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Poet of the Dark Gate

The poetry of David Vogel

HEBREW LITERATURE of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has suffered the strange fate of having been relegated to a domain of cultural isolation. While in many cases it has emulated the trends of major European movements, it has never been regarded, either from within or without, as having a place within European literature. This is partly the fault of its own scholars and critics who preserved its exclusivity during the first decades of this century by abstracting it from the domain of mainstream literatures. Yet despite its largely different historical and ideological determinants, 20th-century Hebrew literature in many cases has emulated the thematic and stylistic tendencies associated with European Modernism. It endured its own form of aesthetic rebellion and because of its reference to its specific cultural crisis, brought about in the late 19th century by a dislocation of Jewish social and cultural norms, modern Hebrew literature was able to anticipate, in theme at least, the sense of "bleakness, darkness, alienation and disintegration"¹ that defined European and American Modernism.

Among those Hebrew writers who, for one reason or another, expressed this sense in their work was David Vogel, born in Podolia in 1891. Little is known about his education, his family or his early interests. He appears to have been orphaned at a young age, and to have begun his life of wandering at 13. The facts of his adult life are dismal and sad. He arrived in Vilna in 1909 or 1910 and left there in 1912 after having been arrested for avoiding the army. On his release he moved to Lemberg and, in 1912, to Vienna. In 1914 he was imprisoned

1. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds. *Modernism*. London: Penguin Books, 1976, 26.

as an enemy alien. On his release he returned to Vienna, later married and in 1926 moved to Paris where he remained for three years until his brief attempt to live in Palestine (1929-1930). After that he wandered for two years, earning his keep as a Hebrew teacher and suffering from tuberculosis. With the advent of the second World War, Vogel was again imprisoned, this time by the French, as an enemy alien. After his brief release he was caught and deported by the Nazis in 1944. These events are not recounted factually in his poetry; the only aesthetic mark they have left is an overriding awareness of personal poverty and barrenness, a sense of despair and an almost nihilistic consciousness of the meaninglessness of life.

This sense was, however, not unique to Vogel but constituted part of the aesthetic equipment of his contemporary European artists during the interwar period. Intellectually, artistically and geographically Vogel was living in the midst of the vast cultural revolution that spanned Europe and later the USA. Whether or not he was influenced by any of its trends is uncertain, but there is no doubt that his poetry conformed in mood, theme and style with much of the experimental writing of the time. Yet his want of reference to the apocalyptic events of his time and of his own life in all but a few of his poems, and his infrequent references to Jewish experience in his work give it a unique disconnectedness which renders it difficult to contextualize. Poems written years apart and in different locations display little material variation.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Certain questions are suggested by the fluctuations in critical response to Vogel since the 1920s. Did he, to any extent reveal Judaic elements in his writing? What was the nature of his reception and why was he so deeply disliked by his contemporary critics, including some of the greatest and most discerning Hebrew literary figures of his day? Conjecture about influence is dangerous but since Vogel did not mature in a cultural vacuum — it may be enlightening to speculate about his artistic indebtedness. Robert Alter notes that while we know too little about Vogel's reading to postulate influence "[his] affinities in theme and setting with a broad current of twentieth century European

fiction are striking."² In his study of Vogel's novels, Gershon Shaked reminds us that Vogel lived within the orbit of Schnitzler, Altenberg, Zweig, Werfel, Hofmannsthal, Rilke and indeed Freud,³ but we have no evidence of any knowledge of their writings (other than Rilke's) on Vogel's part. Maeterlinck, Ibsen and Hamsun are mentioned in Vogel's diary and Rilke in his 1931 lecture on Hebrew literature. Dan Pagis claims that Vogel was not acquainted with the French Symbolists, but that he had encountered Yiddish Expressionism in Vilna. This was, however, different from Vogel's own brand of discourse in its close attention to Jewish concerns and especially nostalgia for the lost Jewish past which Vogel expresses only obliquely, if at all. Menahem Brown stresses the close affinities between Vogel's work and that of Feierberg whom he terms a "pure, pure Expressionist."⁴ Pagis confirms Vogel's contact with the Decadents in Vienna and the Expressionism of George Heym, Elsa Lasker-Schüler and particularly Georg Trakl, but he is not convinced about Vogel's absorption of German cultural movements. It seems unlikely, however, that Vogel could entirely have escaped the influence of any of these movements, or their representatives, given his long sojourns in the European cultural centers, including about fifteen years in the Paris of Post-Symbolism. Vogel himself recognized his identity as a child of Europe. In 1914 he writes, "Again I'm facing a new period in my life whose focal point is German culture."⁵ After Vogel's abortive experiment in Palestine in 1930 he returned to Paris with many excuses and, after being reprimanded by Leo Motzkin, retorted to a friend, "Let him bear the *hamsins*. Me — my home is here. This is the only air I can breathe."⁶ In a short tribute to Brenner, Vogel admits to identifying with Brenner's characters and hence with "the Jewish tragedy," but concludes that "... we have already given ourselves in the great world to a new moulding, to European garb."⁷

2. Robert Alter. *The Invention of Hebrew Prose*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1988, 78.

3. Gershon Shaked. "Hufshah min ha-ani," *Haaretz*, 5 July, 1974.

4. Menahem Brown. "Im shirei David Vogel," *Masa* 21, 20 May, 1966.

5. Dan Pagis. "David Vogel: ha-ish ve-shirato," *Molad*, June-July, 1964, 194.

6. Pagis, *op. cit.*, 196.

7. See *Moznayim* (where the piece is published in Hebrew for the first time) 3-4, July-August 1987, 23.

It was this European garb that contributed to Vogel's alienness within the mainstream of modern Hebrew literature. There has been much debate about his Jewish reference or lack of it, and his critics, particularly his own contemporaries, have exhibited an uncomfortable reluctance to place him within the history of Hebrew literature. Pagis and others of our own time, perhaps through overcompensation, try too hard to do so. For example, when Pagis cites influences he confines these to Hebrew writers, specifying Gnessin and Avraham Ben-Yitzhak, these being among the few about whom we can have any certainty since Vogel himself mentions them with admiration.⁸ Yet Vogel's resemblance to Georg Trakl and other German Expressionist poets, Ernest Stadler, Godfried Benn and Klabund (Alfred Henschke), for example, is so pervasive that it seems unlikely to involve simply a current style. Without clear evidence we may not assume that Vogel had read Trakl but we are equally misguided to conclude that he had not, particularly in view of tropes, phrases and entire poems so similar that without prior knowledge correct authorship is often difficult to assign. That this should be purely by chance defeats logic.

Gershon Shaked, writing in *Haaretz*, reopens the old debate about the nature of "Jewish" literature which began with Ahad Ha'am and Berdichevsky, and continued with Kurzweil and Schweid.⁹ The ethnomusicologist, Curt Sachs once defined Jewish music as "that music which is made by Jews, for Jews, as Jews," a declaration that has implications for all branches of Jewish creativity. Shaked goes further by proposing that Hebrew literature is written in Hebrew about Jews and for Jews but adds that it is also *imbued with Jewish values*. By this criterion Vogel's works are not Jewish, although Brown refers to Vogel's "so very Jewish lines,"¹⁰ without amplifying his evaluation other than by the contention that Vogel closely resembles Feierberg whose Jewishness was unimpeachable. Shaked asks whether the Jewishness of Freud, Schnitzler, Beer-Hoffmann, Wassermann, Zweig, Vogel and others was significant and whether it was only by chance that it was the Jews of Germany and Austria who were "tuned into" Europe's troubled unconscious.¹¹ The Ex-

8. In his 1931 lecture Vogel compares Gnessin to Rilke. He praises the literary style of Ahad Ha'am, Shoffman and Devora Baron.

9. Gershon Shaked. "Hufshah min ha-ani," *op cit*.

10. Brown, *ibid*.

pressionist movement, which more than any other anticipated and revealed this unconscious, was, however, not dominated by Jews.¹² The emphasis on disintegrating reality and social breakdown was as much the province of Expressionism as that of the increasingly deracinated European Jewish intellectuals.

HIS EUROPEANISM

It seems that Vogel was as much a victim of Jewish disconnectedness as of European dissolution. He wrote in Hebrew, but his poetry bore only a notional relationship to Jewish history or Judaism. The central paradox of his style is his usage of biblical Hebrew to frame the utter modernity of his content. If he is considered in the context of Modernist rather than Hebrew literature, of European mood and style rather than Jewish culture, he finds a secure, if paradoxical place as a European writer who wrote in Hebrew. At the same time, there are many factors in Vogel's life that are typical of the life of a Jewish intellectual at that time, predominantly his rootlessness, detachment and poverty. Yet even in his later poetry, when he concentrates increasingly on wandering and journeying, uprootedness and displacement, he is reflecting a tendency of the Modernist — later called bohemian — aesthetic and, if he is referring to himself at all, his personal experience as a stranger, as much as a Jew, in a series of strange lands. Pagis contends that while Vogel's sense of estrangement has its source in a "specific Jewish situation" which is not expressed explicitly in his verse, "only

11. *Ibid.*

12. Rupert Brooke writes of the Cafe des Westens in Berlin:

Du lieber Gott!

Here I am, sweating, sick and hot,
And there the shadowed waters fresh
Lean up to embrace the naked flesh.

Temperamentvoll German Jews

Drink beer around; and there the dews
Are soft between a morn of gold . . .

The reference is to Expressionists whom Brooke encountered in Berlin while dreaming of Grantchester. The *temperamentvoll* Expressionist poets were not, however, all Jews. See Edward Timms, "Expressionists and Georgians," *Unreal City. Urban Experience in Modern Literature and Art*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985, 114.

very infrequently, does he relate to [Jewish] tradition." Even in his poetry on his village he "swallows almost every Jewish reference His poetry is much less 'Jewish' than, for example, the German poetry of Elsa Lasker-Schüler, who stresses her relationship with her sources."¹³

Vogel's poetry is suffused with a sense of devastation, unspecified and undescribed, only intuited, in keeping with much of the Expressionist verse of his time. His last poem, *Shaatot tzevaot* (The trampling of armies), written in 1941, is about the Second World War and often thought to allude to the Holocaust. If it can be said of Vogel's contemporary, Georg Heym, that in his poetry he anticipated the war, Vogel could as well be attributed with foreseeing the Holocaust of which he was a direct victim. However, to ascribe visionary prophecy to either is a fanciful prolepsis: both poets were astute barometers of the time, reading the signs and responding to their contemporary situation. It was not difficult for Vogel, in 1938, to speak of the city's "humming evil," a girl screaming at the vanishing of loved ones and an early morning doorbell that tolls the sudden disappearance of one's neighbor. Yet his famous "Black flags" (*Degalim shehorim*) from *Lifnei ha-shaar ha-afel* (Before the Dark Gate) had been published in 1923 and is not essentially different from later poetry in its sense of foreboding.

Black flags wave
In the wind
Like the wings of forbidden birds.

During days and nights
We will all walk downcast
And secretly
Until we reach
the great dark gate.

Like burnt children
There we'll stand in fear
And we'll watch
The opening
Of the great dark gate.¹⁴

13. Pagis, *op. cit.*, 214.

14. Originally published in *Lifnei ha-shaar ha-afel* in Vienna in 1923. Also in *Shirim liriyim*, ed. Matti Meged, Massada, 1970, 63-64.

Despite Vogel's chillingly prescient choice of vocabulary and imagery the disaster he senses is unspecific. This poem was mocked and reviled by Hebrew writers who had neither the time nor the will, in the 1920s, to reflect that even in the comparatively heady days of the new *yishuv*, Europe had not yet entirely emerged from one darkness before entering another.

GUILT FEELINGS

Moshe Hano'omi maintains that Vogel's references to his father in his first collection, *Lifnei ha-shaar ha-afel* indicate his guilt about his desertion of tradition and Jewish values.¹⁵ There is nothing else in Vogel's poetry which might indicate this sense, but there is no doubt that it did exist strongly in other Jewish literature of the time and later, particularly in that of the writer who is perceived as a kind of soulmate of Vogel's, M.Z. Feuerberg. Feuerberg in his day was the first to establish the personification of cultural culpability when he said of his apostate hero, "... he was murdering everything inside himself, his father, his father's fathers, his entire people."¹⁶

Even later, in the writing of the State of Israel the dead father is a constant image for Jewish tradition, and the response of the son to his memory is correctly taken to be his response to inherited values. Vogel's elegiac memories of a pious father and his references to his father's sadness ("But your sad eyes/I'll see all my life/Upon me") bear a similar connotation of loss which transcends the physical loss of a parent. In another poem Vogel's "I" juxtaposes the father to himself and emphasizes the differences between them: "My father's dream is awake/and exults with night/My eye brings down stars — all the hearts' weeping."¹⁷ Yet "I saw my father" ends on a note of peaceful accommodation with his own world:

15. Moshe Hano'omi. "Olam ha-massoret be-shirat David Vogel," *Lamerhav*, 17 February 1961.

16. Mordecai Zeev Feuerberg. *Le-an?* Tel Aviv: Dvir, 7th edition, 1964, 135.

17. This recalls the mood of Ben Zion Tomer's *Nusah* in which he compares his father's fidelity to tradition with his own rootlessness: "My father carved his life in stone/I, in the wind . . ." In *Shirah tze'irah*. Tel Aviv: Eked, 1980, 116. See also Amichai's first quatrain in the series *Be-zavit yesharah* in *Shirim 1948-1962*. Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1967, 120.

I saw my father who drowned
 in the waves of the sea;
 his frail hand again whitened
 towards the distance —
 and he's gone...

Alone I was taken to their shore
 while still a youth
 with small, thin legs —
 I've grown up now.

And behold I am my father
 all his waves have passed upon me
 until my soul wearies of them.

But all my holy ones
 have gone to the desert
 and I extend my hand to no-one.

I am blessed for I'll rest
 in night's black cradle,
 the dome of the sky above me
 with its silver flecks.¹⁸

The first verse finds a powerful echo in a poem written four decades later, Amichai's "My father in a white spacesuit" (*Avi be-ḥalifat ḥalal levanah*). In his elegiac verse about his father which forms the subtext of all his writing, Amichai speaks of his father's floating away into his own "white, endless death."¹⁹ Once he has died and gone "his strange distances" to meet God, the father's death becomes the son's eternal responsibility and his burden. Yet Vogel's spokesman appears to be free of this obligation and to have detached himself from his "holy ones"; whoever they are they have "gone to the desert," while his father, in a vivid and uncompromising image, has drowned in his life. The speaker has discovered the third option: to free himself from his father's obligations and to admit nature as his consolation.

18. *Shirim liryim*, ed. Matti Meged. Massada, 1970, 60-61.

19. Yehuda Amichai. *Me-ahorei kol zeh mistater osher gadol*. Jerusalem: Schocken, 1974, 49.

FATHER IMAGE

It is difficult to be sure that Vogel's deference to his father's memory or his lament at the passage of youth mark unique grief for a lost *traditional* past. Feierberg, Tomer and Amichai are explicit in this regard, unequivocally providing the equation of father and Judaism, while in "I saw my father" Vogel distinguishes between the father and the "holy ones." Only once does he acknowledge that his father taught him about God.²⁰ Moshe Hano'omi accuses him of feebleness, passivity, sickliness and effeminacy, arguing that his weakness is a result of his inability to fill the gap left by the absence of tradition, a perceived commonplace in the lives of Vogel's Hebrew contemporaries.²¹ The notion of departure from or forsaking of Jewish tradition, the *kera* (split) which became the motivation for so much Hebrew literature of the time and, in fact, for the development of the modernist impulse in this literature, is attributed willy nilly to a contemporary poet. This is perhaps due to the ingrained critical fear of severing Hebrew literature from its bond with Jewish tradition, or the need to underpin it with the guilt of separation, in line with the ideological focus of the time.

A father-son conflict is not entirely absent from Expressionist literature, albeit for different reasons, and from different social derivations. Richard Sheppard's view that in Expressionist dramas "the father symbolized all the forms of repressive and insensitive authority which had to be smashed if the son were to realize himself"²² has a less brutal analogy in the Hebrew literature of the time. However, not only saintly abandoned fathers but repressive and insensitive fathers were frequently functional in the lives of the defecting Jewish intellectual sons, the new "apostates."²³ The Jewish fathers' influence was grounded elsewhere than in ruthless industrialization but was no less oppressive for that, with the inevitable consequence of spiritual rebellion on the part of the sons. Vogel's nostalgic re-

20. David Vogel. *Le-ever ha-demamah*, ed. Aharon Komem. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1983, 239.

21. Hano'omi, *op. cit.*

22. *Bradbury and MacFarlane, op. cit.*, 277.

23. See Alan Mintz. *Banished from Their Father's Table. Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, 148, 82-84.

membrance of his father or rather the father of his lyric "I," does not preclude the unrestricted path he has elected to tread.

In his later poetry where the father-image is almost wholly absent, Vogel's world view remains unaltered, indicating that even if he had been referring to his forfeiture of traditional certainties this contributed only partially to his melancholy. His laments in early poetry for the passage of youth and his departure from home, have greater metaphorical than realistic weight. The pervasive mood of modernism, and more intensively, of German Expressionism, demonstrated a general despair at the knowledge that an ordered world had been overwhelmed by breakdown and change. The art of the nineteenth century had rested on an unquestioning belief in authority, parental or otherwise, which the modernists could now no longer accept. Expressionist writers such as von Hoddis, Heym, Benn, Trakl, Kaiser, Toller and Sternberg, in common with the secularizing Hebrew writers of the time, almost reveled in their spiritual insecurity and the absence of metaphysical consolation. Only Vogel, however, referred to the figure of the father as a symbol of existential loss.

Although Vogel's poetic language is predominantly biblical his poetry has no other indication of tradition, neither the biblical and liturgical allusions which so much distinguish normative Hebrew literature, nor dialectical or defiant Jewish literary theology. He corresponds to the modernist aesthetic regarding a "vaguely perceived religion." Once or twice he refers directly to biblical phraseology, such as *timrot avak* ("pillars of dust")²⁴ and he inverts the sense of supplication from the Yom Kippur liturgy, in the mood of his ironizing Israeli successors: "Take from me the spirit of your holiness."²⁵ Both the untitled poem in which this line appears, and the one following it in Komem's collection,²⁶ are cast in the form of a prayer with an existential content that has no relation at all to Judaism. In a later poem (1937) Vogel apostrophizes God in accordance with his own spiritual development: he sees God as his comrade in pain and pleasure along life's way. He describes a companionship of

24. Vogel, *op. cit.*, 110.

25. Reference to the biblical text is not unusual in Expressionist verse. For example, Trakl's poetry is a melange of Old and New Testament and mythological references.

26. Vogel, *op. cit.*, 142-145.

equals in which he will loan God his walking stick until they find a bench to rest upon; then together they will "enter the evening."²⁷ The notion of a companion-God sharing the speaker's privations and his weariness at the end of life is strangely consoling but one not derivative of Judaic teaching.

CRITICAL RESPONSE

The final question relates to Vogel's reception. The strange fluctuations in the evaluation of Vogel's writing from his own time to the present indicate that there is far more to the criticism than aesthetic criteria alone. Vogel appears to have been a constant thorn in the flesh of the early guardians of the developing literature. In fairness to them, however, this may partly have been due to his own personality, by all accounts a very difficult one. Vogel made few friends and not only his behavior but also his dreadful circumstances tended to estrange him from his contemporaries. Yeshurun Keshet, who took pity on him, describes an encounter with him in Paris in 1926:

The evening I met David Vogel I found him sitting in the company of Shneur, Shalom Asch, Moshe Nadir and others. He and his (second) wife sat there somewhat on the outside and took almost no part in the conversation. They both looked weak and tired and seemingly bewildered. Shalom Asch certainly had never met Vogel and had no idea of the identity of the pale, small man sitting hunched over into himself . . . I moved my chair to where Vogel and his wife were sitting and I began a conversation with them. I did this deliberately: I simply could not bear the sight of isolation and sadness that enveloped them like a kind of fine mist, like a sort of transparent, vague imprint.²⁸

In a conversation with the poet Hillel Bavli twelve years later Vogel summarized his own achievement: "I haven't written much, but I'm thankful that there has never been any writing in Hebrew such as mine. I have something different in me. Is this not so?"²⁹ This "difference" which constituted Vogel's poetic sensibility was strange to the developing Hebrew liter-

27. Vogel, *op. cit.*, 239.

28. Yeshurun Keshet. "Be-zokhri et David Vogel," *Moznayim*, July 1972, 165.
See also "Rishmei masa be-Eiropa," *Hadoar*, 13 October, 1967, 739.

29. Pagis, *op. cit.*, 198.

ature both in Europe and in Palestine during the first two decades of this century. His bleakness, which well accorded with European interwar modernism, was alien to the prevailing attitudes of the *yishuv*, to its ideologies and also to the severely demarcated thematics and styles prescribed by tradition, convention and the critics to the Hebrew writers of the time. The words "weakness," "paleness," "gentleness," "spinelessness" recur in descriptions by his contemporaries both of Vogel and his work. These traits, which have been echoed by later critics, with the present-day addition of "effeminate," contrasted strongly with the positive, masculine ideology proposed by the *yishuv*. Initially Vogel was disliked and misunderstood. His contemporaries criticized his individualism at a time when communal problems were regarded as paramount. Bialik derided him and exposed his irritation at Vogel's blank verse and his abstruse subject matter, reprimanding him for his linguistic usages. He deemed Vogel's work devoid of logic. Benzion Benshalom set the tone in 1927 by exclaiming: "Vogelism? God forbid! Hebrew poetry must choose others for itself."³⁰ Brenner, always the iconoclast, saw some merit in Vogel and favourably compared him to Avraham Ben-Yitzhak. Despite other critical supporters, never vociferous but cautiously approving, such as Hillel Bavli, Asher Barash and Y.D. Berkowitz who published him in his New York journal, *Miklat*, Vogel's curious structures and themes alienated the majority of his contemporary critics. Avigdor Hameiri complained about his excessive imagery, and mocked and parodied him. There has been much debate about Shlonsky's well-known comments about Vogel's first volume, *Lifnei ha-shaar ha-afel*. Shlonsky's savaged Vogel's verse in a piece of scathing satire which mocked his extensive use of "black" and his sadness and nostalgia.³¹ It is clear that Shlonsky either did not like or had not sufficiently explored German Expressionist verse.

In a lecture entitled *Lashon ve-signon ba-sifrut ha-tze'irah* (Language and style in the new literature) given in Warsaw in 1931 Vogel retaliated by deriding the pretentious language of the Hebrew writers, singling Shlonsky out for particular scorn. This

30. Pagis, *op. cit.*, 200.

31. See Uzi Shavit. "Beyn Shlonsky le-Vogel," *Hasifrut*, April, 1973, vol. 3, no. 2, 251 ff.

lecture did little to endear Vogel to his critics. Ironically he argued in it against a tendency to critical leniency, a concessionism to literature for its having been written in the Holy Tongue. He objected to the indiscriminate adulteration of the language for the sake of effect, and the differential criteria for foreign and Hebrew literature. He was particularly indignant about the “forgers” whose linguistic virtuosity marked a lack of originality and individual style. It was here that Shlonsky was cited by name: “If only we had clever and knowledgeable critics, could a . . . [*sic*] like Shlonsky raise his head?” The epithet was removed by Moshe Hano’omi who edited the first publication of Vogel’s lecture.³²

In the 1950s, after Vogel’s “discovery” and subsequent achievement of admiration, if not adulation, on the part of Israeli mainstream writers and critics, the most notable among them Dan Pagis and Natan Zach, Shlonsky claimed to have forgotten what he had meant by his review. Subsequently scholars, including Uzi Shavit, have written many apologetics on Shlonsky’s behalf, professing that the satirical review was in fact highly appreciative, that Shlonsky intended the opposite of what he had said, that he identified strongly with Vogel and that rather than satire he had intended praise.

OBJECTIONS TO VOGEL

It is difficult to know what to make of this vociferous defense of Shlonsky on the part of more than one critic.³³ But even more than this, it is difficult to interpret the furious anti-Vogelism that presided over critical good sense in the late 20s and early 30s. It was compounded of a general dislike of modernism, later of bitter resentment against Vogel’s conclusions in his lecture, of disgust at his abortive Palestinian experience and, clearly, of dislike and misunderstanding of his aesthetic vocabulary. Vogel contributed nothing to national aspirations or the struggle for self-determination. He referred only marginally, if at all, to Judaism; his poetry reflected and lamented the negative European temper and the darkness of annihilation not, however, the annihilation only of the Jews but of European

32. “David Vogel umaamaro,” *Bitzaron*, October-November, 1964, 7-13

33. Shavit, *op. cit.*, 252.

humanism as a whole. Above all, it revealed a disjunction between the language and the national aspirations its use encoded. Hebrew, so much a standard of the rebirth of the nation, was used in all its biblical grandeur by a writer whose contents utterly undermined its connotations of idealism and hope. Its value as a badge of national identity was in a sense deconstructed by its content.

There seems still to be something offensive to the critics about a Jewish writer creating European literature in Hebrew. Even Pagis is surprisingly tendentious with regard to Vogel's environment and possible influences. Others search eagerly in his verse for any vestiges of Jewishness which, it seems, would legitimize him. Robert Alter, exceptionally, writes of him:

Writing novels in Hebrew . . . was intertwined with the adoption of a European mind-set in regard to . . . fundamental aspects of the conceptual world . . . But beyond such epistemological categories modern Hebrew writers — perhaps more radically in prose fiction than in poetry — were embarked on what was in effect a transvaluation of Jewish values The Hebrew writers, nurtured on the imaginative and philosophic literature of modern Europe, very often came to see the world in perspective sharply different from that of their forebears . . .³⁴

Yet this very perspective, which was acceptable in Berdichevsky and Gnessin, was intolerable in Vogel, because of the differences in the treatment by each of these writers of Hebrew and of the Jewish tradition. This indicates that the critics saw Hebrew literature as part of a social-communal enterprise rather than as an autonomous art form, and a writer who did not in some way serve or even refer to the community — whether of purpose or people — was of no interest to it. Vogel called for individuality of expression and it was precisely his own individuality that most fiercely alienated his critics. It is possible that had Vogel written in German he would have been counted among the mainstream poets of his day, whether Expressionist or late Romantic. However, he remains within the history of Hebrew poetry as a second-rater, even in the views of our contemporary critics, and despite the attempts by Pagis, Zach, Dan Miron and Gabriel Moked to rescue his reputation. Shlomo Grodzinsky confirms that there has been a deliberate

34. Robert Alter, *op. cit.*, 83-84.

petty-minded antipathy to Vogel. As late as 1959 Grodzinsky writes:

The Writers' Union has been asked more than once in public and in private why it rejects the publication of Vogel's literary remains. Meanwhile books appear, selected by the Writers' Union, and through its initiative, but as to Vogel's book there is no one to speak or to listen.³⁵

In 1972 the Writer's Union remedied its deficiency by publishing a collection of Vogel's poetry, with Dan Pagis' masterful introduction.

As far as Vogel's present place in Hebrew literature is concerned it is probably best to view him as an intermediary between European Modernism and the developing Israeli literature which was generally more receptive to his gloomy but by no means unique vision. He signified a break from the ideologically circumscribed poetry the Israelis had inherited. During the decade of the 50s Vogel enjoyed a revival which was reinforced by the leading poets of the day. The very qualities that had estranged earlier critics, individuality and introspection, attracted the Israeli poets. Even after the establishment of the State of Israel, Vogelism and its effects were rampant. The poets of the late 40s and 50s continued to be berated by their critics who rejected their aesthetic introspection which appeared to them to signal an anti-communal self-absorption. Gid'on Katznelson, for example, gave the Israeli poetry of the 40s and 50s the blanket label of "nihilism"³⁶; others spoke of its atmosphere of "silent, stifled weeping," its "painful sigh," its sense of "acute nothingness."

While we may not be able accurately to gauge Vogel's direct artistic predecessors we can at least trace his own influence. His use of the devices of Symbolism, his nod towards the decorative art of the Jugendstil, his Expressionism, directly inspired his poetic successors such as Zach, and his conflation of the self and external concerns provided the model according to which the young Israeli poets realized their own growing postwar introspection and withdrawal from collective interests.

35. *Davar*, 26 December, 1959.

36. Gid'on Katznelson. *Le-an hem holkim?*, Alef, 1968.