**Di yunge**

Di yunge is a group of American symbolist Yiddish writers and critics that achieved prominence during the first two decades of the twentieth century and remained active through the midcentury. The name of the group is Yiddish for “the young ones,” referencing not only the youth of its founding members but the sense of newness and dramatic change that they intended to bring to Yiddish literature of the period. The group was made up largely of Eastern European immigrants to the United States who had experienced the the failed Russian revolution of 1905 and the pogroms that followed in its wake. These young writers arrived in America disillusioned with socialist and nationalist politics and instead sought out new forms of cultural expression that focused on artistic achievement in Yiddish rather than any political purpose. Taking European and Russian forms of symbolism as models, Di yunge is the first movement in Yiddish literature to emphasize the importance of the aesthetic, focusing on the poetic potential of the everyday and on the inner life of the individual writer. Di yunge was comprised of several of the most important Yiddish writers of the twentieth century, including the poets Mani Leib, H. Leivick, Zishe Landau, I.J. Schwartz, Yoysef Rolnik, and Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and the prose writers David Ignatoff, Joseph Opatoshu, Isaac Raboy, and Lamed Shapiro. Members of Di yunge were among the first to infuse Yiddish literature with the forms and themes of international modernism.

When the writers that would go on to form Di yunge arrived in America at the turn of the century, American Yiddish literature had been dominated by “the sweatshop poets” who wrote socially and politically motivated poetry for the urban Jewish working class, often using folk genres to create political slogans and refrains. Many of the members of Di yunge had already been involved in similar forms of activism during their youth in Eastern Europe and some, as members of revolutionary groups, even faced imprisonment and exile. Once in America and after absorbing contemporary trends in European literature, many felt that Yiddish literature had been limited in its close association with political ideologies and that a new form of poetic creativity was needed. Zishe Landau commented that before the arrival of Di yunge it was as if “the national and social movements had their own rhyming departments” (Antologye, iv).

The new group of writers sought out a separate, almost holy space for literature, and for poetry in particular. Many of the group’s members considered the lyrical poem, at a remove from the the demands of history and politics, as the purest object of aesthetic value. Following the credo of *l’art pour l’art*, the poetry written, translated, and published by Di yunge often focuses on the subjective experience of the individual poet, reflecting on the color and tone of a single image or recreating the music and rhythm of a single moment. This symbolist poetics allowed these writers to distance themselves from politically motivated art (save for the inescapable Jewish associations of the Yiddish language itself) in order to capture complex personal moods – feelings of loneliness, dejection, boredom, and unrequited love. To be sure, this did not lead to uniformity among the poets of Di yunge. Rueben Iceland argued for a poetry that reflected everyday reality, in its mundane pleasures and sufferings. In contrast, H. Leivick and Mani Leib maintained a belief in the potential otherworldliness of daily experience, a sensibility expressed in their use of folkloric forms – either adapted from Jewish sources or imported from foreign ones. Zishe Landau acted as an arbiter of sorts, agreeing with Iceland’s focus on the everyday while seeking to expose the ways in which the artistic act, despite its transcendent beauty, is also a form of self-deception.

Despite these differences, the members of Di yunge shared a self-consciously international literary pedigree, importing into Yiddish literature a wide selection of world literature. Their initial adoption of symbolist conventions was inspired by forerunners of Russian symbolism like Vladimir Solovyov and by the early Russian symbolists Konstantin Balmont and Fyodor Sologub. Avid readers of contemporary literature in several languages, they translated the major European writers of their day into Yiddish as well as influential figures of Eastern traditions like Buddha and Li Tai Po. Their own work and their translations appeared first in the short-lived journal *Di yugnt* (1907–08; “The Youth”), from which the group derived its name, and then in the small literary publications like *Shriftn*, *Literatur*, and *Der inzl* and in a number of anthologies. These journals often included illustrations in an Art Nouveau style by such artists as Max Weber, Isaac Lichtenstein, and Zuni Maud, a feature which further underscored the group’s aesthetic commitments.

Disdaining the populism of the Yiddish press, the writers of Di yunge initially did not earn a living from their literary pursuits. Many worked by day: Mani Leib was a bootmaker, Rueben Iceland was a frame maker, Zishe Landau was house painter, H. Leivik was a paperhanger, and Isaac Raboy worked in fur pelts. After a full day of labor, the writers would gather in the evening in the cafeterias of the Lower East Side to debate literary issues and only wrote at night when they had finally returned home. Such difficult living conditions led to the contraction of tuberculosis by several of the members of Di yunge, enhancing their romantic image but limiting their artistic production. This compressed schedule, combined with their poetics, likely resulted in the propensity of Di yunge to write primarily short lyrical poetry, with very few writers producing long fiction. Prose writers like Joseph Opatoshu and Lamed Shapiro were initially associated with the group but soon broke out on their own, often merging their adherence to modernist forms with overtly political goals. These fiction writers often explored the gritty Jewish underworld, in opposition to Di yunge’s attention to beauty and in contrast with previous Yiddish fiction’s folkloric tendencies.

Though the writers associated with Di yunge initially shared certain literary sympathies, by World War I the group splintered further and differences intensified. The political upheavals of the period and the devastation of Eastern European Jewry prompted many writers to reconsider the public and political function of their work. Still, a handful of poets remained committed to the purity of the artistic act. Zishe Landua and Rueben Iceland even started a new journal fittingly called *Der inzl*, The Island. Landau was particularly steadfast in his devotion to a poetics of the everyday, even as such normalcy seemed impossible in a war-torn world. Mani Leib too remained a committed symbolist, preferring the short lyric poem inspired by folksongs and ballads in order to capture a single transcendent moment and its soothing, repetitive music. In contrast, other writers began to revise their original political positions, now making overtly ideological statements in both the partisan Yiddish press and in their poetry. For example, Moishe Leib Halpern, ever the iconoclast, was increasingly at odds with the other members of Di yunge, his destabilizing poetics challenging the idea of pure aestheticism while also supporting the working class. In wild and radically new poetic forms, Halpern’s poetry ruthlessly describes the failures of the artistic act and the grotesque (though sometimes comical) brutality of modern life.

Moishe Leib Halpern’s radical poetics combined with Landau’s phlegmatic individualism paved the way for the creation, in 1919, of a new modernist movement by a younger group of poets called the Inzikhistn, the Introspectivists. The group espoused a more explicit modernist poetics, advocating for introspective free verse and adopting aspects of American imagism. The Inzikhistn attempted to capture the “kaleidoscope” of the poet’s experience rather than strive for a single symbolic image. Though some writers of the Di yunge remained antagonistic toward the Inzikhistn, many found themselves in between the two movements. Women poets in particular remained on the boundaries of each of these male-dominated groups. Writers like Fradel Shtok, Ida Maze, Anna Margolin, and Celia Dropkin composed work that fit poetically within the ideologies of both groups, as they too espoused an individualized poetic voice, associated by critics of the time with a “feminine poetics.” It has been argued by recent scholars that their marginal position enabled these women poets to more freely explore new forms and themes without having to adhere to a central group ideology, producing work that surpassed many of their male colleagues in originality and poetic intensity. Printing their work sometimes in Di yunge publications and sometimes in Inzikhist publications, the women poets of this period demonstrate that the distinction between Di yunge and Inzikh is often arbitrary. Such internal battles obscure the collective energy of Yiddish literature of this period to create a new tradition for Yiddish writing – one that was aligned with international modernism but also sought to offer its own unique contributions.

**References and Further Reading:**

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Here is a link to a pdf with relevant images, all taken from the public domain (I think the file would have been too big to go through email): <https://www.dropbox.com/s/zciosxaecizqkku/Di%20yunge%20images.pdf>

Do let me know if you cannot access this pdf.

The images are as follows:

page 1: The cover from a volume of Di yunge's first journal, *Di yugnt* (1907-1908).

pages 2-4: Illustrations by Isaac Lichtenstein for the anthology *Velt ayn velt oys: a zamlbukh* (1916).

page 5: An illustration by Zuni Maud for the story "Roykh" (Smoke) by Lamed Shapiro as it appeared in *Velt ayn velt oys: a zamlbukh* (1916)

pages 6-17: Illustrations and woodcuts by Max Weber as they appeared in the journal *Shriftn* (Winter-Spring 1920).