did have for culture? And could the Jewish historical experience provide answers to these questions? It is Langer’s identification with this literature rather than its correspondence to historical sexual behavior that matters. He understood it as part of a Jewish *Freundesliebe* tradition, which he could draw on to produce a normative aesthetic of homosexuality in modern Hebrew literature. It was because this literature had placed homoerotic desire at the center of the Jewish-Hebrew aesthetic and spiritual thinking that it was useful to him. Whether Spanish-Hebrew poets wrote about homoerotic desire because they also felt it or whether they wrote about homoerotic desire purely to philosophize (in line with an idealized or materialist Platonic vision), their poetry was attractive for the modern homosexual because of its aestheticizing and philosophizing impulse, not in spite of it. In so doing, Langer could make meaning of his desires for himself and locate a space for the modern Jewish homosexual within Jewish cultural life. In Spanish-Hebrew poetry he found an elevation of homoerotic desire—a Jewish enactment of the Platonic principle that same-sex desire was a

---

406 Scholars continue to debate what (if any) relationship existed between Hebrew homoerotic love poetry and the social reality of Jewish life in medieval Spain. To be sure, this debate is but a variation of a larger debate over the reliability of these poems as historical documents. Did the lifestyle depicted in Hebrew secular poetry correspond to the social realities of Jewish court life? The issue is complicated by a number of factors. For one, contemporary Arabic poetry was deeply embedded in the social patterns of the Muslim upper classes. Poetry was an integral part of social institutions like the wine party and were composed in honor (and at times, during) these events. There is abundant historical evidence that Arabic poetry did indeed reflect Arabic social and sexual life. There is little debate, therefore, that homoerotic Arabic love corresponded to widespread social practices, including same-sex dalliances between older and younger men, who were often slaves. The picture is more complicated when it comes to the Jews, where evidence confirming such practices is sparser. On the one hand, the important Hebrew poets, as mentioned, were also major political figures immersed in all aspects of Arabic social life. There is evidence that they participated in wine parties and other luxuries of court life, which they could not have avoided even if they wanted to (and they certainly did not) because these events were an integral part of politics. On the other hand, there is no direct evidence (beyond the poetry itself) that any of these Hebrew poets engaged in same-sex practices themselves. The major courtier-poets of the era were also some of the most important religious figures and Jewish legal authorities, so it is difficult for many scholars to imagine that they blatantly defied the halakhic prohibition. Still, as Hayim (Jefim) Schirmann pointed out in 1955, evidence does exist that demonstrates same-sex practices were not an unusual part of Jewish social life in this period—just not among the rabbi courtier-poets. For inroads into this debate see Pagis, *Hebrew Poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*; Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, and Death*; idem, “Merchants and Intellectuals, Rabbis and Poets: Judeo-Arabic Culture in the Golden Age of Islam” in David Biale ed, *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 313-388; and Norman Roth, *Fawn of My Delights*: Boy-love in Hebrew and Arabic Verse," *Sex in the Middle Ages* ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1991), 157-172.
necessary precondition for creating beautiful art and reaching the ideal. In this, Langer resembled so many other contemporary homosexual writers, as we saw in chapter four: Langer tied the modern Jewish homosexual's integration to his distinct capacity for aesthetic judgment, artistic genius, and philosophical and spiritual reflection.

Not that medieval Hebrew love poetry was a perfect fit for replication by the modern homosexual poet. The very same medieval poets who wrote love poetry to young men also directed their affections toward women. Iberian Hebrew poets did not limit themselves to one sex, as Langer and most modern homosexual poets did. And Golden-Age poets always used a hierarchical model of same-sex relations between an older man and an adolescent. There is no evidence for anything like the mutualistic and egalitarian types of same-sex relationships of the twentieth century. This was a medieval world, after all, which knew nothing of sexual subjectivity in the modern sense. Medieval Hebrew love poetry was, therefore, only partially available as a historical precedent for the first modern Jewish homosexual poet.

But medieval Hebrew love poetry was not without its advantages: it proved a useful ally in Langer’s strategy of revealing and concealing. How so? The language of Spanish-Hebrew love poetry was saturated in the language of the Bible, especially the language of Song of Songs. Though Spanish-Hebrew poets closely imitated Arabic love poetry—incorporating its themes, style, and formal properties (like rhyme and meter)—their Hebrew adaptations remained distinct because of their widespread use of Biblical allusion. There was no parallel to this phenomenon in Arabic poetry, as Scheindlin describes:

[Golden Age Hebrew poets] developed the artful use of biblical quotations as part of their craft, often creating interesting effects by distorting the meaning, expecting their learned audience to respond to the constant manipulation of the quotations. This device was common in Hebrew liturgical poetry before the Jews came into contact with the Arabic literature, but the Golden Age poets developed it into one of the mainstays of their art. Arabic poets used quotation from and allusions to sacred writings and classical literature, but there was no single ancient text that underlay their poetry in quite the same way as the Bible underlay Hebrew poetry.407

By the Golden Age, the erotic classic Song of Songs had long been interpreted allegorically within rabbinic tradition as a love exchange between God and Israel (though its literal erotic meaning was not forgotten). As a result, because medieval Hebrew love poetry was so heavily weighed down with allusion to Song of Songs, it could easily be misunderstood as allegory in the wrong hands. Indeed, the subject of human love was not always immediately apparent to the medieval reader. And to make matters even more opaque: Spanish-Hebrew poets transferred the Song-of-Songs-inspired language and imagery of their “secular” love poetry to their liturgical and religious poems. These latter genres were in turn revolutionized, as poets used highly erotic and sensuous terms to celebrate the love between God and Israel and God and the soul for regular use in the service.408

The epithets used for the Spanish-Hebrew poet’s beloved will illustrate the larger point. Like its Arabic equivalent, medieval Hebrew love poems do not refer to the beloved by name, but by an animal epithet. The beloved boy is usually referred to as tzvi or ofer (“fawn” or “gazelle”), or, less

408 Scheindlin, The Gazelle, 36-41.
often, _ayal_ [deer]. Both terms have female equivalents: _tzviyah_, _ofra_, and _ayala_. _Tzvi_ was a particular favorite since it was a cognate of the Arabic epithets for the ephebe, _ṣabi_, which, like _ghazal_, referred to a gazelle.  

_Tzvi_, _ofra_, and _ayal_ are also well-known images from _Song of Songs_, where they and their feminine forms are used as similes for the lover and beloved. All are therefore laden with erotic and allegoric significance; and all are used in both secular love poetry and in liturgical poetry. In the latter, when the masculine epithet was used it symbolized God, while the feminine form symbolized Israel.

Spanish-Hebrew poets were quite aware that they were actively blurring boundaries between the sacred and the secular. In their poetry, they even played off this ambiguity for dramatic effect. For example, the poet might appear to be speaking to a male or female beloved, as in a “secular” love poem, only to reveal in the poem’s final verse (to a shocked or amused or inspired reader) that his erotic beckoning had all along been direct toward God. Langer, as we shall see below, reversed this trick, masking his poem’s eroticism as allegory.

This potential for allegory proved accommodating to the needs of the modern homosexual-Hebrew poet looking to represent a morally and aesthetically taboo subject in verse. The medieval Hebrew love tradition was available to Langer to execute his strategy of concealing and revealing. It did so in multiple and mutually reinforcing ways. First, as mentioned earlier in our discussion, by imitating a pre-modern normative genre, Langer could pretend to merely be parroting an older acceptable style. In this, Langer had used genre imitation as did other emancipatory-era homosexual poets. But drawing on the Spanish-Hebrew tradition had distinctive advantages too: by imitating the Hebrew _ghazal_, Langer could mask his subject behind two layers of ostensible allegory: the allegorical tradition of _Song of Songs_, and the allegorical liturgical “love” poetry of the medieval tradition. This was a unique tool unavailable to non-Hebrew homosexual poets.

Finally, imitating Spanish-Hebrew love poetry helped Langer in one other respect. As a Hebrew writer, Langer was in a particular bind: How to represent a taboo sin, not only safely, but in the holy tongue? This confronted all modern Hebrew writers who struggled to modernize Hebrew and transform it into a language of daily use. Until the interwar period, most Hebrew writers depended heavily on the Bible and other traditional Jewish texts, conforming to a standardized _nusakh_, or uniform style. Over the course of the interwar period, Hebrew poets began to break with these Hebrew-Revival conventions, albeit very slowly, inaugurating Hebrew modernism in poetry. Langer, as described in chapter four, kept one foot in the Hebrew Revival and one foot in Hebrew modernism during his literary career. Langer would at times break from the conventions of the Hebrew Revival and embrace free verse and a modern allusion-free Hebrew. But Langer also experimented with ways to represent male love within the conventions of the Hebrew Revival; in other words, in the language of the Hebrew textual past. This created a particular problem for Langer: how to represent same-sex love in the language of religious texts that condemned male-male sex, especially the Bible? By imitating medieval homoerotic Hebrew love poetry, Langer found a potential solution to this problem (though he experimented with others too). Through imitation, Langer found a way to represent unspeakable sin using the language of the Bible. The fact that Spanish-Hebrew poets had no concept of the modern homosexual was irrelevant.

---

409 Scheindlin, _The Gazelle_, 37; Pagis, 64.
410 In Hebrew prose, the _nusakh_ was attributed by the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik to the Hebrew and Yiddish author, S.Y. Abromowich. In poetry, it was Bialik’s style that became the standard.
Let’s now turn directly to “Angles Will Sweeten with Song.” The poet immediately invokes the ghazal tradition, but the poem is not an exact imitation. Langer does use a common Spanish-Hebrew rhyme scheme from “belt poem” [širat ha-ezor] and his theme, style, imagery, and language are all Spanish-Hebrew-like. But he dispenses with the conventional length and meter of a Hebrew ghazal. The effect of using these meters, it seems to me, is to recreate the ghazal poem in a discordant mode—a characteristically modernist move, though unusual for Hebrew modernism.

Angels Will Sweeten With Song

Land of the gazelle, where our nation fought, forgave, and dreamed,
Cypress, palm, olive trees will spread their shade;
Please, my shining love, rise with me, to eternal joy!

The heavenly scent of mandrakes,
all around they’ll give off their fragrance,
Cedars of pleasure,
our heads they will crown in glory,
Night of eternal bliss,
he will spread over us an invisible tent.

The Jordan–groomsman, listens, still, before our companionship;
and when under heavens’ glorious wedding canopy the two of us will doze,
the Minister of Grace will bless us,
angels will sweeten with song.

In the course of her initial reading of the poem, even the minority reader, one who is receptive to the poet’s non-normative content, cannot be sure if the poet had been addressing God or a male lover until the poem’s final verse. Before its climactic finale, in which the poet clearly demarcates between “the Minister of Grace” who will bless his union with his male beloved, the poet carefully withholds proof that he is speaking to his male lover. What is more, the poem itself is built to dupe the informed Hebrew reader (at least in her first reading of the poem) into interpreting the poet’s object of desire as God. Langer accomplished this trick by weaving together two sets of Biblical allusion around one another: allusions from the erotic-but-allegorically-burdened Song of Songs were combined with the national-redemptive-and-messianic Isaiah and Jeremiah (with a hint of the Psalmist too). By wrapping these two sets of texts tightly around one another, the poet

411 Instead, Langer uses a modern meter, iambic in the first two stanzas and then anapest in the third. In the belt poem (named for its rhyme scheme), the last rhyme of the first stanza (in this case, “lam”) is repeated in the last verse of each subsequent stanza (returning like a belt at the end of each stanza). The returning rhyme functioned as a cue to the singer to return to the first stanza, which is the poem’s chorus. On the “belt poem,” see Tova Rosen, Le-ezor shir: al shirat ha-ezor ba-Ivrit bi-Yeme-ha-benayim (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1985).
embeds the subject of male love within a seemingly allegoric use of Song of Songs. As the poem progresses, however, the poet subtly narrows its meaning, hint by hint, toward its final revelation, which rules out the possibility that the poet’s *dod* (lover) is God. Once God is ruled out in the poem’s final verse, the reader fully appreciates that all of the preceding allusions were actually doing double duty: maintaining the illusion of allegory, while in fact revealing the sexual nature of the poet’s affection for his male beloved. In employing this strategy, Langer reversed that used by Spanish-Hebrew poets in liturgical poetry: rather than masking divine love as carnal to ultimately reveal a holy subject, Langer masked same-sex love as religious allegory. Let’s quickly demonstrate how this is accomplished.

Ambiguity concerning the poet’s love object is strongest in the poem’s first stanza. The poet immediately invokes “Land of the gazelle,” signaling to his reader that his poem is an imitation of the medieval *ghazal*. Ultimately, this invocation provides him with the protection already discussed; but within the development of the poem itself, “Land of the gazelle” signals to the Hebrew reader that what is to follow may be a love poem, but may also be a religious or liturgical poem. In other words, invoking the *ghazal* is not in itself sufficient in clarifying the poem’s meaning. In addition, “land of the gazelle” suggests an allegorical-liturgical subject because it alludes to Jeremiah’s “*nakhalat tzvi tziv’ot goyim*” (3:19) [the choicest or most precious of lands among the nations] and to Ezekiel 20:6. In other words, “land of the gazelle” seems like a cognate for the land of Israel with a distinctly messianic-redemptive flavor (something close to “Israel at the end of days”). The poet then qualifies “land of the gazelle” with the phrase “where our nation fought, forgave, and dreamed,” emphasizing the “land” as a real physical geography with a distinctly homosocial flavor: the land is depicted as an incubator of national and martial values. By using the plural-possessive “*our* nation,” the poet positions himself as national prophet. He then enlists botanical allies—cypress, palm, and olive—which are classic Biblical symbols of horticultural rebirth linked to national revival and messianic peace in Israel at the end of days.

The poet then beckons to his *dodi ha-tzakh* [my shining (or white) love (or lover)] to rise with him to eternal joy. The reader, at this point, might suspect that something is rotten in Eretz Israel, but the textual evidence still weighs on the side of allegory. The masculine form *dodi* clearly rules out the possibility that the addressee is female. *Dodi* is also a direct allusion to the Shulamit’s
appellation for her male lover throughout Song of Songs and do di tzakh is used in 5:10. Still, the Hebrew reader cannot yet be certain that dodi refers to a male love object—again, because of the well-established rabbinic tradition of reading Song of Songs as allegory. What is more, the poet adds another misleading clue by calling on his dodi to “rise with me to eternal joy.” The phrase “eternal joy” [simkhat olam] is distinctly prophetic-redemptive: a locution that Langer took directly from the Lord’s redemption of the nation in Isaiah 35:10, 51:11, and 61:7. As the reader concludes her reading of the first stanza for the first time, she would not be mistaken in interpreting the poem thus far as follows: the poet-prophet has called on God to initiate the “eternal joy” of messianic redemption in end-of-days Israel. There the poet-prophet will reconcile with God on behalf of the nation in a symbolic end-of-days show of unification. This unification has long been imagined in Jewish historical memory (textual and otherwise) as having an erotic valence (Israel depicted as bride and the Lord as groom). Furthermore, when read in the context of the 1920s (when the poem was written and first published), this subject would have taken on a distinctly Zionist pitch for the Hebrew reader. The poet-prophet’s call “to rise” to the “land of the gazelle” had, after all, been taking place in real time (if in relatively small numbers) for the previous forty years, as tens of thousands of Jews “rose” to build a national home in Palestine.

In the poem’s second stanza, the poet continues to withhold the identity of his beloved, though he takes several steps in the direction of disclosure. As in stanza one, he continues to spin allusions to Song of Songs with allusions to the Later Prophets (and a bit of the Psalmist too):

- “Heavenly-scented mandrakes give off their fragrance all around” [reakh eden dudaim saviv saviv yaktiru] draws directly on Song of Songs 7:14 and 3:6.

414

Bloch and Bloch: “ṣah ve’adam, literally “white and red,” but covering a broader spectrum, such as “radiant, shining,” and “earth-colored, ruddy.” (p.184) NSRV: “My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand.”

415

JPS: So let the ransomed of the Lord return, and come with shouting to Zion, crowned with joy everlasting. Let them attain joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing flee.

416

JPS: Because your shame was double—Men cried “Disgrace is their portion”—Assuredly, They shall have a double share in their land, Joy shall be theirs for all time.
• “Cedars of pleasure, our heads they’ll crown in glory” weaves Song of Songs (1:17 and 5:15) with the messianic-redemptive language of Jeremiah 3:19<sup>417</sup> and Psalm 142 and 145. The turn of phrase “cedars of pleasure” combines language from Song of Songs with Jeremiah. In an earlier draft of the poem, Langer used “cedars of Lebanon” (a direct quotation from Song of Songs), but adjusted it to “cedars of pleasure.”<sup>418</sup>

• “Night of eternal bliss, he’ll spread over us an invisible tent” strings Isaiah 65:17-18 with another distinctly redemptive turn of phrase from the daily prayer service: yifros aleinu.<sup>419</sup> Yifros aleynu appears in birkhat hashkivenu, which ends the reading of the Shema in the daily prayers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JTS: The mandrakes yield their fragrance; at our doors are all choice fruits; both freshly picked and long-stored have I kept, my beloved, for you.</th>
<th>ש하였다 ז:ד</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>וְהַדּוּדָאִים נָתְנוּ -רֵיחַ וְעַל -פְּתָחֵינוּ כָּל מְגָדִים --חֲדָשִׁים גַּם -יְשָׁנִים דּוֹדִי צָפַנְתִּי</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JTS: Who is she that comes up from the desert like columns of smoke, in clouds of myrrh and frankincense, of all the powders of the merchant?</th>
<th>שファー' ג:נ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>מִי זֹאת, עֹלָה מִן -הַמִּדְבָּר, כְּתִימְרוֹת, עָשָׁן: מְקֻטֶּרֶת מֹר וּלְבוֹנָה, מִכֹּל אַבְקַת רוֹכֵל</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JTS: I had resolved to adopt you as My child, and I gave you a desirable land—the fairest heritage of all the nations; and I thought you would surely call Me “Father,” and never cease to be loyal to Me.</th>
<th>ירמיהו ג: יט</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>וְאָנֹכִי אָמַרְתִּי אֵי -וְאֶתֶן -אֶרֶץ חֶמְדָּה לָנַחֲלַת צְבִי צִבְאוֹת גּוֹיִם וָאֹמַר אָבִי תִּקְרְאִי -לִי א תָשׁוּבִי -וּמֵאַחֲרַי</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JTS: His legs are like marble pillars set in sockets of fine gold. He is majestic as Lebanon, stately as the cedars.</th>
<th>שא' ת'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>שׁוֹקָיו עַמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ , מְיֻסָּדִים עַל -אַדְנֵי -פָז ; מַרְאֵהוּ , כַּלְּבָנוֹן --בָּחוּר , כָּאֲרָזִים</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JTS: Cedars are the beams of our house, Cypresses the rafters.</th>
<th>שא' א:ז</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>קודָת בָּתֵּינוּ אֲרָזִים , רחיטנו )רַהִיטֵנוּ( בְּרוֹתִים</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JPS: For behold! I am creating a new heaven and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered, They shall never come to mind. Be glad, then, and rejoice forever in what I am creating. For I shall create Jerusalem as a joy, and her people as a delight.</th>
<th>ישעיהו ס&quot;ה :יז</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>כִּי-גָּנְתִּי בָּרְאָה שֵׁמֶם-דְּשִׁ qed, Also they shall not do so, neither remember They shall not be remembered, They shall never come to mind. Be glad, then, and rejoice forever in what I am creating. For I shall create Jerusalem as a joy, and her people as a delight.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
evening prayer service (and in the reading of Shema before bedtime); it also appears in the blessing after meals, as in “ha-rakhaman yifros aleinu sukat shlomo.”

Within this elaborate mixing of messianic-redemptive and erotic allusions, the poet manages to drop several hints that the object of his affections is not God. First, his description of their heads being crowned and their night of eternal bliss begins to look suspicious, but the possibility for allegory is not ruled out. Second, in verse six (the final verse of the second stanza) the poet uses the phrase yifros aleynu [he will spread over us], which because of its allusion to the liturgy, is an explicit hint that it is God who is participating along with nature (or the heavenly host) in celebrating this union. In stanza three, the poet takes another step by introducing their “companionship,” and then their “dozing” together under the heavens. The poem culminates, finally, when the poet explicitly differentiates between the Lord who blesses and the beloved.

Along with his suggestive use of allusion, Langer used a second layer of intertextual associations to dubiously imply that the beloved is God. He drew specifically on several well-known turns of phrase as well as the general sound of the piyyut Yedid Nefesh, the sixteenth-century classic written by Eliezer Azikri.420 Yedid Nefesh is one of the most famous of all Hebrew poems. After it was composed, it was not very long before it was incorporated into the Friday-night service (remaining there to this day), where it functions as the dramatic welcoming of Sabbath. In Azikri's exquisite poem, the Kabbalist-poet describes his yearning to cleave to God [deviukat] in strikingly homoerotic terms. Langer used its rhyme “lam” and several expressions—yedidot, simkhat olam, and yifros alenu obel ne’elam that evoke Yedid Nefesh. To be sure, this resemblance is quite subtle. But by evoking Yedid Nefesh, Langer strengthened the ambiguity of his subject. Ultimately, once God is ruled out at the end of the poem, the evocation of Yedid Nefesh will shed light on the nature of the poet’s love for his male beloved.421

One qualification should be noted, though this really only strengthens the broader argument: though the poet does clearly rule out God as the poet’s “lover,” he does leave room for a second, allegorical interpretation. Dod can also refer to the messiah, though this usage is far less common.422 The poet-prophet, in this scenario, would be calling on the messiah to initiate the redemption and reconcile with him (on behalf of the nation) in the redeemed land of Israel. Still, this would take some stretching of the reader’s imagination. The marital union between prophet (or messiah) and poet, as well as the poet’s description of their “companionship” (or “friendship”) are awkward metaphors. Nevertheless—and this gets to the larger point—the poet gives the willfully blind reader the possibility for an out: should she still wish to resist the homosexual content of the poem, she has the means to do so by writing the poem off as an imitation of the ghazal.

420 Dror, MA Thesis, 117.


422 Midrash Shir ha-shirim 2:9: “What is this deer like, that he is seen and hidden, seen and hidden again? So the first redeemer was seen and was hidden and returned to be seen again.”
For the minority reader, the poem can easily be read as embedding a simple erotic exchange between two lovers. In this reading, all of the messianic, national, and spiritually redemptive language outlined above would be understood as also speaking the poet’s erotic message. What would such a reading sound like? The dynamic between the poet and his male beloved is first described in the opening alliterative play lakham, khamal, khalam [fought, forgave, and dreamed]. The poem is the poet’s beckoning to his beloved to make up after fighting, to join the poet in his wedding bed for a night of eternal joy, where the two will consummate their marriage and will be blessed by God as they fall asleep together in peaceful harmony. The “land of the gazelle” serves as an erotic metaphor for their marriage bed. The botanical imagery “cypress, palm, olive trees will spread their shade” is likewise an erotic metaphor. My translation does not do justice to the Hebrew, in which yatznikhu et tzi-lam means literally “shoots [up or out] their shade.” This erotic image is then reinforced by a second, when the poet calls to his lover: “Please, my shining love [or lover], rise with me, to eternal joy!”

In the poet’s fantasy, his reconciliation with his beloved culminates in their wedding and sexual union. In Orthodox Jewish law the wedding is not considered complete until the couple has sex (which is an official part of every Jewish wedding ceremony). The poet enlists a number of metaphors and images associated with the Jewish wedding. Nature and the heavenly court will officiate at their wedding. The heavens function as a wedding canopy (khupah); while the phrase “will spread over us an invisible tent,” which as mentioned above refers to yifros aleinu sukat shlomo, evokes the image of God spreading a booth (which is a synonymous image with khupah and ohel) over the happy couple. The cedars form the poles. Their heads are crowned because bride and groom are considered king and queen at their wedding in rabbinic tradition. The two prepare for a night of eternal bliss. The Jordan stands as groomsmen, still, to witness. It “listens to [their] companionship” [makshiv le-yedutenu], an action that might suggest that the poet is playing with the easy slippage between yedidut and yedidot mentioned previously. Recall that the Psalmist used the phrase shir yedidot [love song] in the context of the King’s wedding feast in Psalm 45:1. Listening to yedidot sounds close to listening to yedidot, which would suggest something like the groomsmen “listening” to “our love,” or to “our love song” (perhaps the exchange of vows), or even to “our love making.” Either way, the Jordan listens as the poet and his beloved consummate their marriage (in one form or another), after which the poet and his beloved doze off together blissfully.

Keeping with the tradition of medieval Hebrew love poetry, Langer tied his erotic subject tightly around collective salvation. It is impossible to truly separate the erotic from the religious-national and nationalist-redemptive language of this poem. Indeed, same-sex love and the fate of the nation are intertwined and interdependent. Though the poem’s many messianic allusions from Isaiah serve to conceal the poem’s homoeroticism, these very same allusions also illuminate the nature of the love between the poet and his beloved. For example, the poet’s call to his beloved to “rise to eternal joy” [simkhat olam] draws on Isaiah 35:10, 51:11, and 61:7. In all of these verses, the prophet announces that “eternal joy” will replace “sorrow and sighing” (in 35:10 and 51:11) or the “double share” of the nation’s “shame” and “disgrace” (in 61:7). By echoing Isaiah to describe male love, Langer suggests that this love is also at present shameful and disgraceful. But like the prophet, Langer announces a future when he and his beloved will be able to love without shame and rise to eternal joy.©3 The dramatic reversal from shame to joy is reinforced by the phrase “night of eternal bliss” [leyl gil ad] which draws on Isaiah 17-18, which also announces a new beginning: “For behold! I
am creating a new heaven and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered, they shall never come to mind. Be glad, then, and rejoice forever [ve-gilu adey ad] in what I am creating…”

Finally, the title of the poem, which is repeated as the poem’s closing idiom, also signals that the poet has announced a new redemptive love tied to the fate of the nation. The phrase “angels will sweeten with song” is yet another allusion to Isaiah. In verse 33:7, the prophet describes how the “angels” scream and cry over the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem:

הֵן, אֶרְאֶלָּם, צָעֲקוּ, חֻצָה; מַלְאֲכֵי שָׁלוֹם, מַר יִבְכָּיוּן

Hark! The Arielites cry aloud; Shalom’s messengers weep bitterly.\(^424\)

Scholars are unclear about who the Arielites and Shalom’s messengers refer to, but rabbinic tradition defined them both as angels (and er-el [אראל] is a synonym for “angel” in modern Hebrew). Be that as it may, the poet announces a time when the angels will stop screaming and weeping to sweeten with song. On that day the dishonor of the past on both the personal and collective planes will make way for eschatological salvation. The love between the poet and his male beloved will no longer be shunned but celebrated, just as national shame will be replaced with eternal joy. It is to this final Sabbath that the poet longs for—and quite appropriately in tones reminiscent of Azikiri’s Sabbath piyyut.

In its tight weaving of male love to collective and national redemption, we might also see this little poem as something of Langer’s redress to Hans Blüher. The poem enacts what is by now a recognizable Blüherian ideology: it celebrates the poet’s homosexual love as imbricated in (and the source of) a vision of national rebirth and collective redemption. It does so by drawing on a Jewish Freundesliebe tradition (the ghazal) as well as other layers of the erotic tradition in Hebrew letters. In situating homoerotic desire at the heart of national redemption, Langer has infused male love with collective and religious purpose.

To sum up: This poem is a wonderful example of how Langer enlisted Hebrew’s rich and venerable literary legacy as an ally in portraying homosexual love as normative to the Jewish aesthetic tradition. At the same time, Langer used the Hebrew textual tradition as a resource for enacting a shared homosexual poetic strategy of revealing and concealing his subject at once. Our close reading of Langer’s “Angels will Sweeten with Song” has demonstrated quite a few of the devices used by Langer and other homosexual poets to speak about homosexuality in verse at a time when raising the subject was both scandalous and indecent. This one short poem used genre imitation, the “distancing discourse” of the homosocial setting and the end of days, allusions and allegory, metaphor, and language play in ways that allow the subject of same-sex love to be raised safely and conventionally (at least to a degree). By weaving together the national-collective with the homoerotic, Langer allowed the unsympathetic reader to write off the poem’s deviant elements to a celebration of martial and social values between men, as simply the “Eros of friendship,” and to an allegorical representation of national redemption.

\(^{424}\) Translation is from JPS Bible.
Chapter 5
Mordechai Langer’s Jewish Aesthetic of Homosexuality in Hebrew: Part II

I. Gay Devekut: Representing Same-sex Desire through Mysticism

Mystical metaphors proved another useful ally to Mordechai Langer, as he brought the homosexual experience to light for Hebrew readers for the first time. Like the other shared homosexual literary strategies explored, mystical metaphors helped Langer with several aims: to communicate to two sets of readers; to frame homoerotic desire as aesthetically normative to Jewish and Hebrew culture; and to make meaning of same-sex desire in Jewish terms. Simply put, the Jewish mystical tradition helped Langer put his same-sex feelings into Hebrew words.

We need not dwell too long on the ways in which the Jewish mystical tradition lent itself to supporting Langer’s homosexual worldview. We are quite familiar by now with theosophic kabbalah as a highly eroticized mystical system thanks to our extensive analysis of Langer’s study Die Erotik der Kabbala in chapter two. There we explored the cultural work that his linkage of Jewish mysticism and homosexuality performed within the much broader fin-de-siecle fascination of Jewish and homosexual writers with mysticism and sexuality.

This naturally leads to the question: what was the relationship between the ideas Langer formulated in Die Erotik der Kabbala (1923) regarding mysticism and sexuality and his mystical poetry? Unfortunately, the dating of the three mystical poems under consideration below is uncertain. It is therefore not entirely clear that Langer had formulated all of the ideas he had laid out in Die Erotik der Kabbala when he first wrote them. It is highly probable, however, that he was already familiar with the ideas of Hans Blüher (as well as German masculinism more broadly and Freudian psychoanalysis). It is also almost certain that he had already read (and was moved by) Decadent and Symbolist poetry (in Czech, French, and English) and much of the writing of the fin-de-siecle Prague-Jewish scene, which of course was deeply engaged with mysticism and sexuality as well. Still, let me emphasize: it is important to take these poems on their own terms, rather than merely impose an ideological framework on them. Even if Langer had already been deeply immersed in all these literatures and theories, the poems he produced were not simple enactments of any one ideological, cultural, or medical theory concerning either homosexuality or mysticism, including his own in Die Erotik der Kabbala. All of these intellectual currents are filtered through, adjusted, and adapted through the poet’s artistic imagination; he is not imprisoned by them. This, not incidentally, is the reason why close critical readings of these mystical poems is necessary. But, that all said, I will

---

425 This is not a problem, of course, when treating the mystical poems in Langer’s second volume of 1944. All three of the poems below (To My Comrade, The Strength Within the Magnificent, and When I see your Skies) were published in Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot in 1929, but we do not know when they were originally drafted. Langer may have written them much earlier, perhaps even before Die Erotik der Kabbala of 1923.

426 Zohar Maor, for example, reads Langer’s “From Atop the Valley of Silence” in light of his interpretation of Die Erotik der Kabbala. While there surely is correspondence between the two, Langer’s poetry needs to be handled more carefully. It does not merely replicate the ideas formulated in EK. Maor, Torat sod hadasha, 262-263.
at times draw on Langer’s definitions of specific Jewish mystical terms in Die Erotik to shed light on how he employed these terms within his Hebrew poetry.

These prefatory provisions aside, we can say for certain that in using mysticism to speak homosexuality, Langer was once again both synchronically in tune with emancipatory-era homosexual literary practices and diachronically oriented to precedents within the Hebrew historical literary tradition.427

Mystical metaphors were widely employed by modern homosexual poets, many of whom were related in some way to Decadence and Symbolism.428 It is no hyperbole to suggest that articulating same-sex desire through mystically-inflected representations became something of a distinctive homosexual literary practice. This was true of homosexual writers in the Anglophone orbit: from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Walter Pater to Oscar Wilde to John Gray and Marc-André Raffelovich to Hart Crane, James Merrill, W.H. Auden, and the writers of the Bolton Whitman Fellowship.429 It was also true of the French literary orbit, from Joris-Karl Huysmans to Arthur Rimbaud to André Gide to Jean Cocteau;430 and certainly, in the German, from John Henry Mackay to Hugo von Hofmannsthal to Stefan George; and among Czech Decadents and Symbolists like Otakar Březina and Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic as well.431 Longer lists could be marshaled to further support this by now relatively-well-known claim and context.

427 Obviously, in employing mysticism in his poems, Langer was not just oriented toward a tradition of Hebrew mystical poetry, but to the poetics of Jewish mysticism as well, including theosophic Kabbala as a highly eroticized system. On the poetics of Jewish mysticism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, Language, Eros, Being. On mystical Hebrew poetry, Peter Cole, The Poetry of Kabbala: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

428 Many of these writers found Roman Catholicism particularly suited to their needs and ultimately underwent conversion. Stephen Schloesser, Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933, (University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2005); also Ellis Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism.


430 Stephen Schloesser, Jazz Age Catholicism; Ellis Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism; and Gilles Barbedette and Michel Carassou, Paris Gay 1925, (Non Lieu, 2008); George Stambolian, Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/ Critical Texts, ed. Elaine Marks (Cornell Univ Pr, 1990); Lawrence R. Schehr, French Gay Modernism (University of Illinois Press, 2004).

431 Stefan George is the most important example of this phenomenon in German literature. For inroads, see esp. Marita Keilson-Lauritz, Von Der Liebe, Die Freundschaft Heißt; Keilson-Lauritz, Marita, “Stefan George’s Concept of Love and the Gay Emancipation Movement,” in A Companion to the Works of Stefan George, ed.
A. Yisrael Najara’s “Intimate Close Touch”

Contemporary Hebrew poets were also caught up in the mystical turn. But Langer was the first modern Hebrew poet to use a mystical vocabulary to put the homosexual experience into verse. What’s more, Langer was also the first to link his own mystically-inflected homosexual poetry to a historical forebear in early-modern Jewish history. Close to the end of his life, while living in Tel Aviv, Langer reported to his friend, the great twentieth-century Hebrew literary critic Dov Sadan, that he felt a “close intimate touch” to the sixteenth-century mystical poet Yisrael (Israel) Najara. Sadan recorded his testimony in the following anecdote:

When I used to speak to him [Langer] about his poetic style, I used to tell him all that I say here now about our young [modernist] poets; that based on their poetry it is possible to prove with ease, that Bialik is irrelevant as a causal influence, whether as a foundational influence they accept or reject. In other words: he [Bialik] does not exist as a factor they engage. And I used to say the following to Langer: is it possible that you know Bialik, whom you have not written about, as you know Jacob Cahan whom you have written about, but based on your poetry this is practical knowledge that does not translate into creative knowledge. And he would agree and say: What shall I do, the poet that I feel a close intimate touch with is beyond the poetry of the Hebrews of the latest generations—Rav Yisrael Najara.”

Langer left no record of what he found so attractive about Najara. Sadan sensed how unusual his identification was, but didn’t comment further. That Sadan noted this anecdote on more than one occasion, however, is telling. Sadan, we recall, was one of the few among Langer’s friends who referred publically—if cryptically—to Langer’s homosexuality (and in the 1980s, Sadan would refer to Langer’s homosexuality openly and explicitly in a letter to Avner Holzmann). It is possible that Sadan understood that Langer’s identification with Najara was something of a code and therefore thought it worthy of recording. He would not have been wrong.


432  Bar-Yosef, Mysticism in Twentieth-Century Hebrew Literature.

433  Dov Sadan, Avnei Bedek: al sifrutenu, masada, ve-agafé’a (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad, 1962), 162. In Hebrew:

"כשהייתי מדבר עמו על דרכו בשירה, היהי אומר ול אתי שאיני ימיני עם צעירי-משוררים, כלמרכי י-פי-שרים זה
לוהיזים כנעל, י-ביואלאק א-ל אתי טבריה, מבטedido נזרنع רימ, ביני גורש-שמדה משקולים-שופרiline ביני גורש-שמדה משקולה
ןרדרך-시험יהוhood אתי-طيب ש-מי השב-עלית, יאל-לפי-שayerו יד-ידיית-היה אתי יד-ידיית ש-מי מקמט-ך-כלל ידיה.

434  The context is Sadan’s discussion of western-European Hebrew writers and their purported resistance to the Hebrew Revival. He draws on Langer as an example, but does not discuss the peculiarity of his affinity to Najara. Ibid, 161-163.

435  Though Dov Sadan may not have been familiar with Vital’s specific “sodomy” charge, he was undoubtedly familiar with the text in which the charge is persevered, Vital’s Sefer Hezyonot.
Yisrael Najara (1550-1625) was widely considered the finest Hebrew poet of his era. Although Najara is hardly a household Jewish name today, he has been described by scholars as perhaps one of the greatest pre-modern Hebrew lyricists of all time. His classic “My Beloved Descended to his Garden” [Yarad Dodi Le’Gano], which describes a marriage contract between the Lord and Israel, was incorporated into the liturgy of Shavuot [the Feast of Weeks]. His Aramaic classic “Yab, Sovereign of the Universe” [Ya Ribon Alam] is a staple of Friday-night-dinner zemirot.

Najara’s childhood and later career as a prominent Hebrew hymnist, Torah commentator, rabbinic judge, and kabbalist was mostly divided between Safed, where he was born, Gaza, where he officiated as a member of the rabbinic court, and Damascus, where he spent much of his life, at times in exile from the Safed circle. As a young man, Najara was something of an itinerant wanderer, and a rebellious spirit. He traveled through Turkey, where he spent quite a bit of time in coffeehouses, and later wrote regretfully about the dissipation of his youth. Even as an adult, however, Najara never entirely shed his reputation as a contrarian and transgressor. The Ottoman-Jewish masses adored him, but he remained controversial among the rabbinic elite. Without getting too deep into the rabbinic politics of the Lurianic circle, what is crucial for understanding Langer is that Najara was accused of regular lapses into the sin of mishkav zakhar [of having sex with other men] by no less a figure than the rabbinic giant and major Lurianic Kabbalist, Hayim Vital. In his mystical diary Sefer Hezyonot, Vital wrote as follows:

Behold, R. Israel Najara. True, the hymns that he has composed are in themselves good, but whoever speaks to him and whatever leaves his mouth is forbidden, because he always used foul language and was a drunkard his whole life. On a particular day that was between the fast days [the period of mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem], he prepared a meal [...]put his hat on the ground, sang songs in a loud voice, ate meat, drank wine, and even became drunk [...]. I, Hayim, told him about this incident and he admitted that it was true. Even now, when he is escaping from the plague, he engages in male-male sodomy [mishkav zakhar] in his drunkenness. On Saturday, he committed two sins: First, when he quarreled with his wife and expelled her from his house, and second, he then slept with a gentle woman he’d brought in to light his fire. Therefore it is forbidden to employ him, and it is forbidden to allow him to write a marriage


437 Najara’s autobiographical writings can be found in his Meimei Yisrael.
contract or a bill of divorce [...] There is much homosexuality [sic] and much perversion and delay of justice in this land.  

Vital proceeded next to verify his statements by relaying the mystical vision of a colleague, Jacob Abulafia, in which the “the spirit” informs him (among other things) to stay away from Najara. Scholars are rightfully skeptical about the veracity of Vital’s accusation. But Vital’s general observation that male same-sex activity was common among sixteenth-century Ottoman Jews has been shown to be accurate. There can be no doubt, however, that Langer’s identification with Najara was not an accident. After all, there are only a handful of sites in Jewish history that are available for appropriation for the modern homosexual imagination. The number of rabbinic figures of Najara’s fame who have been accused explicitly of mishkav zakhar before modern times—not to mention by a spiritual leader of Vital’s stature—amount to nearly zero. Langer, we recall, had outlined the great moments of Männerliebe in Jewish history and had sought out whatever personalities might be available as historical precursors to the modern Jewish homosexual. This was the man, we also recall, who wrote to Yaakov Rabinovich of his hope to reignite the “comrade love” that had “been extinguished in the Hebrew heart in these our Enlightened days” through his poetry. When Langer drew a line between himself to Najara, he knew exactly what he was doing. We can only wonder if Dov Sadan did too.

Yisrael Najara was a fitting forebear, however, for more than just his sins. Langer’s “close intimate touch” was most likely also related to Najara’s poetry as well as his biography. “Most likely” because there are several similarities between them, although Langer left no explicit record explaining their connection.

Najara was famous for setting his religious hymns and poems—which were generally divorced from the liturgy—to the rhythm and tune of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian folk songs, especially love and erotic poetry. As Peter Cole describes, “the crucible in which [Najara’s] work was formed turns out to have combined—as under considerable pressure—the mystical poetry of the Sufi tradition, the love songs of the contemporary Turkish popular repertoire, and the classical musical legacy of the Ottoman Empire.” Najara, in fact, was the first Hebrew poet to indicate precisely which foreign song he had set his verse to. For example, he would set a number of liturgical

---


441 Davidson, 101.
poems to the sound of the “señora poem,” a type of erotic poem, in which a poet would begin by addressing his señor. To indicate that he was imitating this genre, Najara began with the Hebrew phrase “Hashem ha-nora” [the awesome or awe-filled name], which sounds like the word señor, but which of course refers to God. 442 Langer paid tribute to Najara by composing a “Shem ha-nora” poem [The Awesome Name] of his own (although it does not follow the tune of the señor). 443 Hebrew critics who will take up Langer’s poetry in the future will also note that Langer borrows quite a few turns of phrase from Najara’s poetry, though a studied comparison of the two would take us well beyond our present subject. 444 These are the more superficial points of contact between them.

More substantively, Langer also probably saw himself as a twentieth-century Najara because like Najara, seemed to “operate [as a poet] in the space between sanctity and sacrilege.” 445 Najara was notorious for pushing boundaries of decorum by using unusually graphic erotic language in his liturgical poetry. Israel Davidson nicely summarizes for us, in his admirably-readable style:

Najara’s religious lyric is saturated with erotic terminology. It breathes the burning speech of tempestuous passion. It is in the full-blooded language of ardent desire and passion that Najara discovers the most appropriate forms for expressing his mystical-religious emotions with supreme clarity. In the long chain of hundreds of Najara’s elegies and hymns a unique conversation is carried on—a dialogue between the tragic miserable beloved, the congregation of Israel, and her divine, appointed One, who in His wrath has forsaken her. In this extraordinary, mystically beautiful epic of love the most varied tones resound, from the delicately soft, heartfelt and sad to the ardent and tempestuous in which the fiery expression of seething passion flares and the cry of unshattered hopes, borne on the wings of triumphant joy, is heard. 446

Many of Najara’s rabbinic contemporaries did not share Davidson’s enthusiasm. Menahem de Lonzano, for example, another rabbi-poet of the era, described Najara’s erotic hymns as “totally impure hocus pocus” [kulo tamei ma’aseh ta’atu’im] because “God and the congregation of Israel speak to one another like adulterers.” 447


443 Langer set his poem “My Song” [Vhira] to “the tune of Gustav Mahler,” but did not specify to which symphony he referred. This may be his idea of a modernist twist on Najara’s early-modern style, but this is no more than personal speculation.

444 For example: Langer’s poem “The Little Ship” [Ha-On] seems to have been inspired by the singular image from Najara’s poem Yidad Shnat Eyni in which the poet is “hurled like a little ship on the turbulent sea of passion.” Langer’s “Bud of Wonders” [Tzitz Pel’aim] should be compared to Najara’s Ya-uf Khalomi. Phrases from stanza three in Yavo Dodi L’ Gan Edno seem to have inspired Langer’s “The Strength within the Magnificent” [Ha-Gevurah Shebetiferet] and “To a Foreign Friend” [Le’khaver Nokher].

445 Tietze and Yahalom, Ottoman Melodies, 10.

446 Davidson, 102.
Langer was probably inspired by Najara’s unique blend of mysticism and erotic allegory. Like Najara, Langer played with the possibilities of mystical allegory; though he reversed metaphor and signified, using the mystical as cover for the sexual. Although admittedly speculative, it is not implausible to suggest that Langer learned (or at least learned a thing or two) about the aesthetic potential of mystical metaphors in Hebrew from Najara. And finally, Langer may have also imagined himself as following a Lurianic imperative by using highly erotic imagery, as Najara did. Najara saw himself, as Yosef Yahalom has argued, as writing in the spirit of Isaac Luria’s doctrine of shvirat hakelim [the breaking of the vessels] and tikkun [mending]. We recall from chapter two, that this involved the idea that sparks of divine light were trapped in the material world, which the performance of mitzvot helped to release. Najara considered his imitations of Ottoman erotic poetry in this light, believing himself to have “raise[d] the sparks of holiness from the Other Side [sitra akhra] to the side of the Sacred [sitra kedusha].” Langer may have considered his own poetry as following in Najara’s Lurianic spirit. As we shall see below, Langer even described the homosexual as “searching for a divine spark within his shamed lust,” in one of his poems. It is not too much of a stretch of the imagination, then, to assume that Langer viewed his aesthetic project in such light as well.

Still, we should not make too much of Langer’s “close-touch” admission to Dov Sadan. Identification and inspiration did not translate into direct imitation. Langer invoked Najara, but there is only a loose affiliation between their two bodies of work. Instead, it was the much broader poetics of Kabbalah itself that would aid Langer in devising a strategy for speaking homosexual desire in Hebrew.

The remainder of our discussion on mysticism is devoted to demonstrating the various ways in which Langer employed mysticism in pursuit of the thesis at hand: to communicate to two sets of readers at once; to frame homoerotic desire as aesthetically normative to Jewish and Hebrew culture; and to make meaning of same-sex desire in Jewish terms. Through close readings and analysis, this study will demonstrate that Langer used mysticism in the following five ways:

(1) Langer profited from the Jewish-mystical belief in intense and intimate friendship between men [ahavat khaverim, dveikut khaverim] as a pathway to personal and collective redemption. He embedded same-sex desire in a representation of dveikut khaverim. In this scenario, the mystic’s ecstatic state was marshaled as a metaphor for describing the poet’s sexual fantasies. This representation, as we shall see, had a prophetic dimension to it. The poet as mystic-prophet announces a new category of male love that will exist in the future, which will reflect what is currently only permissible and possible, as Langer put it in Die Erotik der Kabbala, in “the purer higher world, in the sephirot, [where] the forbidden sexual joining are pleasing to God.”448 Same-sex love, embedded in the language of mysticism, is portrayed as spiritually redemptive.

---

448 EK, 64.
Langer camouflaged the poet’s same-sex sexual desires by depicting them as a violent spiritual conflict, culminating in the mystic’s desire for self-annihilation and death. In this representation, the mystic-poet also desires unification with God, but unlike in the first, dveikut is represented as a painful, torturous, and self-abusive process.

Langer used mystical representations to present the homosexual as a normative Jewish hero. He did this in two ways: first, he used the language of tikkun to present the homosexual as a hero who searches for the “holy spark” [nitzotz] within his decadent impure desires (a kelipah [shell] in Lurianic terms). Langer also represented the homosexual as a Jewish hero in a second manner as a “suffering servant” whose travails are of mystical-redeeming significance. In these two hero representations, the poet is especially invested in performing his supposed shame and suffering for the reader.

Langer drew on mystical symbolism--specifically Kabbalah’s erotic theosophy--to signal the like-minded reader, in something of a homosexual code.

Langer represented God in starkly anthropomorphized terms, so that God functions as an allegory for the poet’s male beloved. This marked a reversal of the pre-modern Hebrew poetic tradition, where poets used erotic representations as allegory (as we have seen represented by Hispano-Hebrew poets and their posterity). Rather than use provocative language to symbolize Israel and God (as he did misleadingly in “Angels Sweeten with Song”), Langer used God to symbolize the male beloved.

In drawing on mysticism in these ways, Langer fit squarely within the broader homosexual literary moment, though he was obviously unique in drawing on specifically Jewish and Hebrew imagery.

To demonstrate these five strategies, the following analysis will be divided in three parts, corresponding to the three poems under discussion.

A. Male-Male Love as Unio Mystica

Like other homosexual poets, Langer’s mystical representations of same-sex love are polarized. On the one hand, Langer drew on mysticism to announce a new redemptive category of male love. He linked male love to spiritual transcendence, transfiguration, and unification with God (dveikut [or Unio mystica]). He also tied this love to both individual and national salvation. But this redemptive love could only thrive at the end of days, in heaven, or in another world. Langer never represented male-male love as succeeding or truly possible “on earth,” as it were; nor as part of

---

449 For examples of how homosexual poets used similar mystical representations, see Kramer, esp. 216-238, 324-339, and 508-526. Examples also abound throughout the following three studies: Saville, A Queer Chivalry; Roden, Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture, and Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism.
civilization; nor as a stable possibility in the life of the poet. As we saw above in “Angels Sweeten with Song,” the conjugal union of the poet and his male beloved is blessed by “the Minister of Grace” and his angels, but only in some unknown future time in the “land of the Gazelle.”\footnote{Another example of this announcement of redemptive love is Langer’s “The Awesome Name” [Ha-Shem ha-Nora]. There the high priest calls out the Lord’s holiest name on the holiest of holy days (Yom Kippur) in the holiest of spaces: the holy of holies in the holy Temple in holiest Jerusalem. That name, announces the priest, is “Love.” For similar announcements by Stefan George, Arthur Rimbaud, and Federico Lorca, see Kramer 216-238.} In this, Langer was not unique: as Max Kramer has observed, in the emancipatory period “an idyll away from the heteronormative ideal of love was not yet conceivable, much less representable in the Modernist period.”\footnote{Kramer, 294.} I would amend Kramer’s observation slightly in consideration of Langer: that idyll was conceivable, but only in another future sanctified zone. It was an earthly idyll that was not conceivable or representable for emancipatory-era homosexual poets.\footnote{Michael Bronski put his finger on the matter in the early 1980s, describing the “cult of dispossession” as one of the defining characteristics of the “gay sensibility” produced through literature. Bronski writes that “one of the most common themes in gay writing is the creation of edenic situations free from the world’s hostility.” Bronski, Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility, 53-56.} In the following poem, the love between poet and male beloved engenders bodily transfiguration and ascent to a “higher world” where “endless light and love exist always” in the poet’s imagination:

**To My Comrade**

Like clouds that disperse at once to reveal star’s eternal white gaze over earth,
you too appeared before your lonely slave
and unknowingly stirred his desperate heart.

When I saw your stature, limber, perfect,
shooting flares of enchanting youth;
when I stared, parched, into your devoted eyes,
in which \( \text{Yah} \), the Eyn Sof, submerged his limitless depths and the interminable sorrow of his sweet secret.

Then I moaned and my spirit shakes
like a taut harp cord stroked by hand, and
my intensity in waves of song sweep toward you\footnote{I translated “\( \text{elekha yishtofu} \)” as “sweep toward you,” but the image is ambiguous and could also be rendered more erotically as “spray or wash upon you.”}
because the sea of my everlasting frost
you kindled with the rippling heat of your touch.\footnote{Kramer, 294.}
And when my heart recalls that hour of bliss,
that night’s beauty; the two of us walking the streets,
you placed your arm gently around my back
and recall as I recalled (as if concealed by fog)
the ancient legend, that pulls at the heart:

Of the love of two comrades, who with great
yearning
embraced one another;
and drunk in their embrace they rose silently
to higher worlds; to tranquil gardens
where endless light and love exist always.

“To My Comrade” divides fairly simply into three parts: the arrival of the male beloved and
the effect of his appearance on the poet (stanzas one and two); the poet’s ecstatic trance-like fantasy
(stanza three); and the poet’s double recollection (a recalling of a recalling) of his walk with his male
beloved, when he remembered the ancient legend of two friends who take flight to another world
(stanzas four and five). The poem is structured so that the poet’s feelings toward the beloved
intensify as the poem moves forward. The beloved’s appearance stirs the poet’s heart and from there
the poet’s desires —spoken through metaphor of course——increase: from his erotic appraisal of the
beloved’s body; to the first climactic image of his “song sweeping toward” the beloved; and finally
culminating, in something of a second climax, with his recollection-cum-fantasy of the ancient
legend of the friends who ascend heavenward.

The reader of this dissertation will immediately recognize that the poet has once again
embedded his feelings within the homosocial setting of friendship. The poem is, after all, addressed
“To My Comrade” [El Re’ee]; and the poet refers to their relationship as “the love [or affection] of
comrades” [khibat shnei re’im]. This time, however, the homosocial framework is buttressed by the
language of Jewish mysticism. Specifically, Langer draws on an established tradition that sanctifies
deep and passionate male friendships as central to the redemption of the individual, the collective,
and the world. As we have seen in previous chapters, ahavat haverim [friend love] had long been
understood as a spiritual pathway to dveikut and was especially privileged by the sixteenth-century
kabbalists of Safed and eighteenth and nineteenth-century Hasidim. Because of this established
tradition, Langer could describe same-sex desire using a highly sensuous mystical vocabulary without
breaking too many taboos. Indeed, Langer carefully choreographed a dance between mystical and
physical descriptions in this poem to reveal and conceal the poet’s erotic pleasure and fantasy. The
result of this weaving of mystical and physical imagery is that in any given description the poet’s
carnal desires can be interpreted by the reluctant or skeptical reader as spiritual excitation.

454 An alternate translation is: “because my frozen sea of existence you kindled with the rippling heat of your
pounding.” It is based on the use of “nitzkhi” in Lamentations 3:18 and “raga” in Isaiah 51:16, Jeremiah 31:35,
and Job 26:12. See my discussion in the text for further explanation.
455 But again, he carefully chose the Song-of-Songs-laden re’a—as in “this is my beloved and this is my friend
5:16) [zev dodi ve-zev re’ed]—a word that as we have seen several times now, was loaded with erotic valence
too. There is a long tradition of mystical interpretation of Song of Songs as well. See Elliot Wolfson, Language,
Eros, Being, 333-371.
From the very beginning, the poet presents himself as a “lowly” mystic-prophet. He invokes “heaven and earth” as any self-respecting prophet would, and with a “desperate heart,” he passively receives the beloved, who appears to him as a divine revelation or mystical vision. The beloved, the poet’s opposite in every way, is a celestial being whose arrival is compared to “star’s eternal white gaze.” The “white gaze” is used to describe the divine emanation in Zoharic and other Kabbalistic texts. In stanza two, the poet sizes up the beloved’s body (or stature) \( komah \), but the Hebrew word could easily substitute as a euphemism for penis. The body is “shooting flares” \( rishpei esh \) “of enchanted youth,” an image which draws directly from Song of Songs 8:6. At the same time, however, these highly sexual images could be written off as an elaborate description of the divine qualities of the beloved, whose eyes contain “the sweet secret” of \( Eyn Sof \). As discussed previously, the secret was used as a code word for “homosexuality” by other poets. In addition, Eliot Wolfson has shown that at least one of the major “secrets” of Jewish mysticism was the homoerotic nature of the mystic’s encounter with God (see chapter two for further discussion).

In stanza three, the poet shifts into a hypnotic trance engendered by the beloved. In Hebrew, the poet’s high is marked by a change in register (from the past tense to the Biblical future or present). This change in register reinforces what the poet states explicitly; he has entered a state of ecstasy: “then I moaned and my spirit [or being] shakes” \( az ne’enakhti ve-naphshi tizda’aze’ah \). What takes place during this rapture is expressed by the poet through two metaphors that once again simultaneously veil and reveal. For the reader open to the poet’s deviant sexuality, the poet can be read as reaching an orgasm: after his “taught harp cord” is strung, the poet’s “intensity in waves of song sweeps toward” the beloved. I have translated the phrase \( elekha yishtofu \) somewhat conservatively as “sweep toward you” to keep to the metaphor of “song,” but the phrase could also be rendered more erotically as “wash upon you” (in keeping with the “wave” in “waves of song”).

This first fluid metaphor is followed by a second: “because the sea of my everlasting frost you kindled with the rippling heat of your touch.” The term \( nitzkhi \), which I have translated as the adjective “everlasting,” can also be used as a noun meaning “existence” or “being” (as in Lamentations 3:18), so the phrase can also be translated: “because the frozen sea of my being you kindled…”\(^{*}456\) Either translation, however, does not do justice to the allusive quality of the original Hebrew. The phrase plays on the Biblical image of God pounding or striking the sea to produce rippling waves in Isaiah 51:16, Jeremiah 31:35, and Job 26:12.\(^{*}458\) Langer’s linking of the Hebrew

---


\(^{*}457\) \( Nitzkhi \) has also yet another Biblical sense: blood.

\(^{*}458\) NRSV: For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar — the Lord of hosts is his name.
words *mog* and *yam* is so distinctive that there can be little doubt he was drawing on the Biblical image; which it seems to me, once again offers the possibility of two readings. On the one hand, the allusion increases the sexual charge of the metaphor. The phrase evokes some combination of pounding and rippling, justifying a more explicitly erotic translation such as “because my frozen sea of existence you kindled with the rippling heat of your pounding.” The rippling effect (produced by the pounding perhaps during sex?) engenders the orgasm in the preceding verse, as the poet is careful to point out: “my intensity in waves of song sweeps toward you because the sea of my everlasting frost you kindled with the rippling heat of your pounding.” To be sure, the reluctant reader is left free to simply discard as much and to write off these metaphors as simple ornamentation. In such a reading, these metaphors would merely embellish the divine attributes of the poet’s “comrade” and communicate that he had roused an ecstatic but purely spiritual response in the poet.

Finally, in the last two stanzas, the poet recalls walking together in the street, when the actual physical touch of his re’ā (as opposed to the touch he merely fancied during the orgasm) jolts the poet into recalling the “ancient legend” of two friends who take flight to heaven—a mystical anabasis—while drunk in each other’s arms. In Hebrew, “recall as I recalled” is rendered zakharti zakhor, which is a clear play with the double entendre zakhar [male and remember]. Doubling zakhar in zakharti zakhor intensifies the verb “recall,” but also functions as a playful nod to the mindful like-minded reader: the doubling of zakhar mirrors the two males walking together in the street. It is the poet’s way of lightheartedly stressing: yes, this is what you think it is!

The distancing effect of twice recalling is familiar: first “his heart recalls that hour of bliss,” but within that recollection “as if through a fog,” he then recalls for a second time—“recall as I recalled”—the “ancient legend.” What’s more, Langer used another strategy to add another layer of distance between himself and the poem: he merely quotes an ancient legend. The operative word And, of course, that legend is itself ambiguous: it celebrates the “love of two comrades” [khibat shnei r’im], but these are not just any comrades, they are “drunk in each other’s embrace.” It is only through this quadruple or quintuple-layered screen (twice recalling, through fog, the ambiguous ancient legend) that his fantasy can be spoken.

For the minority reader, however, the poet’s “ancient legend,” is called upon to announce a future world, one in which “endless light and love exist always.” Currently such an existence is only possible in the higher worlds, but the prophetic implication (the poet’s vision) is that one day it too will exist in this world. In the poet’s world only “an hour of bliss” is possible. His wish to take flight
to “higher worlds; to tranquil gardens, where endless light and love exist always,” is in fact the prophecy-vision that he has received or been inspired to articulate.

**B. Fatal Attraction: Homosexual Desire and Mystical Self-Annihilation**

In this world, the homosexual experience was almost always represented as a conflict. Langer, too, usually represented his subject using metaphors related to aggression, violence, self-destruction, decay, and death. In “Charming Boy,” as we saw above, the poet’s encounter with his boy is celebrated by “wondrous divine song” but only before the sexual nature of their encounter materializes; once it does, the poet can only speak his desires “on the city park bench” through metaphors related to decay, devastation, and death.

In “The Might of the Beautiful” [Ha-Geturah she-be-tiferet] we have a clear example of how the mystic’s desire for self-annihilation and death was used by Langer to embed and make sense of same-sex desire:

**The Might of the Beautiful**

When the arid wins my lover’s gaze
a lovely garden it becomes, budding, blooming.
With his gentle smile and his gorgeous face,
as it radiates light, hearts ignite;
from his mouth pearls drip everywhere.
And when the heavenly host turns to his glory,
and oh, his whole body is exultation and rapture,
and hot youth’s intense desire comes to a boil—
on high they erupt in ecstatic dance.
But when I receive his glance—then every bush
burns
in my young garden and all joy completely stops.
His laughing face in my direction sprouts
unending sorrow, tears and wailing and fear.
And when azure sky is crushed in stars, 460
wandering outside, in bitter regret I’ll scream;
at the cleft of a deadly dark abyss my senses then

---

459 The title renders literally as “the strength [or bravery] within the beauty [or magnificent].” Hamutal Bar-Yosef translates it as “the might of the glory.” Bar-Yosef, *Mysticism in Twentieth Century Hebrew Literature*, 306. The title refers to a relation between the two sephirot (divine emanations) Gevurah and Tiferet. I have translated Gevurah as “violence” because Langer defined Gevurah as violence in *Die Erotik der Kabbala*. There Langer also argues that the “beautiful” [Tiferet] is the sephira representing the beautiful young male. See my full discussion of the title in the text below.

460 Alternate: And when azure sky wallows in its stars [as one wallows in ashes].
The basic contours of the poem look something like this: The poet describes the appearance of his male beloved and the opposing responses that the beloved provokes in him and the world around him (both human and supernal). The poem is structured around the polarizing presence of the beloved; it is divided neatly in half in a symmetrical chiaroscuro. In the first half of the poem (lines 1-9), the beloved’s glance irrigates the arid and rejuvenates nature. His smile is light and his face ignites the hearts of men. The seraphic court responds to his “glory” in jubilant dance. In the second half of the poem (lines 10-17), the beloved’s very same features prompt the reverse in the poet: his glance “burns every bush” in the poet’s “young garden,” his laughing face begets fear, sorrow, and tears. The poet’s encounter with the beloved ultimately leads him to “wander outside” and “to scream.” His senses overpower him and he desires to expunge his senses out into a “deadly dark abyss.”

Even the skeptical or hostile reader cannot avoid the simmering homoeroticism of this poem, which is fairly self-evident even without deep knowledge of its allusions, symbols, and metaphors (and even in translation). The poet again refers to his male beloved as dodi. And with turns of phrase like “hot youth’s intense desire comes to a boil,” and “blood’s virility desires to emerge [or burst],” the poem’s erotics are impossible to avoid. Yet, however difficult it might at first seem, the poem could be interpreted as mystical allegory. The poet’s dod could refer potentially refer to God. Though the poet refers to his face, gaze, and mouth, these specific physical parts are drawn from the allegorically-laden Song of Songs, which too has a long mystical interpretation (and indeed, Yisrael Najara was criticized for doing the same). To support the possibility of allegorical interpretation, Langer inserted three telling mystical symbols: the poem’s title ha-gevurah she-betiferet, of course, refers to the divine emanations or sephirot; gevurah and tiferet. The poet also compares the beloved to the sephirah of hod. In such an allegorical reading, it is his all-consuming desire for unity

461 The term lagiaxb is literally “to emerge” or “to burst out” and “to burst forth” (definition provided by http://www.ravmilim.co.il/) as in Bialik’s "שנ תפשום, פתנים שחורים אראה בקעו, גחו מעיניה אל לבתי, ירדו אף נשכו". But it might also mean something like “to rush” or “to pour” (evoking an image of spraying perhaps?) as in Job 40:23:

| Robert Alter: Look, he swallows a river at his ease, untroubled while Jordan pours into his mouth | או אל רֹאִי נַחֲזְק כֶּפֶר אֵל יָהֵפוּ יִבְּשָׁת כִּפְרָי |
| NSRV: Even if the river is turbulent, it is not frightened; it is confident though Jordan rushes against its mouth. | יָגִיח יַרְדֵּן אֶל פְּיוֹו |

462 Bar-Yosef translates this final verse as follows: “Over the chasm of dark death my senses then erupt/and to it my blood’s potency then desires to enter” Bar-Yosef, Mysticism in Twentieth Century, 306.
with God that leads him to burst at death’s dark abyss. It is his status as mystic that makes the poet an outsider, different from normal society. Because the Jewish mystical tradition portrays the mystical encounter between poet and God as erotically charged (and even homoerotic), the poet’s sexual-sounding metaphors are aesthetically and morally unproblematic.

As we have come to expect, this coding worked both ways: the same concealing metaphors brought the poem’s erotic heat to a boil for the minority reader receptive to its queer messages. The lover’s body is compared to the sephirah hod, which as Hamutal Bar-Yosef points out, may also refer to his penis:

This is undoubtedly a homosexual, erotic poem, but with its title the poet, an observant Hasidic Jew, directed the reader to the idea that the sexual experience causes—at least metaphorically—a union of the two heavenly sephirot, gevurah and tiferet. Later in this poem, the lover’s body (or maybe his sex organ) is compared to the sephira hod (according to its traditional symbolism in the Zohar).

Though not quite “undoubtedly,” as Bar-Yosef put it, this is indeed a homosexual poem, at least for the reader open to taking its metaphors seriously. Bar-Yosef’s equivocation about the double meaning of hod is telling: it reflects, yet again, the deliberate ambiguity that Langer created that I have been describing. Regardless, Bar-Yosef’s suggestion that hod describes the beloved’s penis elides comfortably with the poet’s line about “hot youth’s intense desire com[ing] to a boil.” Either way, it is not merely the specific double meaning of hod, but the entire frame of mysticism that allows the poet to speak about his erotic desires. Through mystical metaphor the poet can verbalize his desires while maintaining respectability and keeping to a normative Jewish aesthetic.

It seems that the more sexual the image, the more violent and extreme the metaphor. Portraying himself (or the poet) as a mystic seeking self-annihilation and death, Langer could then speak the most unspeakable of his sexual desires: “at the cleft of a deadly dark abyss my senses then will burst and my blood’s virility desires to spray out to it.” What exact sexual act this metaphor points to is, of course, intentionally ambiguous, though the options are also, of course, limited.

We are fortunate to have an earlier handwritten draft of this poem. This draft illuminates the erotic meaning of these metaphors and, more importantly, provides additional evidence that Langer worked hard to create the revealing/concealing effect. In comparing drafts it is clear that Langer juggled with how much to reveal. There are three changes Langer made that are worth our attention:

(1) First, in the handwritten version, Langer dedicated the poem “(to a friend)” lekhaver. He also used the less-erotically charged yedidi rather than dodi. Yedid is also used erotically in Song of Songs as we have seen, but dodi still has a higher sexual charge. Langer’s decision to use

---

463 Bar-Yosef, 306.
464 The sephira Yesod is the emanation that is most often associated with the image of the phallus. I have not yet been able to determine whether Bar-Yosef’s claim is accurate, but her mastery of a range of Hebrew literature is well known. It is possible that Langer compares the beloved’s penis to hod, though the sephira has no traditional association with it.
465 The handwritten version is available in the Langer archive at Genazim (Bet Ha-Sofer, Tel Aviv).
Certainly intensified the sexuality of the poem. His choice to remove “(to a friend)” intensified the sexual connotation of dodi.

(2) Langer’s second significant edit is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hand-written Version</th>
<th>Published Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>אתה צבא RAM אל, הודו ישגייח, ונהה בennessee זבח הצלחת</td>
<td>אתה צבא מון אל, הודו ישגייח, ומג ון צוות ירוניצחוה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And when the heavenly host turns to his glory, and oh, every tendon of his body sings adoring verse</td>
<td>And when the heavenly host turns to his glory, and oh, his whole body is exultation and rapture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here we have an example of how Langer concealed the poem’s explicit sexual imagery. The term “bod,” as Bar-Yosef suggests, might refer to the beloved’s penis. In the earlier hand-written version, Langer reinforced such an interpretation using a second metaphoric hint: “every tendon [kol gid] of his body sings adoring verse.” To be sure, the reference is to every tendon, so the resistant reader could easily reject this sexual second meaning as well. But the “every” in “every tendon” is suggestive. And gid can be more extensive than “tendon,” referring to any kind of ligature or connective tissue in the body, and perhaps even to the penis. Either way, it seems Langer preferred extra caution by changing the verse.

(3) Langer’s third edit achieved a similar obscuring effect and sheds light on the meaning of the poem’s climactic finale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hand-written Version</th>
<th>Published Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>על צלמות-תיהום חוסי יגעשו וואן דמי לתוכה פורץ להגייח</td>
<td>על פי תיהום צלמות אד חוסי געשא, ושאאן דמי אליה שוקק להגייח</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on the shadow-death abyss my senses will burst and my blood’s virility breaks into it to burst</td>
<td>at the cleft of deadly-shadow abyss then my senses will burst and my blood’s virility desires to spray out toward it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No doubt both of these metaphors are X-rated. But the final published version was clearly the far safer way to go. In the handwritten version, the key words are letokha poretz le-hagiakh [breaks into it to burst], which suggests that perhaps the poet would like to ejaculate within one of his lover’s orifices. This interpretive possibility is obscured, however, in the final published version of the poem. In the final version, Langer described a more ambiguous desire: his blood’s virility “desires to spray toward” or “desires to leap out toward” rather than to “break” or “penetrate” into something. But regardless of the edit, it seems probable that in both versions the poet is referring to the beloved’s mouth rather than his anus. “Probably” because the parallelism of the two halves of the poem suggests it. We recall that in the first half of the poem, the poet describes the effect of the beloved’s gaze, face, and mouth on everyone else. In the second half of the poem, the poet describes...

466 His edit also changed the rhyme scheme, but this is clearly not the motive for the change, since tehilot (in the hand-written version) would have kept to the “b” rhyme in verse 3 and 5.
the reverse effect on him, but he only mentions the beloved’s gaze and his face. It is only when the poet finally refers to “the cleft of deadly-shadow abyss” that he completes the parallel: the Hebrew for “cleft,” peh, literally means “mouth.” The minority-reader might interpret the final verse as: “I desire to ejaculate toward your mouth.”

Setting these telling editorial adjustments aside, there can be no doubt that Langer portrayed the poet’s erotic desires in this poem as an all-consuming, violent, and even self-destructive struggle. To reinforce this sense that homosexual desire is linked to conflict, suffering, and potentially to death, Langer combined two sets of Biblical allusion throughout the poem: the language of Song of Songs (dodi; “lovely garden;” and the focus on the beloved’s eyes, face, and mouth) was melded with several elegiac phrases from Job (and one from Lamentations). The latter include:

- the bush [siakh]
- tzalmavet [literally “death’s shadow”], which is used at least ten times in Job, the most frequent and concentrated use of the term in the Bible (though it does appear sparingly elsewhere);
- the distinct linkage of “burst” [ga’ash] with death;
- the language of emerging or bursting [la-giakh];
- and (from Lamentations): the image of “crushing” stars [kupashn].

---

467 It also seems to me that his subtle change in the preceding verse had a similar effect. Langer changed “on the dark death-abyss my senses will burst” to “at the cleft [or mouth] of a deadly dark abyss then my sense will burst.” This subtle shift allows the verse to evoke a metaphoric space or condition that the poet stands before, while the original “death-abyss” seems more like a metaphor for something (say an orifice) that the poet is physically lying “on.” But regardless of authorial intent (in its handwritten or final version), all of Langer’s emendations work to cool the poem’s eroticism.

468 Song of Songs 1:10, 2:14, 4:12, 4:16-5:1, 5:10-13.

469 For siakh see Job 12:8 and 30:4.

470 For tzalmavet see: Job 3:5, 10:21, 10:22, 12:22, 16:16, 24:17, 28:3, 34:22, 38:17. Also, while tehom [abyss] is used throughout the Bible, it also appears relatively frequently in Job as well, as in Job 28:14, 38:16, 38:30, 41:24.

471 Alter: In a moment they die, at midnight, a people’s upturned, passes on, the mighty swept off, by no hand.

472 Alter: Look, he swallows a river at his ease, untroubled while Jordan pours into his mouth.

473 JTS: He has broken my teeth on gravel/ Has ground me into the dust.
By mixing erotic and elegiac allusions, Langer reinforced the link between overpowering erotic desire and the mystic-poet’s desire for death.

One final point before moving on. Much of the affective power of this little poem has not been reproduced in my translation. Once again, Langer borrowed the form and style of a medieval Hispano-Hebrew belt poem, but he masterfully played with its formal elements to create a very subtle but distinctly dissonant modernist effect in the Hebrew. One might even describe this effect as expressionist-like or vertigo-inducing.

The poem’s rhyme scheme best demonstrates the point. The poem’s rhyme, mirroring its medieval Hebrew precedent, follows convention until line 14, after which point the rhyme scheme is broken. Had he continued to follow prescribed convention, the poet should have included one additional line between lines 13 and 14. The rhyme scheme goes like this:

[line 1] aababacacadad [missing “a” rhyme] caca [line 17]

In fact, in a hand-written earlier version of this poem, we find that Langer had originally included another line with the missing rhyme. But Langer deliberately removed this additional line and withheld the rhyme, creating instead, a discordant sound effect. Until this point in line 14, the poem is aurally a more-or-less smooth-sailing ride. But when the reader-listener hears the wrong note at the end of line 14, it is as if the poet has broken a string on his guitar, or shifted into the wrong key. By removing the line that would have kept the rhyme scheme, Langer created a harsh dissonant aural transition which, it seems to me, is distinctly modernist. With this sour aural transition, the poet then introduces the disturbing and totally-unanticipated finale, in which we read of the sudden but total emotional unraveling of the poet: first “wandering outside,” then screaming, and then bursting at the cleft of the dark abyss of death. What’s more, after line 14, the poet reuses the recurring rhyme ee-akh in a starkly dark manner. Before line 14, the rhyme ee-akh is attached to positive and light-hearted words like igniting, flowering, beholding, boiling, or brush [yafriakh, yatzmiakh, martyakh, yashgiakh, siakh], which helps distract the reader-listener from the violent finale to come. After line 14, the rhyme is used with the violent verbs “screaming” [atzriakh] and “to burst” or “to spray out” [la-giakh].

The rhyme scheme, in other words, is put to work by the poet to create a harsh and discordant effect in three respects: first, it is used to distract the reader-listener from what is to come; second, it is strategically withheld (or changed) to dissonantly announce the poet’s warped shift into a new state; and then finally, the rhyme is used to reinforce the image of the poet losing control in the final three verses.

I have elaborated on this effect because it is an example of Langer’s distinct modernist experimentation: how he created a modernist effect while imitating a medieval Hispano-Hebrew form. In this, like in so many other of his poetic moves, Langer created a Hebrew modernist sound within a pre-modern Hebrew form.
D. On Sin and Performing Shame: Two Types of Mystical Gay-Jewish Hero

Some readers may be wondering whether Langer’s tortured representations of same-sex desire—his “bursting at the cleft of a deadly dark abyss”—had any grounding in his biography. Was Langer conflicted about his homosexuality? Was he ashamed of his feelings? Did he live an ascetic or celibate life? One can go no further than wonder. There is no evidence external to this poetry from which to draw direct biographical conclusions one way or the other. What’s important for our purposes is the staged voice of the Jewish homosexual performed in this poetry.474

Undoubtedly, the male homosexual voice of Langer’s poetry is often (though not exclusively), represented as tortured, decadent, and struggling with sin and shame. The poet’s love and sexual desire for his male beloved are always displaced: onto nature, projected onto other hearts, and celebrated in another world by the heavenly court. They are never stated directly in a positive and affirming manner by the poet in “this world.” When the poet does articulate his own same-sex feelings, he usually does so through metaphors of violent conflict, pain, suffering, and shame. Take as another example, the following stanzas from the poem “My Day” [Yomi]. Here Langer staged the poet’s desires as a violent conflict that culminates in the poet’s self-immolation because the male beloved’s beauty is too great. The poem is laced with allusions to Lamentations and Job, infusing its violent metaphors with an elegiac shameful aftertaste:

And when shafts of your quiver struck me in rage
and my whole rock, my whole bastion, was split by the thunder—
I recalled that smile every time
and I wandered after you helplessly.

And so, when you sink into the deep’s fog
and that smile remains hovering in the celestial twilight,
you will become the morning star for dreamers,
who come after me and will be consumed in it like me.

Yes, there can be no doubt that a poet who constructed the male homosexual voice in such a manner had either deeply struggled with his homosexuality himself or else empathized with others like him who struggled with its association with iniquity and ignominy. Langer did give this struggling homosexual a clear voice in a number of his poems. It is implausible that a writer could versify such inner conflict without at some level being able to imagine and identify with such a voice himself. Yet we should not make too much out of Langer’s enactment of shame, violence, or conflict either.

Some scholars have all too quickly taken these types of tortured depictions at face value. Representations of shame were also opportunities for homosexual poets to stage same-sex desire in verse. Often shame was simply a trope: by “embedding” the subject in “actual or alleged

474 Undoubtedly, as Frederick S. Roden writes, “too much gay and queer studies work has focused on questions of “did they or didn’t they?” See Roden’s review of Ellis Hanson’s Decadence and Catholicism, Nineteenth-Century Literature 54:1 (June 1999), 119-123, 121.
condemnation of homosexuality,” as Keilson-Lauritz writes, the subject could be broached in the
first place. Decadent tropes of moral decay, violent self-laceration, and shame allowed the poet to
convey the subject while distancing himself from moral and legal censure by seeming to condemn
the very subject he hoped to bring to light. Only “as Shame,” writes Ellis Hanson, “not as Love,
could homosexuality be permitted to have any emotional, ethical, or political content.” 475

Portraying same-sex love as shameful was also a form of resistance. Ellis Hanson has
described this as the “transvaluation of shame,” in which Decadent homosexual writers reclaimed
and appropriated the word “shame” as part of a broader aesthetic and moral redemption of the
beautiful sinner.477 Ellison describes how this reclaiming and performing of shame was so
widespread that it often functioned as a euphemism—yet another example of homosexual coding–
where “the word shame had become virtually a synonym for sexual acts between men.”478

Undoubtedly, for many homosexual poets, this also allowed them to enact conflicted feelings about
desires they were coming to terms with and had difficulty verbalizing (and for many, never resolved.)
But for others, staging homosexual desire as a conflict or as shameful allowed them to infuse such
representations with irony. Shame could be performed as parody or in a style (camp), which
rendered it powerless and ridiculous. We will see more of this latter subversive strategy later in the
chapter.

We have already seen that Langer’s representations of shame and conflict were also, at some
level, a performance. Like other contemporary homosexual writers, shame allowed Langer to
communicate same-sex desire, as we saw above in The Violence within the Beautiful. There the mystic-
poet’s violent conflict and desire for death masks and reveal his overpowering sexual passions at the
same time.

Here we shall focus on two additional ways that Langer used mysticism to appropriate and
“transvalue” sin and shame. Broadly speaking, both of these strategies entailed using mystical
representations to present the homosexual as a normative Jewish hero. Langer did this in two ways:
first, he used the language of *tikkun* to present the homosexual as a brave mystic who searches for
the “holy spark” [*nitzotz*] within his impure, sinful, and material desires (a *kelipah* [shell] in Lurianic
terms). Take the following stanzas from the poem “To a Foreign Friend” [*Lekhaver Nokhri*]:

Woe, this time happiness came close but passed me by and
how quickly did it pass!
The terror has returned to my abandoned and lonely soul,
once again fifty gates of impurity have their maws gaping,
ready to swallow me deep down below into Sheol.

And I see: I will return as I did before
to search through the turds of my shamed lust
for the holy sparks of pure love

475 „Einbettung in wirkliche oder vorgebliche Verurteilung der Homosexualität; hierher gehört z.B. die
Einbettung in das Thema „Dekadenz,‘ „Narzißmus,‘ aber auch etwa in die sogenannte „Satirische Tradition““
Keilson-Lauritz, „Maske und Signal,“70.
476 Hanson, 88-90
477 Hanson, 87.
478 Ibid.
through fields of night – a futile and worthless hope!
A futile and worthless hope of a fool losing his mind;
for which you deserted me!

In these two stanzas we have two intertwined examples of the utility of mysticism for handling shame. In the first of the two, the poet presents himself as facing a distinct mystically-inflected temptation: “fifty gates of impurity.” The image is telling: it both reflects the decadence of his desires, but also suggests an erotic fantasy too. The fifty gates have “their gullets gaping, ready to swallow [the poet] into Sheol.” In the Hebrew, the verbs pa’aru [to open wide] and liv’loa [to swallow] evoke the image of a mouth or orifice (supported by the image of the gate). Through this mystical metaphor, then, the poet once again communicates a sexual image of a gaping orifice waiting for him. Earlier in the poem, the poet describes the reverse—he opens his gate for the beloved—using yet another mystical metaphor, the “blackening fire”: “I opened my heart to you like a temple’s gate/—and you stabbed me;/ you shot a blackening fire through my bones.” In these images, once again, mystical metaphors of violent conflict and shame are used to do the double duty of expressing pleasure.

In the second stanza, the poet portrays himself as a hero who transmutes the sinful into the holy. The poet, in the role of noble mystic, harshly lacerates himself for wallowing in iniquity, but ultimately redeems his tainted existence by searching for the holy spark. In such a framework, the poet benefits from portraying his sin in as extreme a manner as possible, and so he does: he “searches through turds of [his] shamed lust.” By staging his shame through the extreme image of “turds,” the poet affords himself the opportunity to aggrandize his heroic stature: the greater the sin, the more noble the extraction of the holy spark from it. To be sure, this second mystical metaphor also continues to communicate an erotic message as well, building upon the erotic-mystical metaphor of the “fifty gates” in the first stanza. To a like-minded reader open to the poet’s deviant messages, his mention of “turds” in close proximity to the open orifice evokes an image of an anus or even anal sex. No suspension of disbelief is necessary here: these kinds of metaphors are not unusual among Decadent and Symbolist poets of the era. Perhaps the most famous example are Arthur Rimbaud’s poems *Sonnet du trou du cul* [“Sonnet of the Asshole”], “Bottom,” *Accroupissements* [“Squattings”], and *Les Assis* [“The Men Who Sit”], in addition to several others.479 Again, the metaphors easily lend themselves to a non-homosexual reading.

Langer also represented the homosexual as a mystical Jewish hero in a second manner: as a tragic figure who suffers alone, withholding himself from same-sex love (including sex). The suffering of the homosexual is of mystical significance. This is dramatized clearly in the following poem:

---

479 Kramer,
Meeting
My being was bereft of peace on a night of murk, a night of cold, and a current of life brought you to me—and passed.
Join me you beckoned to my heart, and your lips dripped with myrrh.
And I upon my path will embark alone, far far away.
Since I told myself: perhaps in the heart of my darkness a light is hidden.

The sexual nature of the meeting between poet and his beloved is hinted at through a single allusion to Song of Songs 5:13: “your lips dripped with myrrh.” (The reference is subtle enough to allow a non-homoerotic (or even a religious-allegorical) reading of the poem.) The poet, however, does not follow the beckoning of his male beloved (or God). He goes his own way to search for a light hidden in his “heart of his darkness.” The “light [that] is hidden” is a play in Hebrew on the or ha-ganuz, a mystical reference to the “hidden light” of creation that will only be revealed at the end of days. The implication is that the poet will go it alone and suffer his fate, which he hopes will have redemptive consequences. We recall from chapter two that Langer argued for the heroism of the celibate Biblical character Joseph, whom he lauded for having resisted the temptations of both Potiphar’s wife and Potiphar according to the Midrash. The mystical depiction we have here comports with Langer’s reading of Joseph: the poet resists the beloved’s erotic call in his attempt to sanctify himself, to transmogrify his dark desires into light and bring personal and collective redemption.

In both of these mystical-hero representations—the “spark-redeemer” and the “suffering servant”—the poet is especially invested in performing his supposed shame and suffering for the reader. The more shameful same-sex desire is portrayed, the greater the possibility for the poet’s heroic overcoming of that shame; and the bigger the spark of holiness he can extract from it; and the more explicit sexual images he can express. Not only is the homosexual a hero in these representations, but even if he fails to find the spark or to keep celibate—even if he loses himself to his same-sex desires—he is participating in a daring noble quest. In sum, by portraying the homosexual as a mystic struggling with sin, Langer found yet another aesthetic space for representing the otherwise ugly, unspeakable, and morally-suspect Jewish homosexual in Hebrew verse while drawing on Hebrew’s centuries-long textual legacy.

Let me conclude by highlighting a qualification. There are Langer poems that deal with same-sex love without explicit suggestions of shame at all. In “On New Year’s Eve,” which we will

---

480 “Myrrh” also appears in Song of Songs 3:6 and 5:5.

---

481 Another example of this strategy (not explored here) is Langer’s “Song of the Lily” [Shirat Ha-Shoshana.]
read later in the chapter, the poet yearns for his male beloved with no hint of guilt or remorse at all. When the poet and his beloved are in another world or about to ascend to the beyond, there is no direct hint of shame either (other than the backdrop of what is impossible on earth). Shame and suffering, then, was not the entirety of Langer’s personal story nor was it the only mode in which he represented same-sex love in his poetry. Though Langer wrote of “a secret love that I did not dare to love to completion” (in “As Expiring Inside”), the poet’s voice should not be taken as a mirror of Langer’s personal sexual life. If the scholar followed this erroneous logic, she would have to give equal weight as well to the sexual images we have seen above (and will continue to see below). The same poet who declared that he rejected the beloved’s myrrh-dripping lips to embark alone also described the “shafts of [his] quiver str[i]king [him] in rage.” It is far more fruitful to keep our eye on the imagined and enacted voice of the Jewish male homosexual than to try to do the tabloid guesswork about Langer’s sex life. The enacted male homosexual voice is as historically revealing as any “real” Jewish homosexual voice the scholar could ask for. But shame was only one mode for bringing that voice to life for Hebrew readers. And even so, it should not necessarily be taken at face value.

C. Encountering God as Male Lover

Let me conclude this portion of the discussion by providing one final example of how Langer staged homoerotic desire with mysticism. The strategy here is distinct from what we have seen until now: the poet sublimates completely his same-sex desires into a homoerotic appraisal of divine beauty. In so doing, Langer casted the poet’s same-sex desires within a recognizably traditional Jewish mystical framework, the homoerotic posture of the Jewish mystic toward God:

When I See Your Skies

Like a bad dream sinking into eternal night
a day within my lot speaks to other days. At the bank
of the river I stare in wonder: from where do you arrive and to where do you hurry?
And a suppressed moan rises from my throat;
the heart is shaken, exhausted, and miserable.
I turn my eyes to heaven—and my soul will sing to you:

Your skies I see, the stars, the crescent,
your mouth drips dew deep in the void of space
---and my head before you I bow: Adiriron!

The mystic-poet contemplates, in a Qohelet [Ecclesiastes]-like key, his place in the world in light of the Lord’s awesome beauty reflected in nature. That the poet stands in mystical contemplation of

\footnote{“Ecclesiastes-like” because of the poet’s question and because Langer seems to have drawn on Ecclesiastes 5:1 with *nimhar* and the play on words, *bevel*/*vahel*.}
the divine is revealed by his calling out to the rare but mystically-oriented name Adiriron. The homoerotic element within Adiriron's beauty is evoked by the anthropomorphizing phrase "ra'isi be'evd pikha" [your mouth drips dew], which draws on Song of Songs 5:2. Other subtle gestures in the Hebrew give the poem a slight sensual touch: the poet's moan, his weary heart, his arching head, his singing soul or being [ve'naftsi lekha taron], and even the name he calls out: Adiriron. Adiriron emphasizes God's power and his total dominance over the poet. Together these elements point to an erotic relation of submission by the poet to his divine interlocutor, whose beauty overwhelms him.

The poet desires escape from this world likened to a “bad dream” within “eternal night.” His posture is one of passive waiting to be taken in mystical self-abandon. The strategy was to aestheticize and spiritualize his same-sex desires within a recognizable and normative Jewish aesthetic frame: the mystic who desires homoerotic union with God. This complete blurring of religious and erotic metaphor was not uncommon among emancipatory-era homosexual poets looking for frames to make meaning of their desire, to elevate it beyond the carnal, and put the unspeakable into verse.

II. The Loner, the “Greek” Artist, and the Search for Family

Another of Langer’s regular framing devices was the tragic and miserable loner, who exists in exile from civilization. The homosexual poet is repeatedly depicted as the victim of an inalterable condition, which is tragic, frustrating, at times dangerous, but above all lonesome. In these poems, Langer represented the poet as divorced from the rest of society. Like a leper, the poet sits outside

| Alter: Be not rash with your mouth, and let your heart not hurry to utter a word before God. For God is in the heavens and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. | קהלת ה:א

> אל-תבהל על-פי ולבר אל-ימר

> לוחצם דרב לוף מקולם

> כליהם בשם אתה-לטרא

> על-היה ודברך משמיע

| Bloch and Bloch: I was asleep but my heart stayed awake. Listen! My lover knocking: “Open, my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one! My hair is wet, drenched with the dew of night.” | Thần: ה:ב

> אֲנִי יְשֵׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֵר קוֹל דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק

> פִּתְחִי-לִי אֲחֹתִי רַעְיָתִי יוֹנָתִי תַמָּתִי

> שֶׁרֹּאשִׁי נִמְלָא-レスִיסֵי טָל קְוֻצּוֹתַי

> לָיְלָה

483 On “Adiriron”: see The Book of Sacred Names, Jacobus G. Swart (Sangreal Sodality,) 69

484 Take by way of comparison, the opening of Stefan George’s Lobgesang [“Encomium”] from Der siebente Ring [The Seventh Ring].
of Israel’s camp, or to use a Langer metaphor, he sits beyond the pale of the city. At times, the poet is represented as exiling himself; forced to wander “far far away” (a phrase Langer repeated in a number of poems through the years). At other times, the poet encounters fleeting bits of pleasure from the appearance of a male beloved, but these generally end badly (with some of the exceptions we have seen above). The poet’s male beloved does appear in some of his “loner” poems, but sometimes he does not appear at all. Still, Langer took pains to link the poet’s solitude to the homosexual experience, once again through code: he always juxtaposes the poet’s isolation with heterosexual “human” (his word) and family life. He stands apart from the happy, living, normative heterosexual couples around him.

Here are an array of verses that give a sense of the poet’s loneliness and his sense that he is excluded from normal and normative “human” existence:

❖ In my attic/ I sat and I gazed/ alone /upon the city […] And the city below/ tranquil and calm/ and in the windows of its houses/ --there/ the bliss of light/the bliss of human beings. (Alone)

❖ What more do you ask my soul?/To bask in the brilliant honor/ of one single soul/ to be my light and sun— /that I will ask for my soul! (Peace Beneath My Cypress)

❖ To sit at the brink of the deep/ my lonesome miserable self/ and a thread of kindness to pull/from the empty void./And so I do./ From the void/the thread I pull/ as if cursed. Until the end arrives/ a day of praise/ and the thread cuts off/ and the grave is sealed/ and all the wretchedness/sinks into the deep. (A Thread of Grace)

❖ And in Tishrei /in Sukkot booths/ grooms and brides /leave their scent for me;/and in the booth of fragrant delight/ my sorrow sits silently/and I and I and I. (Night of Iyar, Night of Radiant Spring Moon)

❖ And I upon my path will embark alone, far far away. Since I told myself: perhaps in the heart of my darkness a light is hidden. (Meeting)

❖ When the poet finally finds his male beloved, his “blossom of wonders,” he describes it as follows: “I left to stroll in the field when the day grew late/ at the hour when the hunting animals lie in wait/ and in the shepherd’s grove—wonder of wonders—guess who!/ On two cheeks—the flowers: not one, but two!!!/ --But surely those I didn’t allow my heart to pick/- -only the memory of the thing in a book did I stick.” (Blossom of Wonders)

❖ I will not be a bad neighbor my awesome world!/ I will not battle for your bread in belligerent wrath[…] I will not wear a garland of ashes/ I will not weave thorns between my flowered wreath. (I will not be a Bad Neighbor)
Once again Langer was in good company. Representing the male homosexual as a tragic figure was a widespread strategy used by homosexual writers throughout the emancipatory-era period. It is probably the most often remarked feature of homosexual writing.\footnote{Robert Aldrich has described it as follows: [it is] the traditional homosexual dilemma in the period before ‘gay liberation’, their desires make them socially deviant and “must flee to some other place to act upon them, who can hope for only momentary and episodic satisfaction and who is condemned to ostracism, criminal conviction or death. Gregory Woods echoes Aldrich as follows: “…at the end of the nineteenth century male homosexuality…starts to be written about as an essentially tragic condition. Sadness, loneliness, and a tendency to end in either suicide or worse have been regarded by many—and not only heterosexuals— as being inherent in the condition.” Robert Aldrich, \textit{The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy,} 1st ed. (Routledge, 1993), 4; Woods, \textit{A History of Gay Literature}, 217. Woods devotes a chapter to this theme: “The Tragic Sense of Life,” ibid, 217-226.}

Counterintuitive as it may first seem to contemporary readers, representing the homosexual as a tragic loner without family was not exclusively a symptom of the homosexual’s oppression. This was yet another way for poets to represent this modern figure in literature at all. The frame of the tragic loner also allowed homosexual writers to deflect attention away from the shameful aspects of sinful sex. It appealed to the sympathies of readers without directly spelling out the source of the poet’s misery and thus, contravening lines of middle-class respectability. Evoking pathos, like performing shame, also had its ennobling side; as Michael Bronski describes, “Their feelings of self-pity signified for many [homosexual] writers their uniqueness. If they suffered because they were not accepted, this suffering ennobled them, even while it placed them further outside the bounds of ordinariness.”\footnote{Bronski, \textit{Culture Clash}, 47.} Tragedy, after all, was for the homosexual, as Heather Love writes, at times “a mark of Romantic distinction.”\footnote{Heather Love, “Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence.” \textit{New Formations} (Winter 2008), 52-64, 63.} \footnote{Ibid, 63.}

It was also undoubtedly real. Emphasizing the aesthetic utility of the poet’s longing, loneliness, and loss, should not anesthetize our senses from the very real pain that, at times, appears in Langer’s verse. Yet pain can be genuine and staged in the work of the very same poet. We should not ignore the diversity and complexity with which Langer represented the homosexual’s existence.\footnote{In fact, Dror inverted the relationship between loneliness and homosexuality, arguing that Langer’s love poems are but another manifestation of his essential condition of loneliness (rather than seeing both as part of the homosexual experience and as tropes of homosexual literature). See Dror, MA Thesis, 58. She writes: בדריות של המשורר ברוך היא-כלומרلفופקemy הנלות עלולות של פיזור ושלמות ההברה המוקיפות¦ והעדים-אלה עדヘה כרכ פר כרכ אבר נון. לכלך יש לארוא בנותה היא ומיל יושר לארוא בנותה של נשרא המזרחי."}

By representing the homosexual through the figure of the loner, homosexual writers could take up aspects of the homosexual experience without having to make recourse to a male beloved or to same-sex sex. For the majority reader, of course, these poems could be written off as simply about the poet’s solitude. Indeed, Miriam Dror, although quite aware of Langer’s homosexuality, categorized many of these “loner” poems separately from Langer’s love poetry.\footnote{Ibid, 63.} But for the
minority reader, the poet’s self-representations as social pariah and fatherless wanderer would have been recognizable as reflecting the homosexual experience (even if this was merely one aspect of that experience). Of course, Langer dropped revealing hints that helped the like-minded reader recognize the homosexual subtext to his representations. In several poems, the image of the loner poet is directly linked to his yearning for a male beloved, for a family, and for children. Take, for example, the lugubrious “Dressed in Pride” below:

**Dressed in Pride [Dressed in Grandeur]**

At dusk I leave my house to roam, and behold: out in the streets the masses celebrate and wander about.

Couple after couple, young men with young women go about, arms interwoven, or wrapped around each other’s backs.

I watched, I was glad, and I donned pride, because I am like them, human.

When I die-- people will come, and thread fabric from my clothes for the children.

The language of this poem is relatively straightforward: the poet leaves his house to wander the city alone. He is surprised, though pleased, to discover that like the young heterosexual couples around him, he too is human, though he remains distinct from them. But why is the poet surprised that to discover that he is human? Langer forces the reader to consider why such a revelation was necessary in the first place. The only logical conclusion, based on the evidence within the poem itself, is that the poet might not have been human because he cannot participate in the celebration of the young heterosexual couples in the streets and that he cannot bring children.

Crucial for Langer is the poet’s final metaphor: “When I die-- people will come, and thread fabric from my clothes for the children.” The poet’s “clothes,” of course, is his poetry. His poetry, rather than his progeny, will bring him immortality and legacy. His art takes the place of his impossible children and his role as artist reminds him that he too, like them, is human.

This points us to the second framing strategy at hand: Langer, like other emancipatory-era homosexual writers assigned the homosexual the role of artist and producer of culture. This is a social role that is reinforced in several of Langer’s poems. As we saw in chapter three, aesthetics were given a central role by German masculinists and many other homosexuals in this period. Following Plato and Winckelmann (as well as others), the homosexual was conceived as the possessor of distinct aesthetic sensibility; homoerotic desire was widely conceived as the necessary springboard for the production of art, culture, and philosophy; and the homosexual’s aesthetic creations were seen as substitutes for children. We recall Diatoma’s speech from the *Symposium*. 
When he [the male loving male] attaches himself to someone beautiful, I believe, and associates with him, he gives birth and brings forth what he was pregnant with before, both while in that person’s presence and while remembering him when he is absent. Together with him he nurtures the offspring produced, so that such men have much more to share with each other and stronger friendship than that which comes from rearing children, since they share in the rearing of children who are more beautiful and more immortal.  

Another strategy for linking the homosexual to the social role of artist-philosopher was to depict a hierarchical and pederastic dynamic between poet and beloved. As Max Kramer describes, “using the language of pederasty was a classical Modernist strategy to attenuate the scandal of inversion because the love of boys invoked a venerable culture…Even if sexual intercourse between a man and an adolescent male had long ceased to be socially acceptable, thanks to the renewed interest in the art of the ancient world during the Renaissance this aspect of Greek culture had survived as a topos in European literature.” Langer, like other contemporary homosexual poets, believed that by imitating the pederastic tradition, they were situating their own art within a normative canonical tradition in Western art. In these representations, Langer depicts himself as a philosopher-artist whose encounter with his beloved boy inspires him to write or reflect. We saw this early in our discussion of “Charming Lad,” where Langer portrayed their meeting on a city park bench as an occasion to reflect on the evanescence of pleasure. Two other Langer poems that draw on the aesthetic model of pederasty are “Blossom of Wonders” and “On the Margins of a Song for a Young Friend.”

As Timothy d’Arch Smith described in his pioneering study of the English Uranians in 1970, homosexual poetry in a pederastic key usually exhibits the following traits—and this is true of Langer’s three pederastic-style poems:

a) the male youth functions as the poet’s muse

b) the poet is frustrated and mourns the fleeting nature of the encounter with the youth

c) the poet attempts to seduce his young beloved with gifts, especially his poetry

---


493 Kramer, 397.

494 The number of homosexual writers who use the pederastic tradition in literature is vast. At the very least it would include the English Uranians, Hopkins, Pater, Wilde, August von Platen, John Henry Mackay, Constantin Cavafy (Greece), Andre Gide, Henry de Montherlant, Thomas Mann, Sandro Penna, Stefan George, Arthur Rimbaud, Federico Lorca, Jiri ze Karazec, and many others.

495 Another indirect allusion to the pederastic tradition is "On the Poetry of Li Tai Pei,” to be discussed in the next subsection.
d) there is an unbridgeable disparity in power between young beloved and poet: the youth possesses God-like powers and his beauty is an overpowering experience for the poet. “The angelic vision,” as d’Arch Smith put it.

e) the poet at times can only “peep” or stare at his beloved, who is just too celestial for the lowly poet to have as lover.

In “Blossom of Wonders,” for example, the poet describes his odyssey in search of the “blossom of wonders” that will cure the sick and bring the elderly everlasting youth. The poet searches near and far, asking advice from passersby, and ultimately describes his discovery as follows:

And in the shepherd’s grove—wonder of wonders—guess who!
On two cheeks—the flowers; not one but two!!!
But surely those I didn’t allow my heart to pick
Only the memory of the thing in a book did I stick.

The poet’s beloved boy in this description is a “wonder of wonders,” which inspires him to write and create, but is too beautiful for his “heart to pick.” The poet’s reference to “two cheeks” are the only clue to its homoerotic content, which would be picked up by those like-minded hearts who would be familiar with this style of poetry. But the reference, of course, does not necessarily need to refer to a boy and is another deliberate ploy of ambiguity. To be sure, Langer was not predominantly a Uranian or Knabenliebe-style homosexual poet. He represented a variety of same-sex relationship models and only sparingly emphasizes the hierarchical dynamic between an older poet and youth. The pederastic strategy is but one of the many tools he employs in affirming the link between homosexual and artist.

---

III. Queer Reading and Homosexual Literary References

Emancipatory-era homosexual writers alluded to a common set of literary references. They dropped names of other “homosexual” authors (past and present) and drew attention to those particular periods and cultures (like Ancient Greece or Rome) in which male love was common. As has been discussed in earlier chapters, emancipatory-era homosexuals were establishing a “gay canon” (to use Marita Keilson-Lauritz’s phrase): a common set of references and readings that they appropriated as part of their cultural lineage. One of the more famous examples of this is Oscar Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. WH” in which Wilde “drew a line of descent from Plato to himself, via Marsilio Ficino’s translation of the Symposium, Michelangelo’s sonnets to Tommaso Cavalieri, Montaigne’s essays, Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare[…]Richard Barnfield, Johann Winckelmann and Walter Pater.”497 Like Wilde, homosexual writers who wanted to convey veiled homosexual messages could simply drop names form this emerging canon.

Along with references to the nascent canon, homosexual writers often depict the act of reading itself as a social practice through which identity is discovered and the love and sexuality between poet and beloved is mediated and expressed. This representation flows logically from the framing strategy we have discussed above: if the homosexual possesses a unique aesthetic sensibility, and if his poetry is an auxiliary for children, then reading itself is an act imbricated in the self-discovery and reproduction of the homosexual. As we have discussed in previous chapters, this representation had a strong basis in lived social history: there is much historical evidence that demonstrates that homosexuals conceived themselves of coming to terms with their sexual subjectivity through reading canonical texts. Furthermore, there is evidence that reading books, while standing in for the dearth of homosexual community for some, was for others a mode of building community through readings clubs, anthology writing, and literary criticism (around journals and magazines).

Langer, like other homosexual poets, referred to canonical homosexual authors and texts; and thus had participated in a common homosexual cultural practice. Of course Langer’s horizon of references was also distinctly Jewish. As we have seen, Langer drew on the Hispano-Hebrew and Jewish-mystical homoerotic literary tradition while tying himself to the queer figure of Yisrael Najara.498 Be they Jewish or not, by referring to the “homo-canonical” (as Keilson-Lauritz puts it), Langer could divulge a homosexual subtext, while refraining from full exposure. Indeed, on occasion it is Langer’s reference to another canonical author that reveals the subject of male-male love at all. In the poem, “As Dying Inside” the poet pays homage to Lord Alfred Douglas’s “the love that dare


498 Scholars should also note that in three poems, “Passing Phenomena,” “The Lily Song,” and “Night of Radiant Spring Moon” Langer specifically used Hebrew (and only Hebrew) allusions and references to convey a homosexual message. In “Passing Phenomena,” Langer refers to the divine emanations “Netzach She-be-Hod,” which he described in *Die Erotik der Kabbala* as the two sefirot that symbolize male-male Eros (see chapter two). In “The Lily Song,” he drew on the symbolic significance of the Shoshana in Song of Songs and in the Zohar to impart the homosexual subtext to the poem. In “Night of Radiant Spring Moon,” it is the poet’s fate to live without “a crimson thread” (another Songs image) that conveys subtext, along with the poet’s lament that he can smell the scent of “grooms and brides” enjoying the holiday of Sukkot while he remains isolated.
not speak its name” when he introduces “the secret love that I dare not see to completion.” Without familiarity with this allusion, the meaning of the poet’s “secret love” remains opaque.

On the face of it, “On the Poetry of Li Tai Pei (also known as Li-Tai-Po or Li Bo)” also seems to have nothing to do with male-male love. The poet describes the overwhelming emotional effect that reading Li Tai Pei has for him in starkly mystical and Decadent terms: his reading leads him to a kind of self-abandon and even self-annihilation, though he leaves no hint—beyond the title of his poem—as to why:

On the Poetry of Li Tai Pei (Li Bo)

Because your poetry answered my poetry
like a poem’s rhyme, answering to its companion

and like an heavenly echo arising from the vast deep of ancient mountains, so I heard say.

Therefore with a silver pocketknife did I slice through your notebooks of poetry, careful and attending, and I lay down to rest, to dream.

From outdoors the wind brings of summer’s scent—and intoxicates me; a piano in the distance disperses solitary sounds.

The new book of your old poetry is open before me; but I cannot read.

When I scan the first verse—my eyes darken; and at the second—their light ceases entirely.

And at the third—they turn completely to tears; one clear and big tear: bitter like the earth and its fullness.

499 The trials and the text of Wilde’s speech, as we have seen, were well-known in Czech Decadent and Symbolist circles. See chapters three and four for details.

500 Alternate: heavenly voice

501 Alternate: Eastern

502 Alternate: volumes of poetry
It is only the minority like-minded reader who will recognize the Chinese poet Li Tai Pei as a “homosexual reference.” Li Tai Pai wrote considerably about male love in the “pederastic” style. There is much historical evidence that Li Tai Pei was a favorite poet among homosexual reading clubs and social gatherings in interwar Weimar, Germany. For example, an announcement in the homosexual literary journal *Uranos* of June 7, 1922 schedule a social gathering at Lessing Museum for readings of “uranian poetry” by Li-Tai-Po, Jean Paul, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Walt Whitman, Stefan George, and Otokar Brezina.⁵⁰³ Although there is no surviving evidence that Langer participated in anything similar to these Warsaw meetings in Prague, we know that Langer was quite familiar with all of these authors. In 1941, Langer claimed that Kafka had introduced him to Chinese poetry after he had read three of his poems (the only three Langer managed to publish in a Hebrew literary journal in the 1920s: Eliezer Steinman’s *Kolot* (published in Warsaw).⁵⁰⁴ “Kafka told me,” Langer later wrote in Tel Aviv in 1941, “that they resembled Chinese poetry a bit. I went and purchased an anthology of Chinese poetry in Franz Toussaint’s French translation, and from then on I never removed it from my table.”⁵⁰⁵ Be that as it may, it is in light of the “homosexual” significance of Li Tai Pei that the poem’s opening and general Decadent character makes sense: “Because your poetry answered my poetry like a poem’s rhyme, answering to its companion.”

Another clear example of how Langer drew on both canonical homosexual references and a representation of reading to convey homosexual meanings is his “On New Year’s Eve,” quoted below:

**On New Year’s Eve**

**[On The Night of Sylvester]**

On this night, life bubbles like champagne in the streets,
trivial jazz tunes play
in the bars
with showers of money they extinguish desire.

Distance robbed you from me and only
my four walls remain my companions,

---


504 These three poems (“Meeting,” “Angles will sweeten with Song,” and “From Atop the Valley of Silence”) were the only poems Langer managed to get published in the 1920s in a Hebrew outlet before publishing his first volume with a Prague-based publisher.

505 Langer, “Something about Kafka” [Mashbeu al Kafka]. *Hegeb* [הגה]. Issue 256 (February 23, 1941) [כ”ד בכסלו תש”א]. Langer did not specific the Toussaint volume, but it is most likely Franz Toussaint, *La Flute de Jade: Poésies Chinoise* (Paris: L’Édition D’Art H. Piazza, 1922). Toussaint’s French was translated as *The Lost Flute and Other Chinese Lyrics* trans. Gertrude Laughlin Joerissen. (New York: The Elf Publishers, 1929). The volume contains a considerable number of Li-Tai-Pei’s verse. Future studies of Langer’s Hebrew poetry will want to compare the two, since Langer does seem to have drawn from Li Tai Pei’s style.
seeking to box me in.

Therefore I am quiet.

I inhale sweet smoke from cigarettes-of-longing
and I read:
the fairy tales of Andersen, Reuveni’s memoirs,
and the poetry of Apollinaire,
that you love.

But at about midnight I filled my glass
and drink to you, to life.

And when I lie down
--sometimes I think of you
--and sometimes I keep reading.

And when morning dawns

It is New Year’s Eve: a time to celebrate new beginnings, but the poet is haunted by memory and silence before sleep. He mourns for his male beloved, stolen from him “by distance.” The world outside is again bubbling with life. In the bars, the living can satisfy their physical wants (“with showers of money they extinguish desire”). The lonesome poet, however, is trapped within his four walls, his only companions, which “seek to box him in.” The stark opposition between life outside and the poet’s condition is reinforced by a play with the image of toasting and drinking: the living are akin to bubbling champagne and drink “to life!” as they enjoy “trivial jazz tunes.” The poet “drinks the sweet smoke of cigarettes of longing” and can only drink in tribute to the life that was, since the male beloved equals life: “But at about midnight I filled my glass/ and drink to you, to life.”

The sexual nature of their relationship is, however, coded. A minority reader would be able to recognize the sexual subtext because of one (or less likely, all) of the poem’s three literary references—the fairy tales of Andersen, Reuveni’s memoirs, and the poetry of Apollinaire. For those who are not in the know—those in the majority—the poet has left an alternate explanation: these three texts were those “which you love.” The resistant reader can therefore write these references off as explained by the poet: these three references matter because the poet’s companion loved them, and nothing more. In what sense are these three references also “homosexual references?”

Hans Christian Andersen: Not only was Andersen a homosexual himself, but his fairy tales were read by emancipatory-era homosexuals as parables of the homosexual experience. Graham Robb, for example, calls Anderson, famous for his fairy tales, the “Aesop of 19th-century homosexuality.” Robb describes:
Anderson wrote fairy tales, not because he wanted to make children happy (he did not especially like them), but because the fairy tale was a magic cloak that allowed him to be himself in public. As ‘Mother Fairy Tale’ points out in ‘The Little Green Ones’: ‘One should call everything by its right name; and if one dares not do it as a usual thing, one can do it in a fairy tale.’

Whatever the actual original intent of Andersen’s allegories, it is the emancipatory-era homosexual reception of Andersen that matters for this study. Here there is no doubt: Andersen was widely read and appropriated as part of the movement, as Marita Keilson-Lauritz has shown. For example, in the third volume (1901) of the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, Magnus Hirschfeld’s pioneering journal, Dane Albert Hansen (the pseudonym for Carl Albert Hansen Fahlberg) published “H.C. Andersen: Beweis seiner Homosexualität” [Proof of his Homosexuality].

David Reuveni: As we saw in chapter two, Langer imagined the “friendship” between the false-messiah David Reuveni and Shlomo Molkho as a romantic affair in his *Die Erotik der Kabbala*. Whether there were others like Langer who shared his reading is unknown.

Apollinaire: this final reference can leave no doubt that the poet’s concern is erotic. The great French modernist Apollinaire had become a widely-recognized symbol of sexual libertinism during the interwar period. Much of his writing was considered pornographic. Although Apollinaire was not a homosexual, he showed a willingness to depict sodomy and male-male fellatio. Apollinaire’s famous parody of Walt Whitman’s funeral, in which he lovingly mocked the scene of homosexual dandies and fops, was well-known in homosexual literary circles beyond France.

To be sure, by drawing on Apollinaire, Langer was not merely transmitting code. He deliberately referred to Apollinaire using *Latin* characters to imitate Apollinaire’s well-known style. Apollinaire would draw attention to the text of his poems by playing with the visual typeset of his font, by organizing his lyric in shapes, by incorporating non-Latin words, and by using other self-referential strategies. This was a distinct hallmark of Apollinaire’s modernism. Langer’s tribute to Apollinaire, then, does double duty: it serves to code the poet’s erotic feelings but also to add to the poem’s modernist formal qualities.

Indeed, “On New Year’s Eve” is a distinctly modernist Hebrew poem in the standard critical usage of the term. The poem lacks any Biblical or Hebrew textual allusions. It has no meter and no rhyme scheme. Its rhythm is discordant like the “trivial jazz tunes” it describes. Langer also incorporated a number of foreign words: Sylvester, champagne, trivial, jazz, bars, cigarettes, and the references, Anderson and Apollinaire. Like the walls seeking to box him in, the poem ends on a Kafkaesque key: “and when morning dawns.” Though the living welcome the year’s new beginning, the poet shows no optimism regarding what is to come. He does not expect anything from the new day. Langer left the poem unfinished.

---


507 Other treatments appeared in *Der Eigene*. See Keilson-Lauritz, *Die Geschichte Der Eigenen Geschichte*. 
IV. The Overwrought Hebrew Voice: Camp and the Failed Seriousness of Langer’s Elegy

The primary goal of chapters four and five was to demonstrate how Langer developed the first Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew. It has explored many of the ways that Langer blended homosexual poetic strategies with Hebrew and Jewish literary images, conventions, and precedents; and it has argued that in this, Langer participated in a common homosexual manner of speaking (or cultural practice), which he adapted for a Jewish and Hebrew discourse. We have explored the ways that Langer introduced a taboo subject to Hebrew audiences; how he carved an aesthetic space for a sinful subject using the language of the Hebrew textual past; and how he made meaning of homosexuality by framing same-sex desire in various Jewish and culturally-normative (and sometimes subversive) ways. But what shall we make of the aesthetic in Langer’s Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality in Hebrew? How should we evaluate Langer’s trafficking in the poet’s most basic commodity (really, the poet’s raison d’être); the creation of beauty? Are Langer’s poems beautiful?

Certainly no critic would accuse Langer of hard-boiled poetry. His lyric is at times highly sentimental, sometimes unabashedly effusive, and in a few instances, as we are about to see, even overwrought. Many Hebrew readers familiar with the lyrical mastery of canonical Hebrew poets—Bialik, Alterman, Zach, Amichai--will undoubtedly find Langer’s “aesthetic” in my shorthand “Langer’s Jewish aesthetic of homosexuality,” unevenly applied. Langer’s poetry is not always entirely aesthetically satisfying—at least in traditionally canonical ways.

It would be too easy to merely blame the skills of the poet, which are, on the contrary, quite considerable. Let me backtrack some: several of the poems we have seen are quite arresting (like “From Atop a Valley of Silence” and “On the Margins of a Poem for a Young Friend”), and, indeed, we have only covered a sampling of Langer’s poetry in this chapter. In other words, the reader’s sample is flawed. I have regretfully made only passing reference to Langer’s most beautiful poems for the sake of (relative) brevity: “Creator” [Yotzer], “Passing Phenomena” [Ratzo Ha-Tofaot], and “Night’s Riddle” [Khidat Layla]. Indeed, these poems were published posthumously in his second volume of poetry, so it is likely that his skills improved with time.

Langer’s best poems also happen to be those that are most cryptic about their homosexual subtext. I would even dare say that there is an inverse relationship between his poetry’s aesthetic quality and its level of codedness and obfuscation. The more open and overt the poet is in communicating its homosexuality, the more effusive, overwrought, wild, and unmanaged the representation of his feelings, his lyrical control, and the power of his verse. The further the poet discloses his desires, the more excessive his sentimentality. As Terry Eagleton put it in regards to another poet guilty of similar crimes, “it is as though [the poet] does not trust his material enough to appreciate that the feelings are, so to speak, already there in the songs, inseparable from their words and music.”

Let me reemphasize: I am not saying that Langer was not capable of beautiful, lyrical, and even timeless, canon-worthy expression. He was. (Of course, “canonical beauty” will ring too conservative to some, but so be it). And certainly, the value of Langer’s poetry as primary documents for the cultural historian is in no way diminished one way or the other. Still, what are we

508 These poems are far more coded in their broaching of the homosexual experience, so much so that even for the like-minded reader or the reader open to the poet’s queer messages it may be difficult to detect, though each contains subtle clues that point to a homosexual subtext. I will illuminate these through close readings in a future expansion of this dissertation.

to make of the fact that Langer’s most arresting poems tend to be those that are most coded in their treatment of homosexuality? And can the aesthetic quality of Langer’s poetry tell us anything about the historical voice of the Jewish male homosexual and the conditions that shaped it?

It turns out that excessive sentimentality has been recognized by scholars of the modern homosexual experience as one of the more omnipresent characteristics of emancipatory-era (1860-1933) homosexual literature. What we should make of this overwrought style is a very difficult cultural-historical question. Had Langer’s effusive style been idiosyncratic, it would not call for much discussion; but his style—yet again—reflects a much larger pattern of contemporaneous homosexual writing. This style has at times been linked by critics to a distinctly “feminine” male homosexual voice, style, or sensibility. “Feminine” in quotes because homosexual writers often appropriated a caricature of traits that have been culturally coded as feminine (usually ironically). This is a well-known feature of homosexual style that has its origins at least beginning in the molly houses of the eighteenth century, but which became the indelible mark of homosexual style during the Decadence during the fin de siècle. For many homosexual writers and performers, theatricality was a way of challenging traditional gender roles; it emphasized the performative nature of gender roles; surely for some, these qualities reflected something in their lived experience as homosexuals too.

When it comes to thinking about excessive sentimentality in Langer’s poetry, it seems to me that the scholar needs to approach the issue a case by case basis because Langer used it for different purposes depending on the poem. We have already seen that Langer was invested in performing shame and infusing his lyric with pathos to appeal to the moral sympathies of his readers. The overbred performance of shame could also be used to present the homosexual as a tragic hero. Overly dramatic (and even melodramatic) metaphors of conflict—“and when shafts of your quiver struck me in rage/and my rock, my bastion, was split by the thunder”—provided cover for his more explicit sexual expressions. In other poems, Langer is invested in portraying same-sex love as mystically redemptive, so his poem’s effusiveness makes sense in such framework, since the poet’s erotic passions mirror his spiritual encounter with God.

But the homosexual poet’s overwrought style in this era was often used in service of yet another strategy: to produce an ironic and camp effect. And like the other strategies we have explored, this distinctly male homosexual style allowed writers to achieve clandestine recognition by peers. Specific ways of representing the voice of the poet could function as a way of conveying messages to a minority of readers who could identify with the poet’s voice (and would be read differently by most readers).


511 D.A. Miller has written that the excessive sentimentality of much of this writing “was the necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object.” D.A. Miller, Place For Us, 26. For further discussion of this issue, see Halperin, How to Be Gay.

512 For inroads into theoretical work on style and homosexual politics, see Miller, Place for Us; Love, Feeling Backward; and Halperin, How to Be Gay. See also studies on “camp” and “gay sensibility” in notes below.

513 The best work on camp can be found in the collection of essays in Fabio Cleto ed., Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999), especially the classic work of Susan Sontag and Esther Newton; as well as the pioneering group of essays collected in David Bergman ed., Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 1993). See also, Esther Newton, Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); D.A. Miller, A Place for Us; and David M. Halperin, How to be Gay. David Bergman offers a pithy introduction in his entry on
For a fine example, take the following poem, “To a Foreign Friend.” The poem is ostensibly an elegy, but the poet bludgeons his reader with so much effusive sentiment that he ruins the aesthetic power of the elegy:

**To a Foreign Friend**

Happiness came close this time but passed me by
oh, so close,
and it left me a pyre of despair!
I opened my heart to you
like a temple’s gate—
and you stabbed me;
you shot a blackening fire through my bones.

So now the stars are dropping from my sky,
my world, my existence, is ablaze,
the moon’s face paled before me
like the face of a lost lover in a night of alleyways.\(^{514}\)

This world kicked me,
having for so long repeated
that he it?, he and I have nothing together;
kicked me again and again and vomited me, deep, deep
into an empty void.

Woe, happiness came close this time but passed me by,
oh, so close,
He left me a pyre of despair!
In vain, I gulp my wine and guzzle like a camel,
In vain I exhort, I cry, there is no answer, no voice;
In vain I live, in vain do I long for death;
--only my song is my escape, my elegy my refuge.

Only this sad song of mine!
And you, that I loved so,
will never know it;
you’ll never hear it, my lips are foreign to you;
as the flame of my desire is foreign to you;

---lishkat betzavotai, ash mashahira.

\(^{514}\) Alternate: the moon paled before me like that face of a woman wandering in a night of alleyways.

---lishkat betzavotai, ash mashahira.

foreign to you, as the hammer of my blood-song, pounding in my head mercilessly.

You’ll never hear my song, nor can you understand, and what is my sin, and what is my crime never will I know; over what are you incensed, why do you now loathe me it’s not the way of man to abhor his own pet so.

Woe, this time happiness came close but passed me by and how quickly did it pass!
The terror has returned to my abandoned and lonely soul, once again fifty gates of impurity have their gullets gaping, ready to swallow me deep down below into Sheol.

And I see: I will return as I did before to search through the turds of my shamed lust for the holy sparks of pure love through fields of night – a futile and worthless hope! A futile and worthless hope of a fool losing his mind; for which you deserted me!

Yet now the pain has abated, the nefarious noise has paused, and the spirit within has calmed. I was like the eye surface, or appearance of the sea after the storm, and a spark of pleasant rest was lit by my devastated heart. And I felt (−−it seemed to me−−) that I am freeborn, the reins you bounded me with were cut, the yoke of deceit fell, the shafts collapsed, I am emancipated, freeborn.

Yes, freeborn am I, freeborn!

Ben-Kho—rin! Who—ley Free!

Am I free?
Freeborn?
Woe, happiness came close this time but passed me by, and it will not ever return! He took the light of my eyes, he uprooted my heart from within me, I have no tranquility and I never will!
Because there will never be freedom for the eternal slave,
Never will he who is forever sold leave—ever!
Alas! Woe! Alas!
A-las!

Cue the crocodile tears. The poem is an elegy that fails in its affective seriousness. The poet’s voice is overburdened with effusive self-pity as well as overwrought and melodramatic sentiment. This too-much quality, it seems to me, was intentional; it was Langer’s attempt to communicate irony, self-parody, and a distinctly overwrought style that would have been recognizable to homosexual readers. The strategy here was to camp. To the majority reader, the poem might be read as an allegory between mystic-prophet and God or as an elegy mourning the loss of a friend (and perhaps a poorly-executed one at that). But the homosexual reader or the reader familiar with homosexual culture and literary style would have read the poem’s failed seriousness as camp. This was, as mentioned, a familiar and widely-used strategy for subterranean literary communication between emancipatory-era homosexuals.

The poem concerns the betrayal of a friend who has now become “foreign” to the poet and has left him devastated. The nature of the friend’s betrayal is unclear; only that he “stabbed” the poet and “shot a blackening fire through his bones” and is now gone. The poet, in turn, has lost it. In a Job-like tailspin, he laments his fate with the refrain: “Woe, happiness came close this time but passed me by!—Oh so close!” Between dirges, he oscillates between self-laceration, cursing his existence, and contemplating whether he has rid himself of his pain and desire.

The poem’s homoerotics are almost impossible to ignore completely, but as always, the resistant reader has an out. Langer was careful to leave open the possibility for allegorical-symbolic interpretation, though to be sure, an allegorical reading would do some violence to the poem. The poet and his foreign friend could symbolize the dynamic between God and Israel, but more likely, God and the prophet-mystic (on behalf of Israel). In such a reading, the “blackening fire” with which he was stabbed, symbolizes, in typical Biblical style, his incitement to prophecy and compose (the mystical “blackening fire” fits with his dual role as both mystic and prophet). The poem is his elegy-prophecy regarding the fallen state of the world, of Israel, and primarily of his miserable existence. Why is he so miserable? He is miserable for the same reason all mystics are miserable: he is condemned to exile from direct contact with God. That union, after all, is the mystic’s greatest desire and very reason for being.

Earlier in the chapter I argued that Langer enlisted mystical metaphors in this poem to portray the homosexual poet as a normative mystical-Jewish hero. But the willfully-resistant reader could see the mystic as simply performing a general redemption of sin, which is the Lurianic mystic’s task thanks to the flawed state of the world. The prophet-mystic undoubtedly struggles with his alienation from God, as he searches for the holy sparks of redemption. He refers to himself as an “eternal slave,” which in Hebrew is the eved ba-nirtza, or pierced slave of Exodus 21:6 and Deuteronomy 15:15-17. In the Bible, the pierced slave is the Hebrew slave who chooses to remain in bondage after his six-year term is up. But the crucial intertext here is the famous Talmudic gloss of BT Kidushin 22:2 (also quoted by Rashi) that explains the logic of the piercing:

[…]The Holy one Blessed be He said the ear that heard my voice at Sinai at the hour in which I said [Leviticus 25: 55] ‘For Mine are the Israelites as slaves’ and not slaves
to [other] slaves, and this one went and acquired himself a master for himself—he shall be pierced!\footnote{Translation is my own with Robert Alter’s from Leviticus.}

The mystic-prophet is the representative of his people, who are likened in traditional lore to the pierced slave for sinning, betraying God, and choosing another master. Finally, even the poem’s erotic metaphors—like the poet’s “flame of desire”—can fit within an allegorical-religious reading: they fit just fine with the general erotic orientation of the Jewish mystic toward God.\footnote{Even the “lost lover in night’s alleyways” draws on the vague Hebrew term oteyab from Song of Songs, which can be read allegorically.}

But the reader open to this poem’s subversive qualities could read it as camp. How can the scholar determine that what we have here is indeed camp and not merely failed elegy or bad poetry (though it is surely some of the latter two as well)? Admittedly, we are on far shakier ground here. Langer’s other coding and framing strategies were far easier to demonstrate. Camp, like its mother irony, is notoriously difficult to detect, but not impossible. For one, camp is not simply “in the eye of the beholder.” As Sontag famously put it, one could say “it’s good because it’s awful” about many things, but camp is applicable “only under certain conditions.” Langer’s prescription for camp involved heavy doses of theatricality, lots of sexual innuendo, a highly-aestheticized but affected mournfulness, irony, and its deadly-but-failed seriousness, which provokes laughter. Some critics often misuse the term camp by overlooking the seriousness of camp, mistaking it for parody or the Bakhtinian carnivalesque (though the latter has its serious side too). Camp is humorous but its humor is bitter and often black. As Christopher Isherwood had a character put it: “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously; you’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it.”\footnote{Christopher Isherwood, \textit{The World in the Evening}}

In other words, by identifying camp here, I am not trying to minimize the pain or tragedy represented in this poem.

The first surefire sign that the reader is on camp grounds are its brazen innuendos. Earlier in the chapter we reviewed a number of them, but we are now in a better position to appreciate all of them. The poet, we recall, evokes sexual penetration (“I opened my gate to you and you stabbed me; you shot a blackening fire through my bones”\footnote{It seems to me that Langer’s use of the semi-colon here is more telling than the metaphor itself suggesting either a definition of “stabbing” or a second action immediately following the stabbing (i.e. perhaps penetration and ejaculation?).}) and anal sex (“fifty gates of impurity have their gullets gaping” and “to search through the turds of my shamed lust for the holy spark of pure love”).

Still, the poet playfully wonders: “and what is my sin, and what is my crime?” The effect is humorous: the like-minded reader knows the poet has already answered the question with evocative clues. Other metaphors build on this pattern of insinuation. His mention of his “flame of desire [ta’avati]” is literal. His reference to “the pierced slave” plays with the earlier image of his having been stabbed (or penetrated) at the beginning of the poem. Perhaps this reference suggests he has betrayed his “foreign friend” for a new master (or lover)? Another playful move is the poet’s elongated cry “Ben Kho—rin” [literally: freeborn], after repeating the phrase three times. The phrase is stretched out in an overwrought way, but also playfully emphasizes the word “khor” or hole (which I rendered in my translation as “Who—ley”).

Yet another sexual image comes earlier in the poem, when the poet describes how “the moon’s face paled before me like the face of the lost lover in a night of alleyways.” This image combines language from two references: the term oteyab [the female lover who lost her way] from
Song of Songs 1:7\textsuperscript{519} and the “night alleyways” of JT Berachot 3:4.\textsuperscript{520} The moon [ha-levanah], which pales before the poet, is a double entendre in Hebrew for “white.” So the phrase also evokes “the white face [that] paled before me” like the “lost lover in the night of alleyways.” (We recall the paling face of the “charming lad” earlier). Distinctly, the male beloved is compared to the female oteyah, a rare instance of explicit gender bending in Langer’s poetry, which would not have been lost on the homosexual reader. In addition, Langer’s reference to the sexual nature of the city’s alleyways would have been recognized as a nod to a widely-known social feature of homosexual urban sexual life. Quite a few emancipatory-era homosexual poets and writers represent cruising and cruising spaces, sewers, alleyways, parks, even toads, as well as the general seedy underworld of urban same-sex life.\textsuperscript{521} Here then we have sexual innuendo in abundance. But it is not just the quantity of sexual innuendo but the playful incongruity between sacred and profane that too points to a camp strategy.

The poem is also a case study in theatricality. Langer, like the overpowering devastation of the poet he versified, “hammer[s]” his reader with his “blood-song,” which “pounds” our “heads mercilessly” with its at-times mawkish and even hysterical self-pity. I believe that much of this excessiveness comes through in the English translation, but there are a number of elements in the Hebrew that are worth pointing out:

- The poet shifts modes abruptly in an almost-hysterical fashion from verse to verse and stanza to stanza. There is a brusqueness of transition at times that creates this too-much quality, especially from questions to exclamations to parenthetical insertions and to abrupt stops.
- The poet repeats the same dramatic phrases and words in rapid succession to create an overbred overwrought effect: like “in vain…in vain…in vain..” or “what is my sin and what is my crime”
- There is an excessive amount of “woe” and “oh” [hoy!] and alas! And even too many exclamation points! In Hebrew “alas” is rendered as the elegiac shout: “a-le-li” which emphasizes each syllable, compounding the extreme effect.
- Almost every verse ends in either the syllable “ah” or “oosh” so that the poem sounds like a series of cries and moans.


\textsuperscript{520} \textit{When you were walking through [an] alleyway at night} [והי אתי באיסתמא בלילה] Dror, MA Thesis, 139.

\textsuperscript{521} For examples see, Kramer 284-292. Kramer writes that Angel Sahuqillo describes the association of the sewer with homosexuality: “Like rats, homosexuals are associated with a dangerous and repugnant sexuality, and also with the plague. In 1900 they were considered infected with plague...” Marie-Claire Zimmerman writes “mud, silt, sewers, toads designate…the schemes of city homosexuals, of the profiteers of venal love.” Langer’s reference is also reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s well-known references to sexual cruising like: “frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me robust, athletic love” and “O I saw one passing alone, saying hardly a word, yet full of love I detected him by certain signs/ O eyes ever wishfully turning! O silent eyes!” Other memorable and remarkably frank verses include: “I share the midnight orgies of young men/ I pick out some low person for my dearest friend. He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate” and “I too…was call’d by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me approaching or passing. Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat/ Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them a word.” Quoted in Edsall, \textit{Toward Stonewall}, 74-75.
• The already-overbred mournful shouts and questions and at-times tasteless metaphors are buttressed by a number of allusions to lugubrious Biblical texts and settings, especially Job.522

In this poem, many of the elements we have seen in Langer’s poetry coincide: the poet’s exile from normal heterosexual life; the impossibility of finding lasting love; his misery and disappointment; the poem is represented as his refuge for unsatisfied desire and pain; and the illusion of freedom. But these representations, as I have emphasized, should not be taken as an accurate representation of Langer’s feelings concerning homosexuality. The poet’s manic shifts, shrill tone, rhetorical questions, innuendos, and overbred unraveling creates an incongruity that produces the distinct blend of seriousness and humor that is characteristic of camp. The effect (beyond leaving his reader a pyre of despair!) is to undermine the very real pain and torture that undergirds this poem.523 Irony, again, helped Langer communicate a more complicated message.

522 For example: the poet’s “sins” and “crime” (Job 7:21, 13:23); “its not the way of a man to abhor his dog so” (Job 30:1); “eyn li va’lo mi’tov ve’ad rab” (evokes Job); shivatayim (the Cain story from Genesis); Samson (the collapsing shafts); Sh’b’ol; the image of the heykhal contaminated by foreigners, etc.

523 Miriam Dror sensed that there was something excessive about this poem, when she wrote: Dror, MA Thesis, 142.
Conclusion

How best to define Jewish modernity is not a problem that historians will resolve any time soon. Certainly some consensus exists that when it comes to the Jews, modernity might be identified by the advent of new social types unknown to the pre-modern Jewish past. Indeed, since the inception of the *Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden*, historians of the Jews have established a taxonomy of such types, which include the following hardly-exhaustive list: the denominational Jew, the “assimilated” Jew, the secular Jew, the stateless Jew, the Jew by-accident-of-birth, the class-oriented Jew, the psychological Jew, the intellectual Jew, the literary Jew, the Jewish historian, the non-Jewish Jew, the “self-hating” Jew, the autobiographical Jew, the Jewish nationalist, and of course, the Israeli Jew. Specialists in early modern history have extended this cast to earlier figures that too seem to embody something quintessentially modern—a liminal identity, the inhabiting of two (or more) cultural worlds, or a deep skepticism, including: the Court Jew; the Port Jew; the trans-Atlantic Sephardic trader; the Jewish doctor; the *meschmud* [convert to another religion], the *marrano* (or crypto-Jew); the Sabbatean heretic; and so forth.

Today, almost forty-five years since the Stonewall riots, it is fairly clear that no historical consideration of the modern Jewish experience would be complete without including one other modern Jewish type: the Jewish homosexual. In the span of just about a Biblical generation, the lesbian and gay liberation movement has left an indelible mark on Jewish civilization. When historians of the Jews gain the necessary distance, they will look back at the last forty-five years and point to Judaism’s accommodation to queer Jews as one of the major developments in this era. Today in 2013, the two largest Jewish confessional denominations in the world (by far), Reform and Conservative Judaism, have integrated lesbian and gay Jews into their institutions, synagogues, rabbinical schools, leadership, social life, and, perhaps most significantly, into the legal fabric of *halakha* (of course, Jews who affiliate with no denomination outnumber even these groups). So too has the smaller Reconstructionist movement. The vast majority of Jews that affiliate with a denomination, in other words, affiliate with ones that have integrated gay and lesbian Jews. As Rebecca Alpert, David Shneer, Caryn Aviv, and others have demonstrated, LGBT Jews have played

---


525 As David Shneer points out, it is well known that there is a disproportionate number of queer Jews in the Reform rabbinate, though exact numbers are difficult to come by. See Rebecca Alpert, et al. *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

526 It is no major surprise then that in April 2012, the Public Religion Research Institute, which surveyed Jewish values, found that 81% of American Jews supported same-sex marriage (one imagines that number has only risen since, in line with the broader trend toward greater support among Americans as a whole). The report is available at [http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Jewish-Values-Report.pdf](http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Jewish-Values-Report.pdf). What this means too is that, from a Jewish perspective, the fight for LGBT rights is in many ways has become a fight for religious freedom.
leading and transformative roles in transforming the cultural, religious, and institutional topography of American Judaism.\textsuperscript{527} The varieties of Orthodoxy have also confronted and been changed by the history of homosexuality, quite often through the spectacle of scandal (often recalling the Victorian era of LGBT history), which has hit institutions from Yeshiva University to the Hesder Yeshiva movement and beyond. In the United States, the centrality of the LGBT experience to American Jewish life has manifested in a vast proliferation of institutions, organizations, congresses, websites, and journals that concern LGBT Jews.\textsuperscript{528} In Israel, the importance of the LGBT community to national identity is in some ways even more profound.\textsuperscript{529} LGBT life in Israel has become a marker of Israeli democracy and social progress; it has been promoted by arms of the state; and has become a marker of national identity among secular Israelis, so much so that a countervailing attack of “pinkwashing” has been leveled by Israel’s critics.\textsuperscript{530} One can find LGBT leaders at the forefront of Israeli culture and politics. LGBT issues are imbricated in all the major facets of Israeli life. The rights of LGBT individuals and their families are wedded to questions of citizenship (Are their children Jewish?); it is also tied to the much broader issues related to the character of the state, especially the balance between individual liberty and Jewishness; and, as just mentioned, LGBT issues have not been immune from the Arab-Israeli conflict as well. To be sure, far more could be said on these matters and deserve a major study in and of themselves.

The point, however, is clear: the issue of homosexuality is by no means peripheral to the modern Jewish experience. But when and where does the history of modern Jewish homosexuals begin? I first began to consider this question during my first semester as a graduate student in Professor John Efron’s introductory seminar to modern Jewish historiography. At the time Efron was completing his synthesis on the modern period in Jewish history. In the course of our discussion, Efron encouraged me to think about how the history of homosexual Jews could be integrated into Jewish history, not just in terms of a “great Jewish homosexuals in history” project (I


\textsuperscript{528} One thinks of: World Congress of GLBT Jews; Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity; Keshet; Orthodoxes; Nehirim ; A Wider Bridge: Building LGBTQ Connections with Israel; JQyouth; NUJLS (National Union of Jewish LGBTIQ Students); LGBT Alliance; Twice Blessed: The Jewish LGBT Archives Online; Hod; and many others. For lists see: http://www.jewishmosaic.org/page/links, http://jewishlgtnetwork.com, and http://www.hrc.org/joei/.


am paraphrasing), but as a deeper problem of Jewish modernization. In the course of my graduate career, I was lucky to discover Mordechai Langer while reading (unrelatedly) on Franz Kafka. After extensive research into Mordechai Langer's life and oeuvre, it became clear that already in the 1920s Langer had considered the question of homosexuality and Jewish history (and, as we have seen, much more too).

In the course of situating Langer within the homosexual discourses of his era, I also began to realize, as I have demonstrated in this study, that it was not only the subject of homosexuality and Judaism nor was it just Langer's own self-consciousness that qualified him as the first truly Jewish homosexual identity; it was also the manner of his argumentation and the form of his aesthetic production as well. By focusing on the way that he wrote poetry and the way that he reconciled homosexuality and Judaism, the historian is able to situate Langer within an otherwise inaccessible contemporary homosexual context. Given that we know next to nothing about Langer's personal contacts with other homosexuals, it is by identifying these formal affinities within his poetry and Die Erotik der Kabbala that we can position this lone figure within a wider homosexual literary community. This dissertation is in large part the first product of this intellectual labor: to historicize Langer as a historian, sociologist, theologian, and poet within the modes of argumentation and aesthetic production being used by contemporary homosexual authors.

In my earlier published article, in which I focused narrowly on his historical project, I wrote that Langer's "is a story of how one lone homosexual Jewish man, without any inherited narrative or model of self-formation or identification (and as far as we know, without community), looked to Jewish history and Jewish culture to establish a cultural unity of "homosexual" Jews across time." I would amend this observation here: the study of Langer's writings reveals that he may have not been as isolated as I previously assumed. At the very least, Langer had connected with a homosexual community through reading.

Undoubtedly, future historians may discover other such figures that will correct my emphasis on Langer's originality and I welcome such correctives. Be that as it may, it is clear that the modern Jewish homosexual has a history. This is a history in which Jewishness and homosexuality are both mutually constitutive elements of the other, and one that predates the second gay and lesbian liberation movement.

While considering how best to take up the issue of homosexuality within Jewish history, I immediately faced a set of daunting problems that all LGBT scholars know well: where could one locate source material? On what historical sites, places, and figures should one focus in the hopes of perhaps chancing on figures rich enough to warrant sustained attention? The challenge remains daunting, as the historian George Chauncey has described so well in Gay New York. As another scholar put it to me, my endeavor would involve a lifetime of searching for the occasional needle in a haystack, and there are quite a few haystacks in the centuries-long Jewish historical record. Its historical accuracy aside, Mordechai Langer has left the Jewish historian an invaluable roadmap for a broader study of "homosexuality" in Jewish history. A future project should engage more fully with the historicity of each of Langer's historical claims, at the very least, as a springboard for a much larger examination of the topic. As we have seen, Langer's historical gaze was not limited to the list of figures and eras in Die Erotik der Kabbala; his poetry and other pronouncements “felt backward” (to borrow Heather Love’s phrase) to figures like Israel Najara as well.
Langer has until now remained largely unnoticed by scholars, especially in the Anglophone orbit. He did not, after all, mark an epoch as a great political leader, nor did he dominate a new cultural movement as a towering intellectual. He stands outside the canon of modern Jewish thought and his Hebrew poetry is hardly canonical, at least in traditional Hebrew critical terms. But as this study has demonstrated, Langer’s dramatic life and his literary output are an exceptionally rich historical source from which the historian can recover an otherwise opaque aspect of Jewish modernity: the history of the encounter between modern Jews and the growing visibility of homosexual subcultures in European urban and cultural life.

Langer has also afforded the opportunity to think about Jewish modernization not only from its margins, but also from an almost entirely unexamined angle. Where it has been mentioned, the constitution of homosexuality in Jewish modernity has almost always been described (like German-Jewish identity more broadly) as part of a move towards assimilation and secularization. It should by now be clear that neither assimilation nor secularization will do in explaining the birth of the modern Jewish homosexual. Like the other Jewish types listed above, the modern Jewish homosexual as signified by Langer inhabited at least two cultural worlds, and he both contributed and drew from each of them. Like other Jewish moderns, Langer reimagined Jewish history, theology, sociology, aesthetics and politics from the vantage point of his homosexual identity, but he also made meaning of himself as a distinct sexual subject in Jewish terms.

The history of sexuality has long been narrated as the history of secularization. According to this narrative (a la Michel Foucault and others), sexual identities that were once defined by religious terms of understanding were gradually replaced by legal, sexological, and psychological models of normality and pathology. In taking up Langer’s story, this dissertation has shown how Langer (and other German masculinists) filtered the language of sexual science through a broader cultural and religious prism.
Select Bibliography


———. *Der bürgerliche und der geistige Antifeminismus*. Berlin-Charlottenburg: Blüher, 1918.


Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.


---. *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot*. Prague: Dr. Josef Flesch, 1928.


Roth, Norman. “‘Deal Gently with the Young Man’: Love of Boys in Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Spain.” *Speculum* 57.1 (January 1982), 20-51.


Sadan, Dov. *Avne Bohan*. Tel Aviv: Mahbarot le-sifrut 1950 or 1951.


———. “Reading ‘Queer’ Ashkenaz: This Time from East to West.” *TDR* 55, no. 3 (2011): 50-56.


Addendum I:

English Translation of Mordechai Langer’s Hebrew Poetry

*Piyyutim Ve-shirei Yedidot* [*Liturgical and Love poetry*] (1929)

And

*Me’at Tzori* [*A Bit of Balm*] (1943)

Translations by Shaun Jacob Halper
Vision

Like the man at night stirred by anxious dreams from his heart’s abyss, so I awoke slightly from within my somnambulant life, all of creation was as if submerged in an enchanted sleep, within it, all serve, against their will, without respite.

All of the world’s empty space slumbers; the orbit of the stars turns in its sleep; and time slumbers. Dormant is the land and all that is upon it: the valley greens, the mountains, the water, the air. When heaven’s lightning shimmers on high and when the Lord’s thunder is heard on land—all sleeps. All of existence slumbers: the bee buzz in the meadow, the chirping bird in the forest, and the blood slumbers. Nations rise in sleep, sleeping they yearn, into slumber they collapse. All deeds of men are sleep, their heart’s desire drifts off. And those who insist on waking: prophets, cabbalists, ministers, philosophers—all is in vain; there is no rising from their sleep. Our freedom to choose has also been sentenced to doze because against our will to us she is given.

I kept my eyes open a bit longer and behold: all creation resembles a women during birth pangs. The mother in bitter despair roars in awesome pain, and the minister Gabriel has forceps of fire in hand; from within her bowels he extracts her infant fruit until her muscles gnash, but the fetus cannot emerge, on account of its size, because it is huge. And all of creation wallows in her blood, like a lion growling amidst her agony—and she has no redemption.
As it Expires Inside…
(To be sung to the tune of Lamentations according to tradition)

The sun set already.
The final twilight
hours of spring night
have departed and are gone.
Slowly the silence dressed in garments of
black spreads its wings over the garden.
With my companion, black grief, who will surely
never betray me,
I’ll wander far
from the tumultuous city.
The moon’s radiance masks its magic
through tree-leaf whispers.
The nightingale over in the distance
spreads melancholy with the rose-let petals of its
song.
And I go on deeper into night’s bosom.
Silence over everything --
The tree’s murmur has stopped,
the nightingale’s trill in the distance,
are slowly expiring,
as inside expiring
deep in a man’s heart
the tremors of a secret love,
that he does not dare
to love
to completion.

---

531 For this poem’s cantillation marks see Dror, 21.
To My Comrade

Like clouds that disperse at once to reveal
star’s eternal white gaze over earth,
you too appeared before your lonely slave
and unknowingly stirred his desperate heart.

When I saw your stature, limber, perfect,
shooting flares of enchanting youth;
when I stared, parched, into your devoted eyes,
in which Yah, the Eyn-Sof, submerged his
limitless depths and the interminable sorrow of
his sweet secret.

Then I moaned and my spirit shakes
like a taut harp cord stroked by hand, and
my intensity in waves of song sweep toward
you because the sea of my everlasting frost
you kindled with the rippling heat of your
touch.

And when my heart recalls that hour of bliss,
that night’s beauty; the two of us walking the
streets,
you placed your arm gently around my back
and recall as I recalled (as if concealed by fog)
the ancient legend, that pulls at the heart:

Of the love of two comrades, who with great
yearning
embraced one another;
and drunk in their embrace they rose silently
to higher worlds; to tranquil gardens
where endless light and love exist always.

532 I translated “elekha yishtofu” as “sweep toward you,” but the image is ambiguous and could also be rendered more erotically as “spray or wash upon you.”

533 An alternate translation is: “because my frozen sea of existence you kindled with the rippling heat of your pounding.” It is based on the use of “nitzkhi” in Lamentations 3:18 and “raga” in Isaiah 51:16, Jeremiah 31:35, and Job 26:12. See my discussion in chapter five for further explanation.
The Might of the Beautiful534

When the arid wins my lover's gaze
a lovely garden it becomes, budding, blooming.
With his gentle smile and his gorgeous face,
as it radiates light, hearts ignite;
from his mouth pearls drip everywhere.
And when the heavenly host turns to his glory,
and oh, his whole body is exultation and rapture,
and hot youth’s intense desire comes to a boil—
on high they erupt in ecstatic dance.
But when I receive his glance—then every bush burns
in my young garden and all joy completely stops.
His laughing face in my direction sprouts
unending sorrow, tears and wailing and fear.
And when azure sky is crushed in stars,535
wandering outside, in bitter regret I’ll scream;
at the cleft of a deadly dark abyss my senses then will storm and
my blood’s virility desires to burst out536 to it. 537

[Hand-written version: my blood’s virility desires to burst inside it.]

534 The title renders literally as “the strength [or bravery] within the beauty [or magnificent].” Hamutal Bar-Yosef translates it as “the might of the glory.” Bar-Yosef, Mysticism in Twentieth Century Hebrew Literature, 306. The title refers to a relation between the two sefirot (divine emanations) Gevurah and Tiferet.

535 Alternate: And when azure sky wallows in its stars [as one wallows in ashes]

536 The term “lagiakh” is literally “to burst out” or “to burst forth” (definition provide by http://www.ravmilim.co.il/) as in Bialik’s “שני צפעונים, פתנים שחורים אראה בקעו, גחו מעיניה אל לבתי, ירדו אף נשכו.” But it might also mean something like “to rush” or “to pour” as in Job 40:23:

Robert Alter: Look, he swallows a river at his ease, untroubled while Jordan pours into his mouth

NSRV: Even if the river is turbulent, it is not frightened; it is confident though Jordan rushes against its mouth.

537 Hamutal Bar-Yosef translates this final verse as follows: “Over the chasm of dark death my senses then erupt/and to it my blood’s potency then desires to enter.” Bar-Yosef, Mysticism in Twentieth Century, 306.
Meeting

My being was bereft of peace on a night of murk, a night of cold, and a current of life brought you to me– and passed. Join me you beckoned to my heart, and your lips dripped with myrrh. And I upon my path will embark alone, far far away. Since I told myself: perhaps in the heart of my darkness a light is hidden.

Angels Will Sweeten With Song

Land of the gazelle, where our nation fought, forgave, and dreamed, Cypress, palm, olive trees will spread their shade; Please, my shining love, rise with me, to eternal joy! The heavenly scent of mandrakes, all around they’ll give off their fragrance, Cedars of pleasure, our heads they will crown in glory, Night of eternal bliss, he will spread over us an invisible tent.

The Jordan–groomsman, listens, still, before our companionship; and when under heavens’ glorious wedding canopy the two of us will doze, the Minister of Grace will bless us, angels will sweeten with song.
From Atop the Valley of Silence

We sat at the top of a cliff and considered the great impossible, and our silence conceived and gave birth to terror. And behold, before our eyes, Yal's sprawling expanse, and upon the horizon heaven kisses earth and the two melt, and we sit, we keep silent, and look into the sublime distance and consider the impossible.

מראש גבעת השתקה

עַל-רֹאשׁ גִּבְעַת הַשְׁתִיקָה עָלָּ-רֹאשׁ-סְלָע יָשַׁבְנוּ, וַתֵּלֶד אֵימָת.
וַתַּהַר שְׁתִיקַתֵנוּ וַתֵּלֶד אֵימָת.
וְוַאֲנַחְנוּ נֵשֵׁב, נַחֲשׁוֹב עַל-הָאִי אֶפְשָׁרִי.

538 הנוסח הראשון : ושניהם יתמזמזו

Hand-written draft: “and the two melt or merge”
Charming Lad

On a city park bench the calm of secrets pervaded. I sat there myself, you sat there yourself, charming lad.

The heavens broke out in a wondrous divine song, the wind, pure and soft, pales like your face, charming lad.

But then—oh no! Two birds, a couple, by chance arrived from somewhere, before our eyes, entwined, they make love gracefully,\textsuperscript{539} charming lad.

In the night of your eyelids my light expired, in the dusk of your cheeks my sun set upon me, charming lad.

On a city park bench gloom reigned. I continue to sit, I dream—you’ve already left, charming lad.

Oh as this day, before you even expect it, must don its twilight cloak, so man’s happiness is tied up in garlands of the bitter-end, charming lad!

---

539 Alternate: before our eyes, they flirt gracefully with each other, charming lad.
My Song
(To the playing of Gustav Mahler)

When my skies blacken and when my mornings darken
like the muddy waves of the sea of death, and like a tiny island, the earth sinks alone
into the abyss, far far away from me
--your noble notes, oh mute song of mine,
I shall send with blessings of peace to hidden shores.

When all faith disappears from my dashed soul,
when all hope vanishes from my anguished heart
as when daffodil’s scent dissipates in the leaf fall
when black wraps the garden and glorious death’s shade,
you, my lyre, you, I will take,
and to your voice I burn my sorrow as incense.

And when the gleaming seraphim gather on high,
and all my fields’ yield is consumed by wild animals of fire--
the wells of salvation will discharge into the valleys
when my love psalms I silently keen;
and new suns will shine in merriment
from star to star a mighty bridge will be firmly founded.

And anonymous folk, who carry their suffering through
the valley of crying,
and the pavers of paths to the cloven mountain
from the cup of your longing they shall drink and get drunk—my poem!
Though the source of my tears you will never seal,
the fire within me you will not quell, my face you will not gladden,
and my head you’ll bind with broken flowers—my poem!

540 Alternate: of an immobile sea
541 Alternate: oh mute muse of mine
When I See Your Skies

Like a bad dream sinking into eternal night
a day within my lot speaks to other days. At the
bank of the river I stare in wonder: from where
do you arrive and to where do you hurry?
And a suppressed moan rises from my throat;
the heart is shaken, exhausted, and miserable.
I turn my eyes to heaven—and my soul will sing
to you:
Your skies I see, the stars, the crescent,
your mouth drips dew deep in the void of space
---and my head before you I bow: Adiriron!

On the Poetry of Li Tai Pe (Li Bo)

Because your poetry answered my poetry
like a poem’s rhyme, answering to its companion
and like an heavenly echo arising from the vast
deep
of ancient mountains, so I heard say.

Therefore with a silver pocketknife did I slice
through your notebooks of poetry,
careful and attending, and I lay down to rest, to
dream.

From outdoors the wind brings of summer’s
scents—and intoxicates me;
a piano in the distance disperses solitary sounds.

The new book of your old poetry
is open before me; but I cannot read.

When I scan the first verse—my eyes darken;
and at the second—their light ceases entirely.

And at the third—they turn completely to tears;
one clear and big tear: bitter like the earth and its
fullness.

---

542 Alternate: heavenly voice
543 Alternate: Eastern
544 Alternate: volumes of poetry
On the Death of the Poet
(After Franz Kafka)

So the moment has arrived, the bundle falls apart,
a bundle of waves of the limitless sea;
as if there were a split in the timeless place
that point with no end: Eyn Sof!

So your arm is too short to embrace the earth’s dust,
and your strength to reach to the furthest star;
your laughter has dimmed so pain could be voiced
and now – the blast of joyous storm, sobbing and wailing everywhere.

For today there is a grand celebration in the lap of creation
for the well from which brothers, life and death,
emerge as one;
to the wondrous rhythm that nature’s secrets forever play,
drunk on eternal memories,
they dance, electrified, as free men.

Water, fire, and air; the sentient, plant, and inanimate
befriend me now though they were foreign to me before;
their hands deliver all the affectionate language to me
and they gracefulely caress me and you are among them!

And mother earth hints to me lovingly:
“Place between my breasts the weight of your shadowed soul
And the dream of your bones rest on my soft pillow!”
And your life is full!
Alone

In my attic
I sat and I gazed
alone
upon the city
that is below me.

Its windows glow already,
itself streets have fallen silent,
and across the heavens
clouds hurry
to I-know-not-where and I-do-not-understand.

Day passed, I hoped for him
to no profit.
You sat at my side—
seconds;
hours,
hours,
seconds;
against my chest I did not press you,
my arms did not swallow you up,
and though my heart was a flame
I didn't tell you
with my mouth
I couldn't.
And now you left,
and nothing remains
but only the memory
and the regret
and gloom
and gloom.
And a wondrous event!
From amidst the desolation
a sorrowful-like comfort
some kind of moan rises,
barely a moan,
and hidden in the oblivion
there was as if a stirring
of the strings of my violin
so I sensed—
but they have already worn away.
In my attic
I sat and I gazed
alone
upon the city.

And across the heavens
clouds hurry
to I-know-not-where and I-do-not-understand.
And the city below
tranquil and calm,
and in the windows of its houses
--- there
the bliss of light,
the bliss of human beings.
To a Foreign Friend

Happiness came close this time but passed me by
oh, so close,
and it left me a pyre of despair!
I opened my heart to you
like a temple’s gate—
and you stabbed me;
you shot a blackening fire through my bones.

So now the stars are dropping from my sky,
my world, my existence, is ablaze,
the moon’s face paled before me
like the face of the lost lover in a night of alleyways.

This world kicked me,
having for so long repeated
that it, it and I have nothing together;
kicked me again and again and vomited me, deep, deep
into an empty void.

Woe, happiness came close this time but passed me by,
oh, so close,
He left me a pyre of despair!
In vain, I gulp my wine and guzzle like a camel,
In vain I exhort, I cry, there is no answer, no voice;
In vain I live, in vain do I long for death;
--only my song is my escape, my elegy my refuge.

Only this sad song of mine!
And you, that I loved so,
will never know it;
you’ll never hear it, my lips are foreign to you;
as the flame of my desire is foreign to you;
foreign to you, as the hammer of my blood-song,
pounding in my head mercilessly.

[continued on next page]

545 Alternate: the white face paled before me like that lost lover’s face in night’s alleyways.
You'll never hear my song, nor can you understand, and what is my sin, and what is my crime never will I know; over what are you incensed, why do you now loath me it is not the way of man to abhor his own dog so.

Woe, this time happiness came close but passed me by and how quickly did it pass! The terror has returned to my abandoned and lonely soul, once again fifty gates of impurity have their maws gaping, ready to swallow me deep down below into Sheol.

And I see: I will return as I did before to search through the turds of my shamed lust for the holy sparks of pure love through fields of night – a futile and worthless hope! A futile and worthless hope of a fool losing his mind; for which you deserted me!

Yet now the pain has abated, the nefarious noise has paused, and the spirit within has calmed. I was like the surface of the sea after the storm, and a spark of pleasant rest was lit by my devastated heart. And I felt (it seemed to me--) that I am freeborn, the reins you bounded me with were cut, the yoke of deceit fell, the shafts collapsed, I am emancipated, freeborn.

Yes, freeborn am I, freeborn!

Am I free? Freeborn?

Woe, happiness came close this time but passed me by, and it will not ever return! He took the light of my eyes, he uprooted my heart from within me, I have no tranquility and I never will!

Because there will never be freedom for the eternal slave, Never will he who is forever sold leave—ever! Alas! Woe! Alas! A-las!
On New Year’s Eve
[On The Night of Sylvester]

On this night, life bubbles like champagne in the streets,
trivial jazz tunes play
in the bars
with showers of money they extinguish desire.

Distance robbed you from me and only
my four walls remain my companions,
seeking to box me in.

Therefore I am quiet.

I inhale sweet smoke from cigarettes-of-longing
and I read:
the fairy tales of Andersen, Reuveni’s memoirs,
and the poetry of Apollinaire,
that you love.

But at about midnight I filled my glass
and drink to you, to life.

And when I lie down
--sometimes I think of you
--and sometimes I keep reading.

And when morning dawns
-----
Dressed in Pride

At dusk I leave my house to roam, and behold: out in the streets the masses celebrate and wander about.

Couple after couple, young men with young women go about, arms interwoven, or wrapped around each other’s backs.

I watched, I was glad, and I donned pride, because I am like them, human.

When I die—people will come, and thread fabric from my clothes for the children.
I will not be a Bad Neighbor

I will not be a bad neighbor, my awesome world!
I will not battle for your bread\textsuperscript{546} in belligerent wrath;
For those who dine with me I will not pour the wine of my rebellion nor my evenings’ wormwood absinthe or my morning’s hemlock-water.
I will not wear a garland of ashes
I will not weave thorns between my flowered wreath.
Soft buds, the gleanings of my meadow, and pleasant sounds will come from my lyre.
And if my oil will be balm for distress and my wild myrrh a cure to a deeply embittered soul—oh how good!—this will be my reward!

\textsuperscript{546} Alternate: I will not battle in your battle
Night of Iyar, Night of Radiant Spring Moon

Night of Radiant Spring Moon
gave drink to me
with its enchanted mouth--
My trail I set upon a dessert dune,
a whole world fills my satchel,
and every vagrant, every gypsy –
my companion and my devotee.

Singers turn to summer’s song—
my soul, my self, suffers in straits;
oh where is my delicacy?
I raise my cry on high
and the source of my tears--
having no crimson-ribbon [lips to kiss]—
I make the theme of my thought.

Mercy mixed with judgment
hurries past and Elul arrives
to my garden;
And from behind the foliage and brush
an image--night’s black eyelids,
innocently show me
the shadow of my pine tree.

And in Tishrei
in Sukkot booths
grooms and brides
leave their scent for me;
and in the booth of fragrant delight
my sorrow sits silently
and I and I
and I.
Peace Beneath My Cypress

Peace beneath my cypress
and it is a crown for my head;
and what more do you ask, my soul?
and what more do you ask, my soul?

I'll ask, I'll ask in secret:
a roof, a table, a lamp
and my cup filled with my wine –
and what more do you ask, my soul?

I'll ask, I'll ask for a palace
at the bank of a river of spice;
and linen and purple for my robes;
and what more do you ask, my soul?

I'll ask, I'll ask for myself much more!
A day that never ends and is wholly good
and it shall be sweet to me like my honey --
and what more do you ask, my soul?

I'll ask, I'll ask of the beryl-stones secret,
which praise, exalt, and sanctify,
to frame my anguished whispered prayer
and what more do you ask, my soul?

To bask in the brilliant honor
of one single soul
to be my light and my sun –
one soul I will ask for my soul!
There is this blossom of wonders—so I heard told—it is the most glorious of materials and more precious than gold, at the sight of the blossom, the sick is cured of harm, youth replaces age with a glance at its charm.

At the pavilion garden I promptly inquire about the flower of wonders among all the men of hire. “If only it was in my garden,” the old gardener replied, “for until now my eyes have not been satisfied. Though if to the stars you look there such a flower you might set your hook; and I’ll also tell you from weighty head: the flower is not white, perhaps it is red”

With stargazers, up a tall mountain I rushed to climb and the trail of its footsteps I attempted to mine. “Such a flower of wonders,” the astronomer said, is impossible to find up in heaven’s flower-bed; if only there were something like it, believe me brother, over my wounds too a scab would grow to cover.”

I left to stroll in the field when the day grew late at the hour when the hunting animals lie in wait and in the shepherd’s grove—wonder of wonders—guess who! On two cheeks—the flowers: not one, but two!! --But surely those I didn’t allow my heart to pick-- only the memory of the thing in a book did I stick.
Ballad

Atlit, Atlit,
you rose from the gazelle
your shadow is upon me like night
Jerusalem is surrounded by mountains—
surrounding you: the wire.

The daffodil in Sharon
In the Carmel, Avigail;
but in you: the withering grass and the fading
flower
and a few virtuous wives.

In you, the spark consumed goat’s fat,
the fear of my fathers, had he not
all of you devoured
should I cry the cry of a ram?!?

Atlit, Atlit,
you rose from the gazelle
your shadow is upon me like night
Jerusalem is surrounded by mountains—
surrounding you: the wire.

בַּלַּדָּה
עַתְלִית, עַתְלִית,
מִצְּבִי עָלִית,
צִלֵּי עָלִית,
יְרוּשָלַיִם הָרִים סָבִיב לָה –
סֳבִיב לְרָגָל.

הַחֲבַצֶּלֶת בְּשָׁרוֹן,
בַּכַּרְמֶל אֲבִיגַיִל,
בֶּן בֵּשׁ חוֹרִי, בֶּן בֵּל צִיץ
יָבֵש חָצִיר, נָבֵל צִיץ
וְכָמָּה נְשֵׁי חַיִל.

בֶּן אֲכַל חֶלֶב שֻׁתְיוֹדִים,
פַּחַד אֲבוֹתַי, אִל -
מִלְיָא אָתָא כּל הָאֵבְךָ
אָכַל בּוּבָל אֵיל?!?

עַתְלִית, עַתְלִית,
מִצְּבִי עָלִית,
צִלֵּי עָלִית,
יְרוּשָלַיִם הָרִים סֳבִיב לָה –
סֳבִיב לְרָגָל.
Sprinkled across the valley and upon the mountain
his golden showers of wild-pepper.
Last night’s cyclamen still has
her lips puckered to the rising sun.
Upon the grass
traces of sapphire glow.

In the distance the orange marks its zone
with the elixir of its fluorescence.
In the East the darkness has already departed,
indigo and purple mingle
in the divine expanse,
in Yah’s centrifugal dance.

The turtledoves at nightfall
make love with passion.
The Place composes him an ode,
they know no eagle along their path
fashioning light and creating
and to you he calls.
A Thread of Grace

In secret my soul
cries over her destiny
for it has betrayed me
and led me astray.
The finest gold for him –
and for him burnished bronze,
each man was given his due,
but oh what was dealt to me!
To sit at the brink of the deep
my lonesome miserable self
and a thread of kindness to pull
from the empty void.

And so I do.
From the void
the thread I pull
as if cursed.
Until the end arrives
a day of praise
and the thread cuts off
and the grave is sealed
and all the wretchedness
sinks into the deep.

במסתרים תבקה
 댓글 על הגרל
כי מעלה לי מעל
והוא ['$ש suscepto.
ذهب פורים לזו –
ולזה נוחת קול Territory -
לא שישโท גエネルギー –
ולזה [$ש עולם
לשת על שפת התוהם
בתווזד אטמול
וזה [$ש חסד למשך
מעחק רוח [$ח窒息

וכי אני עשה.
מנ [$ח窒息 נוחת [$ח窒息
כמסתק
עד-[ש בפש
י [$ח窒息 [$ח窒息
נפס [$ח窒息
נוס [$ח窒息
וכל [$ח窒息
במתו [$ח窒息
Passing Phenomena

Phenomena pass to and fro into oblivion
upon a ribbon of empty space designated as time;
the gears of the grandfather clock set eternity in
motion:
a pendulum of permutations moving back and forth.

Future and past are synonyms,
touching together out there in the ocean of what
exists
and suddenly we, a dribble among drops, were
discharged
upon the shores of reality by a breaking wave.

And every moment is a secret. Infinity within Glory.
What exists in the present and is gone.
And in every experience—all of existence
And the complete nothing.

And she is a cloud-gathering of dream’s illusions.
And she is the flame of radiant jewels.
The Awesome Name

The preeminent among the multitudes; has names, but no number.
Upon them he hangs the earth; and the world of thought.
He sends down dew of life; and the generous rains.
He commands his soldiers like sheep; and marshals heaven’s army.
And there is one name; which above all He raised.
And without it, all his names; are but a forsaken corpse.
He who overturns the order of creation; and the order of Merkavah.
His terror reigns over Sheol; and over the heavens of Arava.
He turns garden to salt-flats; an oasis to desolation.
And now look! There is a city; and she is quite exalted.
She is found in the holy hills; eternity is her stand.
In the hands of ancient kings, she was hewn from the rock.
Jerusalem city of gold

There once a year; during the secret of sacrifice.
The soul will be absolved; of all its sin.
And the entire house fills; and its light mixes.
And a people likened to the stars; swim from the wilderness.
For then from the mouth of the priest; shooting like a blast of flame

this is the awesome name:

I. O. V. E.
Ah-ha-va.

**On the Margins of a Song for a Young Companion**

Simply a song for you, my precious, from among all the songs of singers; part mask, some balm and some honey of lies. With next summer’s end, when scorching heat strikes the meadows and the river runs dry of its rapid waters – you’ll find within it many clay shards: pure--though broken.

**Night’s Riddle**

Floating inside a pure white shell and the lake is like the heart’s secret. A crystal hand she reaches out -- and silver harp drips longing. The sweetest honey now flows in a pure, voiceless, and serene song. A light cloud chances upon her, stalls, and then swiftly slips away. I won’t reveal the secret, at most I’ll think of evanescent beauty.

---

547 Alternate: A Postscript of a Song to a Young Friend
My day! My destiny!

Dawn I awoke to your smile,
I knew nothing of my confinement in your chains;
Roses, you said, I should place within your bosom,
under your feet, lilies.

I have scorned my stars and my radiant moon,
and I followed you against my will;
you flung thistles in abundance on my path,
you tripped my steps with thorns.

And when shafts of your quiver struck me in rage
and my rock, my bastion, was split by the thunder—
I recalled that smile every time
and I wandered after you impotent.

And so, when you sink into the deep’s fog
and that smile remains hovering in the celestial twilight,
you will become the morning star for dreamers,
who come after me and will be consumed in it like me.
To the Remnants of Israel

Oh woe to those crying before deaf skies
and battling their thoughts in their beds!
For behold darkness descended to the most
remote islands and swarmed over the face of the
land
and it came and swallowed nations and covered
all of humanity;
and among us it dwelled sevenfold, it weighed
heavily upon us.
Thus in the deep darkness the hatching
nighthawk and the fluttering bat are secure
while we went astray and we were lost like a
papyrus reed upon the twilight Nile.
We said, would that the rooster would crow and
the heavy gray cage of gloom would be opened,
we’d go out in procession and go forward and
our shackles would be broken!
And like the blind we faltered, we fell, we were
beaten; we were wrapped in jet black.
Dawn was difficult to distinguish from night; the
ebony and pitch-dark overwhelmed.
But when we would arise with morning--the
scent of the field and the rivers of water will
illuminate the holy lesson.
Therefore listen and behold, daughter of Zion,
look at the wonders of the world!
Yet again will the waters of Jordan touch the
Aravah and fall rapidly into the Kineret.
Yet again will the sun shine on the brow of
Moav and set in the furthest sea;
and you shall yet again thrive and grow like
grapevine saturated in drops of dew.
And kings will come to you and princes will
search for you;
and declare, protect us in the shadow of your
branches, let us eat of your vine,
or else the evil will befall us, a cruel hand will
strike us!
Then your stars will shine as in days of old, and
you will radiate light as when the day has come,
and you shall not be trodden upon by the
bandits of the night,
and your honor will bear fruit before the sun.
Not a Blazing Sword

Not a blazing sword, not venom and anger, not fire and brimstone and rivers of blood – a sect of demons dance over all the desert sand, the lord of the sea storms a raging tempest--there is no exhausting the power of a people, that defends and wages battle, for its honor and its life’s land!

From the lands of the North and Yemen and Magdiel, upon you, Mount Zion, we have arrived to be redeemed! And from Dan to Beer-Sheva, from Dan to Beer-Sheva, then like a lioness the man of Israel will rise! there is no exhausting the power of a people, that defends and wages battle, for its honor and its life’s land!

In the hills of Gilboa – there we’ll raise the shofar blast to reach the Jordan and cross the Bashan. Will you hear from afar?! Come and let us be saved! Freeborn you are, freeborn, a strong nation! there is no exhausting the power of a people, that defends and wages battle, for its honor and its life’s land!
Recall, my people!

Recall, my people,
the days of Barak and Deborah;
recall, my people!

Recall, my people,
her splendor, her radiance, her brilliance;
recall, my people!

Recall, my people, the precious language
holy, pleasant, and pure;
recall, my people!

Recall, my people, the great crown,
and pick it up from the dust;
recall, my people!
The Ship

“Brothers, come quickly, awake, 
glory to the man who will stand in the break.

Rescue me from theft and disaster 
the ship is far out at sea with no captain or master!

And terrible is the wrath and the froth is wild 
and Neptune cries: “Bring woman, bring child!”

And from wave to wave the I rages, 
downward it falls and then heavenward it raises,

into the deep it dives again, up it climbs another tel, 
thunder, clap, and shatter --“Shema Yisrael”

Fighting arms here and there can still be seen 
they too down into the depths careen.

And everything has ceased. The ship has disappeared. 
The burst of sea’s devilish cackle has seared.

And the expanse listened to its water sport. 
But did it pay heed or is this perhaps a false report?

Have I again been betrayed by my imagination? 
Do miracles happen and is eternity their continuation?

Because far, so very far from there 
the ship hovers like a shadow amidst the sea air.

And it happens that from the silver scuttle 
on bright nights tones begin to bubble

like melody of flute or like song of violin, 
a joyous song rises mixed with elegiac hymn

“My ship, arise, arise from waters of bitter fate 
and return, my mercy, to the land of the date!”

The song has finished. The dawn will release. 
But the core of my tears—when shall it cease?
The Lilly Song

Brush, be still and be amazed!
Forest tree, lower your head to earth!
Stop your joyous singing, share in my secret;
as I'll sing you a lily song.

Why has your face turned sanguine?
Why have your cheeks turned green?
And what shall one make of night’s dew shaking
upon your bough?
Did the eastern wind’s kisses burn?
Was your heart struck by a worm
that you cried and wailed in the dark of night?
Is there no gardener in Zion,
Is there none to dress your wounds
that you expire, you die before your time?
Already the valley fog has broken
the swallow exults in the field--
and you will mourn over the destruction of your
world,
you will wither, you will shrivel;
rise, rise and sing to the wind.

Brush, speak and rejoice!
Tree, raise your head up and clap!
Because you will not hear my song,
Because the grief of the lily you will not know.
To the Old Synagogue in Prague

How do, like old Israel under the burden of generations, you bend over in gloom as if mourning for mother. Outside the sword bereaves, pyres have been put out, but your light did not dim and your candle still burns.

How I loved your secret when I was still a lad studying Gemara inside you with thirst! All around big-city life and unruly storm and you: total calm, tranquility, and stillness.

Again I recall the stains of your blackening walls, the blood stains of a fearless generation; the blood of the beaten brave and the holy slaughtered, in your bosom they delivered their souls pronouncing God's oneness.

Oh the charming lectern of handicraft and its standard! And here and there light of windows broad within and narrow without; and ancient lamps hung on its walls with brass plates that sparkle like seraphim.

On Friday night while those lamps burned, the hidden secrets of the next were revealed to me in their light and on Rosh Hashana I heard their plates shaking and answering “amen, yehe shme raba.”

In the sacred stillness between one prayer and the next by the look of your obscure gothic vaults As if the shekhina’s appearance gazed upon me and frightened me.

[continued on next page]
Woe! How could today’s generation understand, orphaned from the purity of the prayers taking off there toward heaven! In this small sanctuary, the Nodah and the Maharal cast out pleas in trepidation.

* * *

Your gates were stretched out upon rivers of tears forever they will stand before the fury of the instigator and the walls that were sanctified in the time of pogroms, no metal shall break and no explosive will tear down.

From the destruction of Zion your cornerstones were founded and for a poor people they stood from generation to generation like pillars of water; And now, in my return, I sacrifice your blessing the sacred fruit of jubilation for rebuilt Zion.
Addendum II: Translation of Mordechai Langer’s Letter to Yaakov Rabinovich

Prague, 26 Adar II 5681 [March 31, 1921]

Honorable sir!

As I express my hope that you still remember your servant, I hope you will allow me to trouble you with my following request:

You sir were the first that I showed my poems to when you were in Prague due to the congress of Ha-Poel ha-Tzair, and if I am not mistaken, you were interested in my poems; for you said the following to your servant: “your poems are poetry” and you advised me as follows: “send your poems to Klausner or Frishman because only these two understand new things that have not yet been said in our narrow literature.” This was the content of your words. And now know my lord what happened to my poems after I did as you commanded: I sent the two poems you read then to Mr. Klausner in Jerusalem in the hands of Dr. H. Bergmann, and then after several months, I received a reply from Klausner informing me that though my poems are beautiful and original in their content, “as well as their execution,” their meter is no meter (they are indeed made according to the Sephardic meter!), “and a poem without meter is not a complete creation” (?) [Langer’s question mark]. This answer of his upset me slightly and I did not send him my poems again.

After this I sent select poems in the hands of designated emissary [ish iti] to Berlin to Klatzhkin. Dr. Max Brod wrote a recommendation to Martin Buber and asked him to publish them (Max Brod likes my poems and he told me to rewrite them in Ashkenazit when they are set to be published) but Buber replied in the name of Klatzhkin that “although…” etc., but they have linguistic defects (and therefore he contradicts Klausner’s reasoning) and what’s more, they only publish famous authors in “Avar” on principle [davka] (!). After this I sent a booklet of my poems to D. Frishman in the hands of Eliezer Shteinman who I consulted upon his journey to America through Prague and who also took much interest in my poems. From him I received a postcard in which he informed me that he showed them to Frishman but he “didn’t sing their praises” and added to console me that “though our author is elderly and has no understanding of the yearnings of the young.”

And now I beseech you sir to try and publish my poems in one of our many newspapers that Eretz Israel has been graced with…And especially perhaps some young editor free of all literary conservatism and predetermined judgments will be able to except them! Because it is clear to me that it is not because of their external form, i.e. since they were composed either in a totally free style like the poetry of the most modern poets of Europe or they are bound in the ancient rhymed furniture like the poetry of Yehudah Halevi and his friends (for bottom line even the return to this form is current, I believe, among the new poets here in the West)—rather it is there content, it and only it, which caused my poetry to not be willingly accepted by our “great ones.”
Does it make sense in our present generation, which is all hate and all rage and animosity, that a man shall appear and sings songs of companion-love, songs like that sung by courtiers for their true loves?! Has this abomination not been done in Israel since the days of David who eulogized his friend Jonathan: “I grieve for you, my brother, Jonathan. Very dear you were to me. More wondrous your love to me than the love of women!” How strange this elegy rings in our cold age, an elegy of sublime and exalted human feeling that has been extinguished from Hebrew heart in the tragedy of their bitter exile, may it be swift...And now here I come and my soul to arouse this feeling again, this companion-love, in these, our enlightened days—does it make sense? And not only this but especially in the Sephardic meter and in the nusakh of “Selikhot” and “Yotzrot…”

With your generous staff, my honorable sir, try to publish my poems in the Land [of Israel]’s newspapers and I will be eternally grateful to you. For if I cannot at this moment make aliya to you all [join you], at least my poems, the children of my soul, will see the light of the Land of Israel's sun and my soul shall rejoice.

With feelings of respect and affection,

Mordechai Dov Langer

Respond promptly!

לני "י=לני תחיה"

---

548 Genazim-Beit HaSofer. 22 Adar II. Also reprinted in Dror, 157-158. Translation is my own; translation of Samuel II 1:26 is from Robert Alter, *The David Story.*