

Prague beyond Kafka: Rethinking minor literature through the work of Jiří Langer

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Although the clash of national identities in Franz Kafka's native Prague has become an indispensable element in the ever-growing of research on his work, the author himself touched on this issue only in passing, notably in his "character sketch of the literature of small peoples" (*Schema zur Charakteristik kleiner Literaturen*) from a 1911 diary entry (1948, 148). The abstractness of these remarks has allowed scholars to interpret them with only vague reference to their original context, a situation which Meno Spann referred to as early as in the 1950s as "the minor Kafka problem": "The Kafka without contours, existing outside time, or worse, in the wrong cultural space and at the wrong historical time, is a phantom which can take on any shape in which a literary necromancer wishes to conjure him up" (1957, 163). The most influential of these "necromancers" are doubtless Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who redefine the term "minor" in *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (1975; *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 1986), with Kafka's reflections as the starting point (or justification) for their own argument about language and "minor literature". With the French translation of Franz Wagenbach's biography of Kafka as their main source for the Prague historical context, they conclude: "The impossibility of writing other than in German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality." They assert that Kafka was caught between the "four languages" of Jewish Prague (German, Czech, Yiddish, and Hebrew), "deterritorialized" from his native German (1986, 16–17). Despite its considerable influence, this study has been increasingly criticized by more recent scholars like David Damrosch, who refers to this argument as a "misreading" of Kafka: "If we now see a Prague Jew where an earlier generation saw an international modernist, are we getting closer to the essence of the writer and his work, or simply projecting our current interests into both?" (2003, 198).

Other than Kafka, the writer most closely connected with Prague is Jaroslav Hašek, whose fictional antihero Josef Švejk has become a symbol of Czech culture around the world. Although the two novelists lived in Prague at the same time, there is no definitive proof that they ever met, but the philosopher Karel Kosík's essay "Hašek and Kafka" ([1963] 1983) creates a vivid image of parallel existence by juxtaposing two famous fictional scenes from their work. While Hašek's Švejk is escorted by two

guards down the hill from Hradčany across the Charles Bridge, Kafka's Josef K. is also led by two guards across the bridge and up the hill to his execution. Kosík notes that Švejk crosses Prague in the morning, Josef K. in the evening, so that although joined by location, they are separated by time: "Both groups pass through the same places, but meeting each other is impossible" ([1963] 1983, 117). While this essay was an important part of the 1960s critical movement that reclaimed Kafka's work for Marxist criticism, allowing it to be discussed in Czechoslovakia, it also reinforces the image of Kafka's alienation and separation from Czech culture that later appears in Deleuze and Guattari's "deterritorialization".

Nonetheless, Hillel J. Kieval has emphasized the "competing claims to self-definition" in which Kafka's "German" identity was complicated by his "personal ties to the many 'non-Germans' who populated Prague's cityscape", including Czech-speaking Jews like the brothers František and Jiří Langer (2000, 219). Although distantly related to Kafka's friend Max Brod, the Langers were raised in Czech culture, but took strikingly different paths in their writing: František Langer was a playwright who was close friends with Jaroslav Hašek and other leading figures of Czech literature and society, while his younger brother Jiří was an expert in Jewish mysticism who had studied with a famous rabbi in the Galician town of Belz and later (through Brod) met Kafka and instructed him in Hebrew and the Hasidic legends. Angelo Maria Ripellino has grouped Jiří Langer with Brod and Kafka as exemplary cases of alienation in their native Prague: "However far they moved from the city on the Vltava, they felt an uprootedness, a sense of not belonging" (1995, 24). Yet Jiří Langer differed from both Kafka and Brod by writing simultaneously (under different names) in German, Czech, and Hebrew, attempting to integrate the competing concepts of Central European Jewish identity (German assimilation, Czech nationalism, and Zionism) into a complex and contradictory yet somehow cohesive vision.

Langer wrote a psychoanalytic interpretation of Jewish mysticism, *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (The eroticism of the Cabbala, 1923, which he published in German under the name Georg), as well as the poetry collection *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot* (Liturgical and love poetry, 1929, for which he used his Hebrew name Mordechai Georgo). However, he used his native Czech for his collection of Hasidic folklore, *Devět bran* (1937; *Nine Gates*, 1961), which Gershom Scholem has described as "one of the most valuable descriptions of Hasidic life and the Hasidic way of thinking from within" (Langer 1959, 9–10). Just before Langer's death in wartime Palestine, Brod arranged for the publication his collected poetry in Hebrew, *Me'at tsori* (A bit of balm, 1943). Over the past decade, this poetry has become available in Czech (Langer 2013) and in English (Langer 2014) but most importantly, it has been contextualized by Shaun Jacob Halper's groundbreaking research on the gay themes of Langer's German and Hebrew writings (2011, 2013). Presenting these texts as revolutionary for modern Jewish homosexual identity, Halper has argued that "the institution of Hasidism gave meaning and shape to how Langer experienced the inner life of his sexual self – one might even say to his sexual subjectivity – even if Langer did not have the language to express it as such" (2011, 209–210). What is striking is that Langer explored this "sexual subjectivity" not in German or Czech, but in Hebrew, not yet fully revived

at that time as a national language. Thus the following analysis aims to “reterritorialize” Langer’s work within three distinct contexts: the theoretical discourse of minor literature (inspired by Deleuze and Guattari), the multicultural milieu of interwar Prague, and the less-familiar context of Czech gay writers.

KAFKA’S SELF-REPRESENTATION AND SEARCH FOR “DEEPER MEANING”

The concept of minor literature has been criticized for preserving the distinction between small and large literatures even as it claims to offer a liberating approach for marginalized writers. In *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999; *The World Republic of Letters*, 2004), Pascal Casanova examines the power relations between literatures, stating that Deleuze and Guattari “impose a modern opinion upon a writer from the past who did not share it”, and referring to their theory as “further proof that anachronism is a form of literary ethnocentrism used by the centers to apply their own aesthetic and political categories to texts” (2004, 204). More recently, Dirk Weissman has traced their “misreading” to the replacement of “klein” with “mineur” in the French translation of Kafka’s diary by Marthe Robert: “This singular choice of translation, coming from a particular interpretation of the writer’s literary and linguistic situation, has exerted a strong influence until the present day.” By basing their interpretation of Kafka on Robert’s French versions, Deleuze and Guattari “perpetuated, indeed amplified the choice of these translations” (2013, 77–78).

However, in *Milles plateaux* (1980; *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987), Deleuze and Guattari offer a more nuanced “trilingualistic” model of language, based on Henri Gobard’s *L’alienation linguistique* (1977), for which Deleuze wrote the introduction. Rather than the binary major and minor, they propose four functions of language based on location: “vernacular is here; vehicular language is everywhere; referential language is over there; mythic language is beyond” (1986, 23). For Kafka’s Prague, the “vernacular” Czech is the everyday language of the majority, the “vehicular” German has an official function, and the “mythic” Hebrew is limited to religious use, although rather than designating Yiddish as “referential”, they refer to it more vaguely as “a nomadic movement of deterritorialization that reworks German language” (25). This model is also more appropriate for Jiří Langer, one of the relatively few writers fully fluent in all four languages.

Another frequently encountered issue with minor literature is the way that the term is shifted to “minority” writing, as in the case of Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd’s *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990). Hannan Hever’s article from this collection (originally published as a thematic issue of *Cultural Critique*) describes Israeli Hebrew culture as a “unique sort of majority culture, which pretends to be a minority culture and thereby absolves itself of its real responsibilities and commitments as the master culture.” Hever defines Deleuze and Guattari’s minor literature as “evaluating ‘the degrees of territoriality, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization’ practiced in Hebrew (the mythic language informing the genesis of Zionism) and other languages in a similar position” (1987, 72–73). Citing the Palestinian author Anton Shammas’s article “The Guilt of the Babushka” (1986)

to problematize his relationship to “minority” identities, Hever notes that “he writes in Hebrew, the language of the dominant Jewish culture, which is itself a minority within the dominantly Arab Middle East. This peculiar position, which Shammas likens to the image of a Russian babushka doll, gives him a unique perspective on Israeli public discourse from the inside and the outside at once” (1987, 49). Scott Spector has in turn taken Shammas’s image of the nesting babushka doll (known in Russian as *matryoshka*) from Hever, and applied it back to the Prague context in his study of Kafka’s Zionist contemporary Hugo Bergmann:

The issue of identity [for Prague Jews] is at the centre of a crisis of self which is at the same time a political crisis. Even the discussion of their literary products as representations of “minority culture” is made problematic by the layers of identity which the Arab Israeli Anton Shammas, in a different context, has symbolized with the image of a babushka doll. (1999a, 91)

This quintessentially Slavic image is also appropriate for Czech literature, whose role shifted within Kafka’s and Jiří Langer’s lifetime from that of a vocal, self-defensive minority under Habsburg rule to the majority culture of the Czechoslovak Republic, which also included numerous Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks, and other minorities.

In *Prague Territories*, his study of Kafka’s German-speaking friends and contemporaries such as Max Brod and Egon Erwin Kisch, Scott Spector points out that although “the historical circumstances in which Kafka found himself allowed for a uniquely nuanced and complex web of territorial relations to be articulated [...] Deleuze and Guattari dismiss the production of the rest of the Prague writers who benefited from the same rare contextual and linguistic condition” (1999b, 29). Anne Jamison uses minor literature as the starting point for her study of Kafka’s relationship to Czech and Czechoslovak culture, but states that by making “the theoretically expedient but historically and linguistically outlandish move of substituting Kafka’s views on Czech and Yiddish for his views on his own relationship to German literature”, Deleuze and Guattari have “substantially undermined any broadly held understanding of Kafka’s relationship to Czech, which has always been the most marginalized, least researched aspect of Kafka’s thoroughly researched life” (2018, 29).

Marek Nekula has provided the most comprehensive overview of Kafka’s relationship to each of the languages he spoke. He connects Kafka’s story “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse People” (1924) with his shift in interest from Yiddish to Hebrew: “singing – like Hebrew in the discourse of the day – does indeed represent more than a new quality of language and [...] of Judaism itself, which sees in Hebrew a renewal of its age old ‘being’ and collective self-awareness” (2016, 70). More generally he states that “Kafka connected Hebrew with health, freedom, and life, and that he ‘yearned’ for Palestine”, yet “Hebrew was a foreign language to him in every sense of the word” (85). Nekula also discusses Kafka’s relationship with both of the Langer brothers, noting that the “retrospective claim by [Jiří] Langer that Kafka was able to communicate with him in Hebrew fluently does not [...] seem credible in view of the circumstances” (81), but while Kafka’s frequent references to Langer in his diary begin in 1915 and end in 1921, “Langer’s poem [written between 1924 and 1929] suggests that their friendship lasted until Kafka’s death” (177).

Although Jiří Langer is frequently mentioned in connection with Kafka, it is mostly in passing as his Hebrew teacher, with an occasional comment on Langer's "eccentricity" in adopting Hasidic customs in Prague, usually without any reference to Langer as a significant figure in Czech literature in his own right. The editor of the *Jewish Observer*, Yaakov Jacobs, observed in 1969 that "Kafka has become universally recognized as the one figure in world literature who has most influenced the writing, and therefore the thought, of our time", adding that Langer "came – as did Kafka, from an almost assimilated Jewish family [...] Langer tried to retrace his Jewish roots, studying Torah in his early adulthood. But Langer, unlike Kafka, apparently succeeded in finding his way back" (11).

Max Brod describes Langer in his memoir *Der Prager Kreis* (The Prague circle, 1966) as "a ghetto character that might have slipped out from the pages of [Gustav] Meyrink's *Golem* into real life", who told Brod "straightforwardly and unceremoniously that he had only come to see the man 'who wrote such a swinish book'" (157). As Scott Spector has explained, the novel which so irritated Langer, Brod's *Ein tschechisches Dienstmädchen* (A Czech maidservant, 1909), is "an extraordinarily articulate example of the entanglement of discourses of gender and nationality in Prague." Its title character, whom the narrator refers to several times as "primitive", "is mysterious and irresistible, capricious and deceitful; she is simple and tied to physical, material needs" (1999b, 174–175). Despite this unpromising start, the two men became friends and after meeting Kafka through Brod, Langer eventually taught Hebrew to both of them. In the earliest reference to Langer in his diaries, Kafka describes attending one of Brod's lectures on "religion and nation" and concludes: "The group of eastern Jews beside the stove. G. in a caftan, the matter-of-fact Jewish life. My confusion" (1948, 119). "G." (i.e. "Georg" Langer) appears between the foreign Jews, who are huddled together, and the solitary, "confused" westernized Jew, as a model for a balanced modern Jewish identity.

In September 1915, Langer took Brod and Kafka to visit a "wonder rabbi" who was staying in Prague due to the war; an encounter which Kafka describes in his diary in conflicting images of dirt, purity, roughness, and gentleness: "A nature as strongly paternal as possible makes a rabbi. All rabbis look like savages, Langer said" (1948, 128–129). Ritchie Robertson depicts this occasion like a scene from Kafka's *Der Prozess* (The Trial, 1925): "Kafka, Brod and Langer, like Josef K. on his visit to Titorelli, had to make their way through swarms of children on the pavement and the stairs and along a badly lit corridor to the room where the Rabbi and his circle were praying." Nonetheless, Robertson suggests that "Kafka looked to such figures for a more endurable paternal authority than he himself had experienced" (1985, 178).

Another of Kafka's encounters with Hasidic culture was when Langer took him to meet his spiritual mentor, the rabbi of Belz, who had come to the spa town of Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad) for treatment. In a letter to Brod, Kafka describes the visit with a deep ambivalence that contrasts with Langer's uncritical acceptance of its absurdity. He and Langer wander around in the rain, looking for the medicinal springs: "On the way we meet up with two other Jews who attracted my attention earlier. They walk along like a pair of lovers, looking affectionately at one another and smiling, one with his hand thrust into his low-slung back pocket, the other looking

more citified. [...] Firmly locked arm in arm” (1977, 120–121). This pair, an odd juxtaposition with the quest for the famous rabbi, seems to evoke the famous pairs in Kafka’s fiction, like the two policemen who arrive at Josef K.’s bedroom at the beginning of *The Trial*, which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “a homosexuality of doubles, of brothers or of bureaucrats” (1984, 68). Yet reflecting Langer’s marginalized position (at least until recent years) in Kafka’s biography, Guy Davenport’s short story “The Chair” (1984), a fictionalization of this meeting in Marienbad, portrays Kafka wandering through the town alone and omits Langer entirely (1997, 159–164).

When they finally reach the rabbi, Kafka grows increasingly frustrated with his slow pace and constant distractions, which “reduce all thinking on the part of his escort” to a childish level. He concludes that “Langer tries to find or thinks he finds a deeper meaning in all this; I think that the deeper meaning is that there is none and in my opinion this is quite enough” (1977, 122). In *Nine Gates*, Langer describes this period as one in which “Prague is part of the Chassidic Empire”, allowing unique intimacy with the rabbi, who is usually “separated from us by his secretaries and servants, as God is separated from our souls by myriads of spheres and worlds. But here among the forest trees we can all approach him” (1961, 20). Writing in Czech, he conveys a sense of the “deeper meaning” of the Hasidic perspective, adding a touch of irony to his own genuine faith. In Michal Kosák’s comparison of these two accounts: “Kafka [...] cannot see [the rabbi as] anything other than a half-blind, neglected old man marveling at everything, while Langer is able to constantly find the saintly in him and catch a glimpse of other worlds” (2002, 39).

Kafka’s diaries also include his own renditions of Hasidic tales he had been told by Langer, as in his entry for October 6, 1915:

A Zaddik is to be obeyed more than God. The Baal Shem once commanded a favorite disciple to have himself baptized. [...] The Baal Shem himself cast the disciple into the midst of evil; it was not the disciple’s own fault that he took this step, but because he was commanded to do so, and there seemed nothing more the Evil One could do. (1948, 139)

In contrast, Langer’s *Nine Gates* projects a sense of almost childlike faith in the Hasidic tenets with a scarcely perceptible nod to modernity, as when explaining the distinction between the title “Rebe”, referring to Hasidic saints, and the shorter form “Reb”: “there are some saints whose greatness neither of the two titles can approach. In consequence we give them both titles together: ‘Rebe’ and ‘Reb’. [...] It is rather a curious custom – as though in ordinary life we were to address a doctor as ‘professor doctor’, only ‘Rebe Reb’ is much more saintly and magnificent” (1961, 115).

By November 1917, when Kafka wrote an irritable letter to Brod refusing to help Langer find a job (“Langer is strong; why doesn’t he hire himself out to some Jewish tenant farmer?”) their friendship had apparently waned (1948, 165–166). Yet in another letter to Brod the following spring, his final reference to Langer ends on a more positive note (although suggesting that their direct contact had ceased): “Your news from Langer – please thank him warmly – made me very glad” (236). According to Cecil Bloom, Langer may have inspired a minor character in Kafka’s *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*, 1926): “the secretary Erlanger (Herr Langer) who [wears] a black coat not dissimilar to chassidic dress” (1996, 36).

Langer's final memories of his famous friend appear in the short article "Mashehu al Kafka" (Something about Kafka, 1941) published in the Hebrew newspaper *Hegeh*. In it he includes an anecdote about speaking Hebrew with Kafka on a streetcar in Prague, where their fellow Czech passengers "were surprised that it was possible to converse in Hebrew, even about airplanes. [...] How Kafka's face lit up then from happiness and pride!" (2014, 89). He concludes with an almost uncanny event that occurred at Max Brod's apartment in Prague (it is not clear from the context whether Langer was present, or is retelling it from hearsay). A well-known writer was visiting Brod, who offered to show him Kafka's manuscripts. At the moment he was about to take them out of the folder, the power went out in the neighborhood and the guest had to leave without seeing anything. This coincidentally foreshadows the later destiny of these papers, which Brod took with him when he escaped from the Nazis to Tel Aviv, and planned to donate to the National Library of Israel, only to leave them with his former secretary, who infamously kept them hidden from the world for decades until her death. It was only after an arduous lawsuit that the writings were finally properly preserved and displayed to the world; among the most notable discoveries were some of Kafka's previously unseen notes in Hebrew (Fraňková 2021).

"SOMETHING DIFFERENT" IN INTERWAR CZECH LITERATURE

After *Nine Gates* was published in German in 1959 and English in 1961, it became widely accepted as a valuable portrait of the vanished world of East European Jewish culture. It has even been compared favorably to Martin Buber's earlier translations of Hasidic tales into German, as for example in Karl Erich Grozinger's claim that even though "Langer comes much closer to Hasidic reality in his retelling of the tales than do the philosophically and romantically tinged renditions of Martin Buber or Elie Wiesel, he still could not completely resist certain rationalisations and attempts at polishing" (1994, 16). It is also worth noting that one of the most renowned Yiddish-language authors, Isaac Bashevis Singer, called *Nine Gates* "a book to be read more for an impression and a mood than for a systematic study of Hasidism" (1961, 260). Readers of the book in other languages might overlook the fact that it was originally written in Czech, but it has close ties to the vibrant literary scene of interwar Prague.

Those links are most clearly shown in František's Langer's essay "My Brother Jiří", which was included as the foreword to the English translation of *Nine Gates* and also added to the second Czech edition in 1965. As Avigdor Dagan notes, "[t]his personal memoir is the only published literary evidence of an inner change in František Langer's attitude toward Judaism. Apparently, he had been shocked back to his Jewish heritage by the Holocaust and by the death of both his brothers" (1988–1989, 27–28). Through these recollections, František Langer places *Nine Gates* within the context of modern Czech literature, explaining that its stories "were written for the ordinary reader, especially the [non-Jewish] Czech reader [...] to tell him something different about the Jews from that which Nazi anti-Semitism was endeavouring to smuggle across the Czechoslovak frontiers" (1961, xxiv). This essay also appeared in Langer's autobiography *Byli a bylo* (They were and it was, 1963), which also includes chapters

on Jaroslav Hašek as well as Karel and Josef Čapek. Although this autobiography has never fully been translated into English, the chapter on Jaroslav Hašek also includes valuable material on his life before *Švejk*, and much as his chapter on Jiří was added to *Nine Gates*, Langer's description of the prewar "Party of Moderate Progress within the Bounds of the Law" has been included in an English translation of Hašek's writings (Hašek 1981).

By juxtaposing Jiří with such world-famous figures as Hašek and Čapek, František reaffirms his family's affiliation with Czech culture, but despite his affectionate tone, he cannot fully account for the divergent and eccentric path his younger brother chose to follow. He describes Jiří's first trip to Belz in 1913 as a journey "from the living reality of the twentieth century into the mystical and ecstatic atmosphere of the Middle Ages" (1961, vii). Jiří's youthful fascination with the Czech poet Otakar Březina led to his deep interest in Jewish mysticism, which František, a medical student at the time, regarded in analytical terms: "I could only suppose that his was a case of belated adolescent psychopathy, which I hoped was a mere passing phenomenon" (xiv). After Jiří Langer first returned to Prague from Belz, he retained the dress and customs he had adopted among the Hasidim, refusing for example to touch or look directly at women, even in his own family. František claims that his transformation "seemed to us at the time to resemble the situation in Kafka's novel *Die Verwandlung* [*The Metamorphosis*] in which the son of the house is suddenly changed into an enormous cockroach [...] while the family strive in vain to find some place for him in their affections" (xvii). (Since Kafka's work was still not widely known in Czechoslovakia when Langer's essay was first written in the late 1950s, this allusion may have been intended more for the prospective foreign readers of *Nine Gates*).

With the outbreak of World War I, Jiří Langer was summoned to military service, but even there, he refused to break with his Hasidic rituals, such as waking up early for prayers. Eventually, he was court-martialed for his refusal to bear arms on the Sabbath. He accepted his imprisonment passively but did not cooperate with his questioners (it is hard to avoid seeing a touch of Hašek's *Švejk* in his behavior here). Fortunately, as František Langer recounts, he happened to be on leave and as a military doctor he intervened to provide the authorities with medical background on his brother, who was discharged on mental grounds. In *Nine Gates*, however, Jiří credits this rescue to a miracle by the rabbi of Belz. As František Langer observes, "[w]hen I told him of my part in his deliverance he declared that the miracle might have consisted in the fact of my having succeeded in getting leave from the front – which might of course have been true" (xix).

When František returned to Prague after the war, he was surprised to see that Jiří was now reading Sigmund Freud, whose thought was then still little-known in Czechoslovakia:

For me his teaching was in the nature of an utterly fantastic hypothesis, whereas my brother accepted Freud's discoveries as axioms with scientific validity. He began to use Freudian methods in analysing the essential meaning of the practices observed in Jewish ritual and in Jewish cults, applying them to his search for the subconscious sources of Jewish mysticism and the actual origin of the religious idea. It was a most remarkable spectacle

to see him studying, a scientific work of the great psycho-analyst open in one hand and at his other hand an open folio of the Talmud, or more often some mystical work such as the *Zohar*. (1961, xx–xxi)

This cultural fusion continued in the foreword to *Eroticism of the Cabbala*, published in 1923, in which Langer quotes from Otokar Březina's poem "Modlitba za nepřátele" (Prayer for our enemies) and describes it as "Cabbalistic" (1989, 14).

The main text of *Nine Gates* begins with Jiří Langer's own introduction, "A Youth from Prague Among the Chassidism", in which gives his first-person account of his arrival in Belz. He describes his embarrassment at being unable to understand Yiddish, "that bizarre mixture of medieval German and Hebrew, Polish and Russian" (1961, 5). On his first evening there, exoticism gives way to a sense of familiarity: "The spacious Belz synagogue has meanwhile filled with people. [...] In a way the interior reminds me of the Old-New Synagogue in Prague" (6). Even in a distant land, surrounded by speakers of Yiddish, Langer is reminded of the oldest and holiest of Prague's Jewish landmarks. In this description, we can see the relationship between language and territory as he negotiates between his foreignness and a sense of belonging as a Czech of Jewish origin.

In the third chapter, Langer presents the language question from the Hasidic point of view, through the perspective of the holy Reb Naftali, who compares Russian, Hungarian, and German to Yiddish: "Russian is the personification of *retsiche*, or violence, Hungarian of *niyef*, or sensuality, while German personifies the worst quality of all, namely unbelief — *apikorses*. [...] German resembles our Yiddish, but only in the same way that a monkey resembles a man" (1961, 77). By focusing on the irrationality of these languages, Langer subtly undermines the assumption that they are as more "logical" than Yiddish, and also contrasts the linguistic richness of Reb Naftali's community with its material poverty. Even if they only have potatoes, they "have something different every day"; he then gives a different name for potatoes (*kartoflyes*, *zemakes*, etc.) for each day of the week. Sarai Brachman Shoup points out that although Reb Naftali comments on various languages, he does not mention Czech, the language of the original text (2001, 165). The shift in perspective from the first chapter, where Langer sees Yiddish as incomprehensibly strange, to the third, where he judges the dominant languages of Central and Eastern Europe using Yiddish as the referential language, parallels his own development as a Hasidic scholar.

In his introduction, Langer compares the controversy over the original of the crucial Cabbalistic text, the *Zohar*, to a famous Czech controversy: "The book appears in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century, when it purported to be an ancient work of Palestinian origin. The dispute over this question – which has a certain analogy in the controversy over the Králové Dvůr [sic] and Zelená Hora manuscripts in Czechoslovakia – is not yet at an end" (1961, 25). Here Langer refers to the "Queen's Court" and "Green Mountain" manuscripts, "discovered" by archivist Václav Hanka in 1817 and considered long-lost epics for decades before they were definitively revealed as forgeries in 1886 (the anachronistic "Czechoslovakia", which did not yet exist at the time of this scandal in Bohemia, was added for clarification by the English translator Stephen Jolly). In a later instance, Langer alludes to a renowned Czech poet

as a complement to his account. In his account of two ascetic brothers, he describes an occasion in which a group of drunken musicians forces one of the brothers, Rebe Reb Sussya, to dance for them until he falls unconscious. They put him back in bed, but due to a misunderstanding, he is forced to dance once again in his brother's place:

He danced and danced until he again fell to the floor, and the musicians realized that this time their Jew would not regain consciousness so easily.

However, here below, earth's fate

May toss and twist and rage,

The Sussyas' fate was e'er the trait

Of our hard pilgrimage.

This is how some great poet described it – Vrchlický by name. (119)

At this point in the text, the translator Jolly has added his own footnote: "There is a pleasant touch of deliberate understatement here, for Vrchlický, one of Bohemia's greatest poets, is a well-known name, for every Czech. The lines quoted here are in the nature of a jingle." As if giving a knowing wink to the Czech reader through such references, Langer preserves his narrative balance between naive credulity and ironic distance.

In his final chapter "The Ninth Gate", Langer includes one of his most extended references to Prague, using the theme of the journey to symbolize the process of self-discovery. In this story (versions of which also appear in Martin Buber's and Elie Wiesel's collections of Hasidic tales) a "devout scholar" named Reb Eisik Yekls is told by a "mysterious voice" to go to Prague and look under the Charles Bridge for a hidden treasure:

But when after his long and arduous pilgrimage he stood on a hill, covered with green trees, and saw in front of him a glorious castle on a high mountain and under the castle a town spread out on both banks of a wide river, and when he glimpsed a mighty bridge, built throughout of stone, Eisik's heart thumped with joy. [...] But the bridge was guarded by soldiers. [...] He was seized and led before the commander. When questioned Reb Eisik Yekls held nothing back. [...] He was not asked his name nor where he came from.

"You fool," exclaimed the officer with a sneer [...] "If I were to believe in dreams, I should have to go all the way to *Cracow*. I had a dream that there is some wonderful treasure there hidden near the fireplace in a room occupied by a Jew. [...] His name was *Eisik Yekls*...

Do you think I'd want to drag my weary body all the way to *Cracow* to go scratching for treasure near the fireplace of some confounded Jew? Dreams are lies and deception." [...]

When the gendarmes released him Reb Eisik gave thanks to the Lord. [...] Eisik returned home without delay and found the treasure near his fireplace. (250)

Langer likely would have seen this "journey to the West", from Poland to Prague, as reflecting his own journey to Belz in reverse. The "joy" evoked by the famous cityscape of Prague shows Langer's deep attachment to his birthplace, similar to his allusion to Prague's Old-New synagogue in the introduction, and the idea of finding treasure at home suggests that the true discovery of a journey takes place upon one's return to the familiar.

In 1937, the same year that *Nine Gates* appeared, the Communist writer Ivan Olbracht (incidentally one of the first critics to see Švejk as a representative figure

for the Czech nation) published a collection of three stories under the title *Golet v údolí* (*Valley of Exile*, 1964). Set in the remote region of Transcarpathian Ruthenia (then in Czechoslovakia, now in Ukraine), this book includes the novella “O smutných očích Hany Karadžičové” (“The Sorrowful Eyes of Hannah Karadjich”), which was later adapted as the Czech film *Hanele* (1999). When its title character Hana (also known as Hanele) decides to leave home, one of the other villagers (as if in warning her about the outside world) tells her the tale of “a Jew in Cracow” who was told by the angel of dreams to travel to Prague:

He found Prague and the Vltava and the stone bridge [...]; suddenly two soldiers caught hold of him from behind. “Look, a stinking Jew! Spying for the enemy, are you? Just you wait!” [...] In the end there was nothing for it but to tell the whole story of his dream. The officer laughed. [...] “Last night I dreamed that I was in the house of a certain Jew [in Cracow], I even remember what he was called,” and he gave the prisoner’s name, “and I even remember what his house looked like,” and he described the prisoner’s own home, “and I dreamed I found a treasure in his stove.” He felt so happy about it that he let the Jew go. He thanked his benefactor and set off back home to Cracow. At home he had barely taken the first brick out of the stove wall and there was the treasure of gold. (1999, 79)

Like Kafka in his diaries, Olbracht recounts the same material as Langer, but with greater skepticism; one striking difference is that Olbracht’s unnamed traveler thanks the officer who interrogates him, while Langer’s Reb Eisik gives thanks only to God. Hana herself goes to the Czech city of Ostrava, where she falls in love with the secular Jew Ivo Karadžič. She takes him to visit her village, but her fiancé refuses to follow the traditional rituals, and as a result, she is cast out of the community forever. Unlike Langer, who took Jewish tradition back to Prague, Olbracht’s protagonist tries to bring “progress” to a traditional society, with disastrous results.

The sixth chapter of *Nine Gates* illustrates Langer’s most direct attempt to “reterritorialize” Jewish identity in the Czech lands. “The names of some Czech and Moravian towns”, he explains, “are known to Jewish children in Eastern Europe as places where distinguished Rabbis once worked in centuries long past.” By showing how significant the Czech lands have been for Jewish culture, he implies that Jewish culture, should be important, in turn, for the Czech reader. He also places the homeland of Hasidic tradition within “Slavic” territory: “At no time did the mystic wave of Chassidism sweep beyond the borders of the Slav countries of Eastern Europe to the west” (1961, 141–142). One of the few exceptions was Mikulov in southern Moravia, whose position near the Czech/Austrian border (on the boundary of Slavic and Germanic cultures) is striking in this context. The arrival of a Polish rabbi, Rebe Reb Schmelke, in Mikulov leads to conflict:

The people of Mikulov had caught the scent of western enlightenment and were not inclined to be friendly disposed towards the mystical strivings of a Chassidic Rabbi from the East. His relationship with the people was clouded by one habit of his in particular. Unlike the other Rabbis, he would not speak Yiddish, still less German. As a rule, he used only pure Hebrew, and at that time the educated people of Mikulov were almost entirely ignorant of the language of the prophets. (145)

In this passage, the conflict between the “educated people of Mikulov” (i.e. assimilated Jews) and the Hebrew-speaking rabbi parallels Langer’s own “mystical strivings” as a Hasidic writer in Prague. Nonetheless, he suggests that Czech territory is historically hospitable to Hasidic culture, showing that his own self-identification as both Czech and Jewish is not as questionable as it may seem. This issue of identity was not only a personal statement but a highly political one, as Nazi aggression was already threatening Czechoslovakia. Indeed, only a year later, despite their vastly different attitudes toward their Jewish background, both Langer brothers were forced to flee Prague.

During World War II, when Jiří was in Palestine and František in England, they corresponded about a potential translation of *Nine Gates*, although by this time it had been banned in Prague by the Nazis and much of its first edition was destroyed. In his final letter to Jiří, František was already preoccupied with the idea of an English version: “If the first part is translated into English, I think that a publisher could be found for the book here or in America, if not now [...] then certainly after the war” (Langer 1995, 194). However, this letter only reached Max Brod a few weeks after Jiří’s death in 1943. František Langer’s heartfelt reply to Brod after learning of Jiří’s death is a touching testament of his deep affection for his brother, yet even in his grief he had the presence of mind to add the reminder: “Please help to preserve his literary estate so that nothing is lost. He wrote to me that he wanted to continue *Nine Gates* and that he had a little book prepared of Hebrew lyric poetry. If it is possible to print something to his memory in Palestine (Hebrew texts), it would be a beautiful tribute” (1995, 217–218). By this time, the faithful Brod had already arranged the publication of *A Bit of Balm*, the proofs of which Jiří was able to see before his death. It was almost two decades later, thanks to František’s extensive efforts and despite his own personal difficulties under the Communist regime, that his brother’s greatest work would reach world readers.

THE LOVE POETRY OF A “BACHELOR HASID”

Both Freud and Kafka had deeply-rooted (and widely-studied) problems with their own identity as German-speaking Jews, in a culture where Jewishness was traditionally associated with femininity. Daniel Boyarin has shown with particular clarity how the “ambivalence underlying wishes for Jewish assimilation, like other performances of colonial mimicry, is deeply embedded in issues of both gender and sexuality” (1997, 226). Freud was aware, Boyarin notes, that “at least for the *Ostjude* [the unassimilated Eastern Jews] being Jewish is a source of secret joy”, but he believed that the “form wherein the old Jews were happy no longer offers us any shelter” (257). Jiří Langer was able to find not only shelter, but eventually what Boyarin (punning on *jouissance*) describes as “jewissance”, in his experience with the Hasidim. As Sander Gilman has suggested, “Langer undertook much the same program as did Buber, to create for Czech a language of the Jew, the mirror image of the Yiddish-intoned German that Buber fantasized he was creating for German” (1990, 281). Yet while Langer was able to translate his religious identity across cultural borders by writing *Nine Gates* in Czech, it was a different case with his sexual identity, which he expressed through his Hebrew poetry in a language that was inaccessible even to his brother.

Until recently, studies of Langer mentioned sexuality only obliquely, treating Langer as a “solitary bachelor” as in Peter Mailloux’s biography of Kafka: “Langer was intelligent and cultivated [...] and shared Kafka’s preference for solitude, all of which contributed to their friendship” (1989, 363). This question is treated similarly in Czech scholarship, for example by Tomáš Pekný: “[Langer] tried a number of times to break through the circle of his solitude. [...] Why he did not succeed, we can only guess” (Langer 1996, 310–311). As Herman Carmel points out, “[i]t is interesting to note how many times the word *galmud*, ‘lonely,’ ‘solitary’ or ‘forlorn,’ occurs in [Langer’s] Hebrew poetry”, and cites a eulogy by Dov Sadan, who had been friends with Jiří Langer in Palestine: “Our lonely friend! The chapter of your life is closed, but the riddle of your life remains. [...] What was your solution?” Sadan’s only answer is to cite Langer’s own self-description as “*HaBachur heHasid miPrag* (The bachelor Hasid from Prague)” (Carmel 1992–1993, 123).

A few scholars have seen František Langer’s nostalgic foreword to *Nine Gates* as obscuring the radical nature of his younger brother’s intercultural vision. Michal Kosák sees the text as lying “like a heavy stone on the fate of Jiří Langer” (2002, 41), while Shaun Jacob Halper calls it “our most comprehensive source for Jiří’s biographical details, but his testimony is tendentious and scholars should examine it with more critical care than they have” (2011, 202). Arguably, František’s account has set the tone for later commentators to “normalize” Jiří’s behavior, such as Herman Carmel’s observation that “Jiří was what today would be described as a ‘regular fellow’” (1992–1993, 98). However, František’s own observations are more nuanced than this. For example, he contrasts Jiří’s initial insistence on following the strict Hasidic tenets about contact with women with his later concessions to modern social norms: “He not only shook hands with women but acquired a reputation for being very courteous, especially to old ladies” (1961, xxiii). Arnold Mandel’s rather anecdotal account makes a minor but significant alteration, stating that in Jiří’s later lifestyle, he had changed into “quite a gentleman, especially with pretty women” [*en homme tres galant, surtout avec les jolies femmes*] (1974, 92). This shift from “old ladies” to “pretty women”, while perhaps accidental, portrays Jiří Langer as not only a “regular fellow” but practically a “ladies’ man”, something that František Langer does not indicate. In fact, Halper suggests that František’s mention of Jiří’s aversion to female contact “was [his] 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” (2013, 77). Interestingly, in another possible “coded reference” from his autobiography, František Langer observes that Jaroslav Hašek had a similar physical ambivalence toward women, and never made physical advances toward them even in the rowdy atmosphere of pubs (1963, 63). Langer apparently found this issue so relevant that in a 1954 letter to the linguist František Daneš, he questioned the authenticity of a sexual episode in *Švejk* and wondered if it had been added to the text by someone else, since it was so atypical of Hašek’s humor (Daneš 2004, 169).

Ann Oppenheimer’s dissertation on Kafka’s Jewish identity includes a short biographical appendix on Jiří Langer, which is probably the first reference in English to

Langer's homosexuality (1977, 300). It also has an English translation by Miriam Dror of Langer's poem dedicated to Kafka, and quotes Dov Sadan as stating that "Kafka deeply admired Langer as the only member of the Prague Jewish circle whose mastery of Hebrew allowed him to use the language as an artistic medium, and that Langer represented in this respect a linguistic and artistic ambition of Kafka's own" (302). Both Dror and Sadan referred to Langer's sexual orientation in their own writings in Hebrew (Halper 2013, 26). In his profile of the Langer brothers (whom he knew personally) in the US-based journal *Cross Currents*, Avigdor Dagan (known as Viktor Fischl in Czech) focuses on *Nine Gates*, but as one of the few Czech writers to understand Hebrew, he mentions *A Bit of Balm*, remarking almost in passing that some of the poems "disclose his homosexual leaning" (1991, 188). In recent years, this aspect of Langer's work has become more widely known, as in Avner Holzman's encyclopedia entry stating that Langer "wrote some of the most daring homoerotic poetry ever published in Hebrew, at a time when merely discussing such matters was considered shameful" (2008, 990). Martin C. Putna's study of homosexuality in Czech literature places Langer among the gay writers who chose the "path of stylization", emphasizing Langer's "choice of an alternative literary language". This choice is either to find a foreign-language readership, or find a freedom of expression that "he would not dare in his native Czech language". As Putna also notes, Langer's "most personal and erotic work, [his] lyrical poetry, is written in Hebrew, "the language that is for an observant Jew the most sacred and for his Czech surroundings the most impenetrable", while *Nine Gates* is "essentially free of homoerotic themes" (2011, 137).

The "sacred" language of Langer's Hebrew was finally "penetrated" for English readers with the appearance of Shaun Jacob Halper's analysis of Langer's "homosexual-Jewish identity" in an article (2011) focused on *Die Erotik der Kabbala*, followed by his full dissertation (2013) which includes close readings of Langer's poetry. In the article, he describes Langer's early work as "a moving and powerful record of how an interwar homosexual Jew – without community or inherited identity – fashioned his own homosexual Jewish identity that did not conform to the available sexological or masculinist models of homosexuality" (2011, 228). In his dissertation, Halper states, "[w]hether 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" (2013, 35). His later chapters explore "the slippery ambiguities and canny codes" that characterize Langer's first book of poetry, beginning with the title *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot* (Liturgical and love poetry): "by combining *shirei yedidot* with *piyyutim*, a term which generally refers exclusively to liturgical Hebrew poetry, [...] he seemed to promise that the "love poetry" to follow were allegorical prayers as well." An additional level of ambiguity is added by the word *yedidot*, which when "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)." Using such linguistic strategies, he "playfully straddled the lines between same-sex friendship and same-sex erotic love, and between God and the male erotic love

object” (2013, 127). In his close readings of individual poems, Halper points out numerous examples in which an almost shockingly erotic meaning can be replaced by an innocuously spiritual one: “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” (2013, 162).

While Langer’s Czech translator Denisa Goldmannová sees his verse as expressing *filia* (friendship) rather than erotic feelings (Langer 2013, 120–121), his English translator Elana Wolff concurs with Halper by describing them as “poems of profound loneliness and longing, and [...] undisguised, unrequited homoromantic love”, even speculating: “Could it have been that Franz Kafka was Georg Jiří Mordechai Langer’s great, secret, unrequited love? Maybe. It is tempting to think so, and the mystery of it adds a certain cachet to Langer’s work” (Langer 2014, 15–17). In any case, Langer’s “On the Death of the Poet”, dedicated to Kafka, was one of his few Hebrew poems that he translated himself into Czech:

For today a mystical marriage is celebrated in the bosom of nature,
at the spring from which life and death come forth as one like brothers [...]
Water—fire—air and everything animate—growing—inanimate,
befriend me today, though I was estranged from them until now,
with an expression of unspoken affection, they reach their hands toward me
and caress me beautifully – and you are among them!
And Mother Earth so lovingly beckons to me:
“Rest the shadow of your soul between my breasts,
And lie the dream of your bones in the pillow of my softness!”
– And it is filled with your life.¹

In his review of Wolff’s translation, Kenneth Sherman claims that “Kafka would have winced at” this poem, which he calls “a hodgepodge of rococo imagery”, and concludes that “nothing in the poems, or in the biographies, supports the notion that Langer was romantically taken with Kafka” (2014). Yet as overwrought as it may appear to 21st-century readers, Langer’s Hebrew poetry illustrates that crossing languages is not only about making connections, but about asserting difference, and finding a balance between assimilation and resistance.

CONCLUSION

Although scholars of world literature like Damrosch and Casanova have critiqued Deleuze and Guattari’s minor literature for projecting their own claims and interests onto Kafka’s work, they leave the predominance of “major” language (and for that matter, major writers) in literary studies largely intact. Yet reading the seemingly marginal Czech- and Hebrew-speaking Jiří Langer alongside Kafka’s work calls into question the presumably inevitable “deterritorialization” of Prague-Jewish writers: Langer retold Yiddish folklore in his native “vernacular” Czech and composed poetry in the “mythic” Hebrew, all cultural options from which Kafka had felt cut off as a speaker of the “vehicular” German language. As Halper has convincingly argued, by fleeing to a pre-modern environment of gender separation, Jiří

Langer was able to free himself from social pressures, and his devotion to religious study helped him to sublimate his same-sex desires into a sense of identification with a spiritual community. It is through Jiří Langer's prose and poetry, more clearly than in the work of better-known German and Czech writers like Kafka and Hašek, that we can see the multiple languages of Jewish Prague as a unifying rather than divisive force.

NOTES

- ¹ This previously unpublished excerpt was translated by the present author from Langer's own Czech version (reprinted in Tvrdík 2000), with the help of Anton Shammass and Doron Lamm from the Hebrew version. The full poem, translated from the Hebrew, can be found in Oppenheimer 1977 (303–304), Halper 2013 (220) and Langer 2014 (58).

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Prague beyond Kafka: Rethinking minor literature through the work of Jiří Langer

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Franz Kafka. Jiří Langer. Minor literature.
Czech literature. Hebrew literature. LGBT literature.

Taking Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of minor literature as a starting point, this article moves from their opposition of "major/minor" literatures to their "tetralinguistic" model of vernacular, vehicular, referential, and mythic language. It presents the work of the polyglot poet and Hasidic scholar Jiří Langer to offer a multifaceted view of three distinct contexts: the theoretical discourse of minor literature, the literary milieu of interwar Prague, and the history of gay Czech and Jewish writing. Langer appears in Franz Kafka's diaries and letters over a period of several years as a source of information on Jewish culture, as well as a personal contact to prominent rabbis from the east. Two decades later, Langer produced his own remarkable work in Czech, *Devět bran* (*Nine Gates*, 1937), a popular-scholarly study of Hasidic traditions based on his experience in the Galician town of Belz. Much of what is known today about Jiří Langer's unconventional life comes from the memoirs of his brother František, published as a foreword for the English translation of the book. However, it was only in recent years that Langer's Hebrew poetry has also become available to English-speaking readers, revealing his linguistic strategies that draw on mystical traditions in the attempt to form a modern synthesis of Jewish homosexual identity. Jiří Langer's literary activity shows Prague as a site of self-definition through multilingualism, rather than the more familiar image of Kafka's "deterritorialization".

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