The Introspectivists

Variant: Inzikhistn

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The Introspectivists (*Inzikhistn*), the first group of modernist Yiddish poets in America, were part of the Jewish American Renaissance and flourished in the years following World War I. The movement was headed by Jacob Glatstein (Yankev Glatshteyn), Aaron Glanz-Leyeles, and N. B. Minkoff, and later by Yehuda Leyb Teller. The Introspective poets rejected traditional, highly-stylized forms, instead employing narrative fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness, free verse, word play and neologisms, and irony in their work. Glatstein, Leyeles, and Minkoff formalized the movement’s aesthetic principles in the first anthology of Introspectivist poetry, *In Zikh* (‘In Oneself’). The introduction to the anthology became the movement’s manifesto, in which they proclaimed their dedication to the individual and the personal. For the Introspectivists this meant that ‘the poet must really listen to his inner voice, observe his internal panorama—kaleidoscopic, contradictory, unclear or confused as it may be’ (Glatstein, et al. ‘Introspectivism’ 774). The kaleidoscope was an important image for the group, because, while they promoted introspective analysis, they also celebrated technique that synthesized fragmented experience into an artistic whole. They also insisted that each poem required a different form to express its unique content and perspective. The Introspectivist manifesto was inspired by Russian and Italian Futurism, German and Yiddish expressionism, English Imagism, Symbolism, and Vorticism, but the movement also operated in response to The Young Ones (Di Yunge), a Jewish artistic group interested in poetry of mood, as well as the uniform ideologies of contemporary Jewish leftist groups in New York. As such, the Introspectivists are often labelled apolitical, but as Benjamin Harshav has pointed out, while they were not aligned with any party, they were nonetheless political poets, ‘acutely attuned to the historical and political world, however personally internalized by each poet’ (179). In his later reflections on the movement, Introspectivist B. Alkvit credited James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Sigmund Freud as key influences.

The anthology *In Zikh* was immediately followed by a little review with the same name that appeared between 1920 and 1940. The magazine was devoted mainly to modernist poetry in Yiddish, but also included poetic theory, criticism, polemics, and political and cultural essays (Harshav 177). About one hundred poets contributed to the magazine, including Glatstein, Leyeles, Minkoff, Teller, Dvora Fogel, Abraham Sutskever, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, and many others. Though the journal suffered from lack of readership and attacks by leftist party members, it inspired similar projects across America and Europe, including *Shtrom* (‘The Torrent’), *Khalyastre* (‘The Gang’), and *Albatross*. Key works that appeared in *In Zikh* include ‘Labirint’ (‘Labyrinth’) and ‘New York’ by Leyeles, and ‘Sezame’ (‘Sesame’) and ‘Turtle Doves’ by Glatstein. In the face of growing anti-semitism in the 1930s, most members of the group began to turn away from the principles of Introspectivism and write more explicitly about Jewish culture and political issues. In Jacob Glatstein’s 1938 poem, ‘A Gute Nakht, Velt’ (‘Good Night, World’), the poet turns away from ‘the big stinking world’ and returns to the Jewish ghetto.

Online media:

Glatstein, Jacob. “Good Night World.”Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Apr. 2009. Web. 5 January 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyxSmah3gZc]

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