Di Yunge and the Problem of Jewish Aestheticism*

by Ruth R. Wisse

In their confrontation with secular modernity the Jews of Eastern Europe were exposed to the major ideological and intellectual movements of the time. The interaction between traditional Jewish culture and Marxism, for example, or modern political nationalism, had such immediate and penetrating effects on the course of Jewish history as to demand serious attention and consideration. The Jewish encounter with aestheticism, by contrast, involves so minute a fraction of the Jewish population as to seem historically inconsequential. The major group of Jewish "aesthetes," the Yiddish poets in New York at the beginning of this century, numbered several dozens of young men and women at the most, a negligible number when compared with those in the local labor union movement or with the Zionists or Bundists. But the statistical measure is clearly inadequate. Aestheticism attracted the artists and writers and some intellectuals, the most articulate sector of the population, those very speakers who were offering and supplying interpretations of the new, alien order.

At a time when rabbis, the traditional spokesmen and legislators, were losing their authority by virtue of being the *traditional* authority, the secular writers were gaining stature, perhaps in inverse ratio. The role of imaginative art, deprived, by halakhic Judaism of any independent value, expanded among Jews to the degree that they adapted to their secular environments. Writers filled part of the vacuum in spiritual authority and were looked to as fountain heads of inspiration. Thus aestheticism, the acceptance of artistic beauty as a fundamental, self-referring standard independent of social, ethical, or national value, was a challenge, not so much to traditional Judaism which opposed all secular art, but to the expectations of newly emancipated Jews who turned to literature for an elucidation of ethical and social problems, for a new kind of guide to the perplexed. By insisting on sensibility rather than social conscience as the ultimate arbiter of value, the Yiddish aesthete appeared to be defying his culture entirely, opposing not merely halakhic Judaism, but even the secular transposition of Jewish values, as in "Yiddishkayt."

From the point of view of Jewish national interest, aestheticism appeared the more dangerous since it made its greatest inroads at the worst

*This paper, originally presented at a Columbia University Seminar on Jewish Studies, is a substitute for Prof. Wisse's paper delivered at the Conference Seminar.

possible point, among Yiddish writers in New York in the decade before World War I. The immigrants crowded on New York's Lower East Side were less and less bound by religious imperatives and in need of cultural leadership strong enough to guarantee group survival. The *landsmannschaften*, the Jewish national parties, the social welfare organizations, and the powerful Yiddish press, tried to provide the social and ideological underpinnings for communal cohesion, and looked to such poets as Bovshover, David Edelshtat, Morris Rosenfeld, Abraham Liessin, Yehoash, as a persuasive arm of this enterprise. Linguistically, Yiddish was considered particularly suitable for the task, being the *lingua franca*, the language spoken by more Jews than had ever spoken a Jewish language, and so homey, down to earth, functional. The Yiddishists and Bundists placed the language at the very heart of their ideology, making it not only the instrument of national expression but its substance. It was against this background and these pressures that certain Yiddish writers mounted the aesthetic standard, identifying with pure poets in other languages and refusing the social, national mantle that was being slipped onto their shoulders. Their first modest periodical, *Di Yugend*, did not survive its first three issues of the winter of 1907-1908, but it gave the group its name. Thereafter they were called—with varying degrees of opprobrium, approbation, or despair—*di Yunge*, the young.

In each of its cultural centers, Paris, London, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vienna, aetheticism's basic motto of *l'art pour l'art, dichtung an und für sich*, art for art's sake, took on a distinctive coloration, but certain tendencies are characteristic of the movement as a whole: the reaction against the social purposes of literature in favor of a personal, visionary art; the emphasis on subjectivism, not, as among the romantics, because poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, but because they are the elect, the poets; the expression of feelings through evocative symbols rather than by ideational statement; emphasis on musical rather than pictorial correspondences between the arts with a resulting stress on sound patterns and oral effects. Sociologically, the aestheticists were reacting against the bourgeoisation of culture, retreating from popular culture into a private, perfectly crafted, ivory tower or "temple" art. Philosophically, they were antirationalist, antimaterialist, nurturing intimations of an ideal order beyond this one, of which they were perhaps the heralds. The Yiddish poets owed a special debt to the Russians on whose work many of them had been nurtured: late 19th century poets like Fet, Nadson, and Solovyev, and early symbolists like Balmont and Soloyub.

Probably in no artistic group did aestheticism seem as anomalous as among the Yiddish poets in New York during the first decades of this century. They were neither aristocrats nor bohemians, the two categories at either end of the social scale equally distant from the "common man" and equally receptive to exclusivist ideals. These were ordinary workers: Mani Leib, a bootmaker; Reuben Iceland and David Ignatoff, occasional frame-makers in small millinery factories; Zishe Landau, a house painter; Joseph Rolnick, a

newsvendor; H. Leivick, a paperhanger; Isaac Raboy, a worker in fur pelts; Moishe Leib Halpern, a sometime waiter and presser.[1] With the exception of Mani Leib, they were not skilled workmen and they changed jobs frequently. They were immigrants, living when they arrived as boarders in crowded apartments, bringing their sweethearts from Europe, or marrying an immigrant like themselves and raising a family in the most densely populated section of New York. Many contracted tuberculosis and remained lifelong victims, and almost all struggled with genteel poverty till the end of their days. What is more surprising, before coming to America in their late teens and early twenties, several of them had been members of revolutionary movements, anarchists and social revolutionaries, imprisoned or exiled for antitsarist activities and forced to flee for their lives.

And yet these young men, when they came to America between 1902 and 1913 and began writing and discussing their writings, insisted on beauty as the supreme value, and on the pursuit of beauty as the highest human ideal. Adapting the vocabulary of the Symbolists, they defined poetry as personal, not public, not a call to others, but a probing into self. Yiddish was simply their mother tongue. It did not commit them to Jewish topics any more than their employment in the sweatshops limited their aspirations or concerns. Whether this was escapism as their detractors taunted, or idealism as they occasionally claimed, is not as important as the substance of their revolt and achievement.

The movement inward dictated an immediate shift from the realm of ideas to that of moods. How does it feel to walk the crowded streets, to spend days and days at a thankless job, catch sight of a bird, lust for an unattainable woman, waste a night in a game of cards? "The older Yiddish poet knows no moods," wrote Iceland in 1914, "because he has never penetrated his own personal self. And even when he does turn inward, he has a ready-made, generalized formula for everything."[2] The *Yunge* concentrated on precisely the most personal of their moods and feelings: loneliness, estrangement, guilt, boredom, unrequited passion. As against the caustic anger and its corollary, the dedicated optimism of the older "sweatshop" poets, the *Yunge* allowed themselves states of dejection.

Their most characteristic prop was the window separating the inner from the outer world, creating either a sheltering haven or a cell of isolation.

[1] Mani Leib (Brahinsky), 1884-1953, came to America in 1905; Reuben Iceland, 1884-1955, arrived in 1903; David Ignatoff, 1885-1954, arrived in 1906; Zishe Landau, 1889-1937, arrived in 1906; Joseph Rolnick, 1879-1955, lived in America from 1899 to 1904 and from 1908 to 1955; Halper Leivick (Leivick Halpern), 1888-1962, arrived in 1913; Isaac Raboy, 1885-1944, arrived in 1904; Moishe Leib Halpern, 1886-1932, arrived in 1908. I have used, somewhat reluctantly, the spelling of the *Encyclopedia Judaica* which is not consistent, but provides at least some standardization.

[2] Reuben Iceland, "The New Direction of Yiddish Poetry" (Yiddish), *Fun Mentsh tsu Mentsh* [From Person to Person] (New York, n. d.), p. 34. This article was first delivered in 1914 as a lecture for the Moses Hess Club of Chicago.

In the middle of the day I hung a curtain on my window,
I firmly shut my door to keep the day and people out.
And pallid in the darkness I spent a long time pacing,
Rubbing icy hands, and laughing to myself.[3]

The speaker in this poem by Mani Leib almost goes mad in his self-imposed isolation until he finally throws open the curtains and sees that it is night. Women are strolling by, children are shouting, and a blind street musician is turning his hand-organ with a "blind hand."

In different mood, the husband in a poem by Zishe Landau turns back from the window into the room to see his wife doing something familiar, embroidering or sewing. When he actually looks at her, he notices that the activity is but an excuse for her heavy sorrow, and he is roused to a new feeling of compassion.[4] In both poems, the nervous and the calm, the one in its blindness and the other in its insight, and in many similar works that could be cited, the speakers are first effectively insulated from the outer world and permitted a personal emotional development.

This withdrawal was actual as well as thematic. In the evenings, on Sundays, whenever they found a spare hour, the poets would gather at Sholem's café, later Goodman and Levin's dairy restaurant[5] or Lamed Shapiro's vegetarian diner, and argue the relative merits of their own and one another's work. "We are a sect;" wrote H. Leivick of the group in its prime, "we set ourselves apart from everyone, not only from other writers, but from everyone. We want to be separate, our ears cannot tolerate the false sounds, the cheapened literature."[6] To underscore the high seriousness of their purpose and the sacred nature of their quest, religious imagery and terminology were often invoked: "These are writers," wrote the friendly critic Shmuel Niger in 1918, "who cannot stand and pray—that is, create—in the middle of the street, but who must have for their literary *minyan* a special corner, a literary *shul*, an artistic *mokem koydesh* [holy place]."[7] Clearly, this espousal of individualism had its roots in the Emancipation's release of the individual from his collective identity. "The ghetto herded us together, forced us to breathe one air, and we Jews became the most socialized animals in the world. And if we

[3] Mani Leib, "Khob in mitn tog a forhang . . . ." *Lider* [Poems] (New York, 1918), p. 57. The translation is mine.

[4] Zishe Landau, "Haynt ovnt" [This Evening], *Lider* [Poems] (New York, 1937). The poem was first published in 1914.

[5] The English reader can find an account of this period in Reuben Iceland, "At Goodman and Levine's," in *Voices From the Yiddish*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (Ann Arbor, 1972), pp. 300-305. This excerpt is from Iceland's memoirs, *Fun unzer friling* [Of Our Springtime] (Miami Beach,1954). Although English materials on the *Yunge* are limited, the following constitute a minimal bibliography: Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (New York, 1969), pp. 25-39, 85-169; Charles A. Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* (New York, 1968), pp. 288-307; Sol Liptzin, *The Flowering of Yiddish Literature* (New York, 1963), pp. 206-235.

[6] H. Leivick, "Di Yunge", *Shriftn* [Miscellany] (New York, 1919), not consecutively paginated.

[7] Shmuel Niger, "Young America" (Yiddish), *Onheyb* (April, 1918), unpaginated. This article was originally published several years earlier in the *Folkstsaytung*, St. Petersburg.

now want to break free, we must first free ourselves from those communal social instincts and ideas and return to the elemental freedom of the individual."[8]

Singly, it is doubtful whether each of these poets could have fought off the stultifying effects of his daily circumstances. The literary atmosphere of the cafés, like the *botey-midroshim* of East European Jewish society, provided social and spiritual nourishment, encouraging competition—always a factor in creativity—and setting critical standards for recognition. By example and in their writings, they represented the primacy, the legitimacy, of the individual, withstanding the centripetal attraction of the Jewish street and the American marketplace to which it now belonged.

The struggle for independence from narrow Jewish concerns was matched in intensity by an ambition to encompass other, foreign cultures. The fluency of the *Yunge* in other languages enabled them to read widely in other literatures, and their sense of artistic inferiority derived from the relative novelty and poverty of their own literature necessitated a process of catching up. They were assiduous and often brilliant translators. Among the dozens of writers they brought into Yiddish are Heine, Goethe, Schiller, von Hofmannsthal, Rilke, Pushkin, Lermontov, Blok, Briusov, Mandelstam, Whitman, Poe, Wilde, Kipling, E. A. Robinson, Homer, Sappho, Catullus, Horace, Anatole France, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Bergson, Hamsun, Ibsen. Like their contemporaries in England and Russia, they delighted in such Eastern literature as became available in Western translation and quickly undertook translations of their own: of the Persian twelfth-century lyric poet Dzielialedin Rumi, of Japanese Haiku, of the Finnish epic, *Kalevala*, of the writings of Buddha and Li Tai Po. The "Galicianers" among the *Yunge* introduced the "Russians" to German modernism, and the Russian and Ukrainian Yiddish poets introduced the former subjects of Franz Joseph to Russian Symbolism and Decadence. At least linguistically, they were very likely the most cosmopolitan of all modernist groups and they brought into Yiddish for their own needs, but for general access, a wide selection of the best of contemporary and ancient culture.

The Yiddish press which claimed to be wholly responsive to Jewish needs and which served the exigencies of the moment, became, as Mordecai Soltes has shown, "an Americanizing agency," a tool of assimilation. These purists whose single-minded drive for a richer Yiddish poetry flaunted all the national forms of allegiance, created an ever-expanding Yiddish cultural base and a program of internal cultural exploration.

The designation "*Yunge*" which originally referred to their chronological age and rebellious individualism, actually reflects an ongoing part of the group's self-image. They described themselves as orphans. Whereas the moderns of other cultures had behind them generations of writers and literary

[8] Menakhem (Boreysho), "East Broadway," *Fun Mentsh tsu Mentsh*, p. 11.

schools, the *Yunge* were "rootless, without tradition."[9] Occasionally they were ready to acknowledge a minor debt to the poets Abraham Liessin and Abraham Reisin, or to I. L. Peretz, but on the whole they continued to suffer from a lack of proper anchorage. Their struggle was therefore vertical as well as horizontal: they had not only to reach out to foreign literatures, but down into their own, to the Yiddish prayers, the *tkhines*, the Yiddish folk songs and ballads, the hasidic motifs and songs, to create at least the semblance of a traditional ground. Here we begin to see the paradox that shaped their art. Insistent on absolute personal freedom, on the autonomy of art and the artist, they were forced back into the roots of the language—inseparable from the roots of the culture—for the sake of those very aesthetic principles that were to have freed them from national concerns. In their search for simplicity, purity of expression, melodious flow of language, they had to uncover the natural folk voice upon which they could play their own variations.

Although Zishe Landau was fond of boasting that he had written this poem originally about St. Francis of Assisi, he published it in praise of the Master of Hasidism, the Baal Shem:

> The holy Balshemtov walked through the fields,
> walked at dawn through the cold fields.
> From the north the winds were blowing,
> cold and frosted, the winds were blowing,
> and the cold began to freeze his limbs,
> and with frozen limbs
> the holy Balshemtov opened his lips
> and aloud he began his singing.
> Thus were his opened lips
>
> singing, singing, singing:
> "How blessed is he who has been favored
> once to be touched by Your wind.
> How blessed am I that I have been favored
> to freeze in the cold of Your wind;
> how blessèd am I and how blessèd and blessed,
> how blessèd and blessèd and blessed."[10]

There may be enough delicate irony in this stanza and in the remainder of the poem to make the hasidic disciple a trifle uncomfortable. Yet poetically, Landau's use of an old-fashioned narrative style creates a sense of ease, a musicality that won the poem its high reputation. In the Yiddish there is a counterpoint of restraint and release, with the rhymes and regular metres creating a frame of ordered expectancy challenged by the swelling lines and the

[9] See, e.g., Reuben Iceland's article on I. L. Peretz in *I. L. Peretz* (Memorial Book) (New York, 1915), p. 101.

[10] Zishe Landau, "Iz der heyliker Bal Shem Toyv . . ." [The Holy Balshemtov], *Lider* [Poems], pp. 138-139. This poem was first published in 1918. Trans. Sarah Zweig Betsky, *Onions and Cucumbers and Plums* (Detroit, 1958), no. 18.

soaring repetition that breaks free, finally, like the Balshemtov's joy. As the ecstacy is unexpectedly in response to hardship, not ease, so the music becomes unnaturally fervent in its apparent simplicity. The poems that Landau wrote in his "own" voice, that of a New York resident, circa 1915, did not invite the same range of poetic experimentation or offer such opportunity for phonetic, linguistic, and rhythmic play.

The same is true of this classic poem by Mani Leib:

Hush and hush—no sound be heard.
Bow in grief but say no word.
Black as pain and white as death,
Hush and hush and hold your breath.

Heard by none and seen by none
Out of the dark night will he,
Riding on a snow-white steed,
To our house come quietly.

From the radiance of his face,
From his dress of shining white,
Joy will shimmer and enfold;
Over us will fall his light.

Quieter—no sound be heard!
Bow in grief but say no word.
Black as pain and white as death,
Hush and hush and hold your breath.

If we have been mocked by them,
If we have been fooled again
And the long and weary night
We have waited all in vain,

We will bend down very low
To the hard floor, and then will
Stand more quiet than before,
Stiller, stiller and more still.[11]

The theme here is also sound and poetic inclination. Against the rhetorical bombardments of their predecessors, the so-called sweatshops poets, the *Yunge* made a virtue—some said, a fetish—of stillness, softness, silence, and this poem assumed the importance of a manifesto. But the poetic value of softness here is boldly linked to a national motif, and transformed into a national ideal. Stillness and patience, perfected in the centuries of messianic anticipation, are presented as an admirable historical response, and the speaker, mimicking the orator's posture, bids his people neither revolt nor awaken but be stiller yet, and stiller yet. The poem anticipates our objection: has not this sweet patience won us only mockery and abuse? But surmounting this

[11] Mani Leib, "Shtiler, Shtiler" (Softer, Softer), *Lider* [Poems], pp. 95-96. This poem was first published in 1914. Trans. Marie Syrkin, in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, eds., Howe and Greenberg, pp. 89-90.

challenge, the poem concludes with a final reiteration omitted in the English translation, more forceful by virtue of the doubts it has overcome, and raises to heroism, to the status of decisive endurance, the posture of the stooped, pale, uncomplaining Jew.

In a review of the 1915 *Poems* of Joseph Rolnick, his fellow poet, Reuben Iceland is not content to praise Rolnick's quiet, introspective verse, but calls it the very embodiment of Jewishness whose outstanding qualities are "a pure lyric spirit, resignation, and faith!"[12]

Plumbing the Jewish past for a quality of voice delicate enough, harmonious enough, to satisfy their aesthetic ideal, the Yiddish poets read themselves back into Jewish history, and recreated it as a soft sphere of eternal longing. The messianic expectation is like a Keatsian urn, animated, yet perfectly fixed for all time. From the point of view of social activism, this was reactionary in the extreme. And to be sure, by reaching selectively back into time, the poets were effectively strengthening their opposition to the present which was anything but resigned and quiet. The poems of still-life (the word-play, when the term is used, is deliberate) were an assault on the organized public sector and, more pointedly, on the private sector aburst with energy and determined striving for upward mobility. Once again, paradoxically, the aesthetic notion dictated a national motif. In the act of renouncing the materialism, greed, mutability of their immediate surroundings, the poets shored up the qualities of antimaterialism, and steadfast faith in the Jewish past. Some critics read this as nostalgia, as longing for a better life once tasted, and many an ordinary reader was touched by these apparently tender evocations of the old country. Yet obviously, the impulse of the poems is wholly contemporary. The aesthetic ideal determined which aspects of Jewish life were precious, and shaped those "national" and "religious" themes in its own image.

Even H. Leivick, who later broke with the privatism of the *Yunge* to cultivate a more forceful social, rhetorical voice, remained bound to this earlier national motif of passivism and patience. The Maharal, Rabbi Loew of Prague, in Leivick's interpretation of the Golem legend, is accused by the play of committing the Jewish crime of hastening the coming, if not of the messiah, then of a temporary strong-man relief. Faced with the failure of the Golem, the Maharal asks God:

> Did you reveal to me the more than human,
> Allow me to create, to rule, command
> Only that I might see at last
> My insignificance, my massive sin?
> And more than that—my sin against all Jews?
> That, in impatience and despair, I wished

[12] Reuben Iceland, Review of *Lider* in *Literatur un Lebn* [Literature and Life] (New York, 1916), p. 73.

To turn my back on those ways of Your people
That are eternal, gentle, patient, full of faith?[13]

Not accidentally, the Maharal's characterization of the ways of the Jews as *shtil, geduldik, ful bitokhn, eybik* (quiet, patient, full of confidence, eternal), represents the highest ideals of aestheticism in its effort to transcend flux and mere topicality.

In the period before World War I, Yiddish aestheticism was in what might be called its naive phase. There was no strong theoretical argument for this artistic tendency as opposed to another; the younger poets seemed simply to have reacted spontaneously against the "establishment" ideas of artistic responsibility. Not all would have judged their predecessors as harshly as Landau who dismissed them with the much-quoted observation that "the national and social movements had their own rhyming departments,"[14] but they shared the basic aestheticist preference for muted, personal verse. The upheavals of World War I with the resulting devastation of European Jewish communities, the victory of Communism in Russia and its promise of a just society, these sharply affected the American atmosphere, prompting many writers to return to realism and a public art. After the founding of the Communist Yiddish daily, the *Frayhayt*, in 1922, the growing militancy of the Communists attracted several former *Yunge* who found an outlet for their writings and a new cause. During the twenties, Jewish intellectual life in New York was polarized to such a degree that between those who fell in behind the Party and those ranged against it there remained hardly any middle ground. The handful of poets who still defined themselves as aesthetes solidified into a firm group, almost by default, around a periodical they called *Der Inzl*, Island. It was a title they had used before, but never so accurately. Though this is not a particularly attractive period in the history of Yiddish literature, there does emerge a more articulate, precise aesthetic theory than we had before, and some exquisite verse.

While other Jewish writers at this time, H. Leivick in Yiddish, Uri Zvi Greenberg in Hebrew, Ludwig Lewisohn in English, were defining the writer and poet as modern heirs to the prophetic tradition, since they were now the conscience of the Jews and the voices rousing them to righteousness, the aestheticists of the *Yunge* bluntly placed the prophet and poet in honest opposition:

"The artist is never a prophet," wrote Iceland, "being a prophet means fighting for a predetermined truth that must serve all alike; being an artist

[13] H. Leivick, *Der Goylem* (New York, 1921). Trans. Joseph C. Landis, *The Dybbuk and Other Great Yiddish Plays* (New York, 1966), p. 350.

[14] Zishe Landau, *Antologie: Di Yidishe Dikhtung in Amerike biz Yor 1919* [Anthology: Yiddish Poetry in America until 1919] (New York, 1919), p. lv. The foregoing passages owe much to one of the finest articles on Yiddish poetry in America, A. Tabachnik, "Tradition and Revolt in Yiddish Poetry" (Yiddish) *Dikhter un Dikhtung* [Poets and Poetry] (New York, 1965), pp. 402-413.

means forever seeking new truths that must first satisfy oneself alone. The prophet is a monotheist, the artist, a polytheist. They are alike in that both seek ultimate realization in life—the prophet in a single truth, the artist in various truths, one of which may happen to be the prophet's."[15] Iceland acknowledges the basic antithesis between Judaism and aestheticism. When the Jews became monotheists they became the enemies of all art. They have profaned the creativity of their forefathers by failing to recognize *Shir Hashirim* for the perfect poem it is, and by reducing it to mere allegorical pretext. Until Jews learn that a word of a poem is no more than itself, they will never have any understanding of poetry.

"The prophet, the preacher, the politician, have distant goals," writes Landau in another issue, "only we, aesthetes, have no goals and no purposes," none, that is, other than those of art itself.[16]

The most poignant of these arguments is perhaps Iceland's observations on Yaddo Park in Saratoga Springs. He describes Jews who can afford the cure going to Saratoga and, while there, strolling through the natural splendor of Yaddo Park. Their perception of its beauty, however, is coupled with the realization that something is lacking. Why doesn't this serve some useful purpose, they want to know, house an orphanage, a home for the aged, a TB sanatorium? "The beautiful has no value unless it brings some use, not to themselves, but to society at large, to all humanity, or at the very least, to the Jews."[17] Iceland calls this a *reyn yidishlekher kuk*, a purely Jewish point of view, and bemoans the fact that since the war the whole world has been Judaized! He concludes that in their attitudes toward art the bourgeois philistines are at one with the proletarian ideologues in that for both beauty is valueless unless it is made to serve some material function. As against this, Iceland pleads once again for the poet who does not want to change the world, only to express his vision of it.

Despite the identification of Judaism with morality and themselves as aesthetes, they were not placing themselves outside the tradition, but asking Judaism to broaden sufficiently to include both poet and prophet. They did not, to my knowledge, demonstrate how this could be achieved, but were content to provide such proof as there is in their practise. And though we are left wondering, on the theoretical plane, how a religion founded on law could possibly admit an amoral aestheticism, one that would not obey the commandments, that was by its own definition, polytheist, on the practical level the writings of the *Yunge* pose no problem whatever. They are *yidishe dikhter* (Yiddish poets), a term that leaves language and culture undifferentiated and impossible to separate. The poet may renounce Jewish ideals but as long as

[15] *Der Inzl*, a literary monthly, began publication in March, 1925, and continued until February, 1926. Reuben Iceland, "Art and Profanation" (Yiddish), *Der Inzl*, 1 (March, 1925), 13.

[16] Zishe Landau, "For the Honor of the Word" (Yiddish), *ibid.*, p. 3.

[17] Reuben Iceland, "In Yaddo Park" (Yiddish), *ibid.*, 8 (October, 1925), 15. Ironically, Yaddo Park was subsequently converted into a writers' colony.

the Yiddish language is the repository, indeed the outgrowth of Jewish ideals, the aesthetic goal of the perfect Yiddish poem will force him back into national history, culture, and values. It is not a matter of subjects and themes (although here, too, it must be said that the sociological position of the Yiddish writer in America forces him into an ever-narrowing Jewish sphere). Their aesthetic credo gave the poets complete freedom to write as they pleased, to find their exact poetic pitch, to range over other literatures, and experiment with sound play for the sheer delight it provided, but the instrument ultimately determines the limits and the range: Yiddish shaped the very possibility of what a good poet could be.

Aestheticism had a profound effect even on those who were not its adherents and on those who opposed it. The results of poetic experimentation among the purists of the *Yunge* became public property and had an immediate salutory influence on the level of Yiddish poetry and prose. Influences in the case of Yiddish poetry moved not from Europe to America, but in the unexpected direction, back across the waters. The work of the *Yunge* stimulated such lyric poets as Itsik Manger in Galicia and Itsik Fefer in Russia and provided younger poets with the classical basis of the poetry whose absence the *Yunge* had mourned.

In America itself, the *Yunge* very soon inspired a series of revolts on the part of still younger poets for many of whom "art for art's sake" was an axiom, and who were prepared to take literary modernism a giant step forward. That poetry was the dominant American Yiddish genre, and that Yiddish poetry rose to a level of excellence in America equalled nowhere else, is due in obvious measure to the major poets of *Di Yunge* and to the artistic theory they upheld.

Poets most temperamentally opposed to aestheticism were still obliged to acknowledge its sway, not only over others, but over themselves. The most fascinating instance of this is Moishe Leib Halpern, a man at war with the world, who made poetry out of his own warring instincts. Like the others among the *Yunge*, Halpern yearned for harmonious, lyrical Yiddish expression, creating several of the most musical poems in the language. At the same time, the striving for pure beauty in the midst of such human deprivation and cruelty as he recognized and experienced struck him as farcical or evil. He sees hungry crowds shoving and jostling around pushcarts of onions and cucumbers and plums, and their crude greed repels him. And then he reminds himself that as long as the stomach remains the absolute tyrant in life, he has not the right to apply aesthetic criteria to human survival. Turning the pain inward, he mourns the ugliness but resolves not to chastize.[18]

The struggle between morality and aestheticism rages ever more fiercely in Halpern's poetry. A savage depiction of a lynching reserves its final anger

[18] Moishe Leib Halpern, "Keynmol shoyn vel ikh nit zogn" [Never Again Will I Say], *Di Goldene Pave* [The Golden Peacock] (New York, 1924).

not for the spinster's frustrated accusation, not for the crazed mob that tars and feathers the fifteen-year-old black nor even for the preacher who sanctifies the lynching in God's name, but for himself, the poet, who stands by, making beautiful music out of the scene. Aestheticism is Halpern's angel and his poetry is the chronicle of his wrestling.[19]

Looking back on the remarkable achievement of Yiddish poetry in America one must admit the advantage of aestheticism's forceful appeal. It is doubtful whether Yiddish poetry could have reached its present competence without its stern emphasis on expressive perfection, formalistic and musical virtuosity, sheer technical brilliance. As for its threatening aspect—the danger to the Jewish element in Yiddish—as long as the aesthetic ideals had to be realized in the language of Jewish experience the culture would become the inevitable beneficiary. In fact, the power of the language over its content, the degree to which linguistic resonance dominates and shapes all aesthetic considerations, raises serious doubts about the possibilities of Jewish literature in a non-Jewish language where certain national subjects and problems can be sketched out, like a melody picked out with one finger, but which can only be orchestrated within the sonorous range and limits of the instrument at the musician's disposal. All languages are like Yiddish in that they have their own cultural and historical reverberations, and exert their own ultimate claims on all one would like to express through them.

[19] *Ibid.*