

The Russian Jewish Diaspora and  
European Culture, 1917–1937

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# The Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture, 1917–1937

*Edited by*

Jörg Schulte  
Olga Tabachnikova  
Peter Wagstaff



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## VOGEL AND THE CITY

Glenda Abramson

David Vogel presents us with many enigmas but perhaps the most curious is his choice of Hebrew through which to express elements of the modernist European aesthetic. Rather than being a Hebrew writer living in Europe he was, as Gershon Shaked suggested,<sup>1</sup> a European writer who wrote in Hebrew. He was also a Yiddish writer, having written, but not completed, a novel in Yiddish and he was certainly familiar with modernist Yiddish poetry, including that of U.Z. Greenberg. Robert Alter suggests that Vogel's choice of Hebrew was 'a calling card' that allowed him entry into modern European culture.<sup>2</sup> Certainly for Vogel Hebrew was less a badge of national identity than a marker of the *difference* he craved. Perhaps he realised that he would not achieve acceptance into the German language mainstream but writing in Hebrew would afford him recognition as a unique voice.

Vogel was born in Podolia in 1891. Little is known about his education, his family or his early interests. 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 in Austria as an enemy alien. Thereafter he wandered through the European capitals, finally settling in Paris until his death at the hands of the Nazis in 1944.

A sense of social estrangement and displacement of identity is not Vogel's alone, but constituted part of the aesthetic baggage of his contemporary European artists during the Great War and the interwar period. Yet his lack of direct reference to any of the apocalyptic events of his time and of his own life in his poetry and fiction, apart from exploring his poverty and homelessness and noting his daughter's birth, placed his work outside the accepted modern Hebrew canon during

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<sup>1</sup> Aharon Komem, *Ha'ofel vehapele: Iyunim biytsirato shel David Vogel* (Haifa: Haifa University Press; Tel-Aviv: Zemorah Bitan, 2001), p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter quoted in Hanna Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 161.

his lifetime. It was to be designated pejoratively as 'Vogelism' by his critics, referring to an aesthetic that was unique in Hebrew literature.

Vogel ignored Jewish history, the development of Zionism and the establishment of the *yishuv* in Palestine which was taking place during his most productive years. He contributed nothing to Jewish national aspirations or the struggle for self-determination, he referred only tangentially to Judaism or Jewish sources. According to Gershon Shaked, 'We might go so far as to say that Vogel produced an "anti-Eretz Israel" fiction, written as though Eretz Israel did not exist and as though the diaspora, despite the existence there of anti-Semitism, was where Jews had to conduct their lives.'<sup>3</sup> This tells us a great deal about the expectations for literature written in Hebrew, the resistance to creative autonomy, and the distorted perception of Jewish culture in the diaspora. Only infrequently in his poetry does Vogel relate to elements of Jewish tradition and even then it is generally as metaphor, for example, 'A pale Yom Kippur has already set out/ in the soul'<sup>4</sup> or through allusions to Jewish liturgy. His frequent references to the figure of a father in his verse may signify a nostalgia for tradition or guilt about his desertion of it, but there is nothing else in Vogel's poetry that might confirm this sense. It is possible that had he written in French or German he would have been counted among the mainstream symbolist, perhaps expressionist, poets of his day.

Whether or not Vogel was directly influenced by any of the writers and intellectuals of his time, particularly the exponents of symbolism and German Expressionism is uncertain, but there is no doubt that his poetics conformed in mood, theme and style with much of the writing of the period, particularly that of Georg Trakl and Georg Heym. It seems unlikely that he could entirely have escaped the influence of any of the European cultural movements or their representatives, given his long sojourns in the European centres, including his years in the Paris of post-symbolism. His debt to Baudelaire is obvious in many lines of his verse written in and about Paris. In the broadest terms the mood of his poetry reflects the negative European temper and the darkness of the annihilation of European humanism during two world wars.

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<sup>3</sup> Gershon Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> *Le'ever hademamah*, ed. and introduction by Aharon Kōmem (Tel Aviv: HaKibuts Hame'uḥad, 1983), p. 97.

Vogel himself recognized his identity as a child of Europe. In his diary, which ends before his arrival in Paris, he described himself as an impoverished Russian in Vienna. After his abortive experiment to settle in Palestine in 1929–1930 he returned to Paris with many excuses and, after being reprimanded by Zionist leader Leo Motzkin, retorted to a friend, ‘Let *him* bear the *hamsins*. Me—my home is here. This is the only air I can breathe.’<sup>5</sup> The details of Vogel’s sojourn in Palestine are vague; we know only that he was deeply unhappy there even though his only child, a daughter, was born in Tel Aviv during his stay and even though his masterpiece *Haye Nisuim* (Married Life) (1929) was published there. He disdained most of the Hebrew literature of his day, reserving his praise for the Hebrew writer Y.H. Brenner; despite his sympathy with Brenner’s characters and hence with ‘the Jewish tragedy’, he refrained from any identifiable expression of that tragedy in his work. All this contributed to his alienness within the mainstream of modern Hebrew literature. This alienness resulted in his total obscurity until the 1960s when he was ‘discovered’ by the Israeli poets Dan Pagis and Natan Zach.

During the First World War Vogel was incarcerated as an enemy alien in three prison camps in Austria. The conditions were not severe; in fact for the first time since his arrival in Western Europe he consistently had food to eat and a roof over his head. Much of the poetry composed between 1916 and 1918 in the prisons and in Vienna after his release, and first published in the literary and cultural magazines of the time,<sup>6</sup> is devoted to visionary depictions of nature. He stresses in his diary the beauty of the landscape at Karlstein and Markl, the locations of the castles which served as prisons, so enchanting that he is inclined, with true Vogelian intensity, to throw himself into the valley in order to enjoy it.<sup>7</sup>

In his essay on Georg Trakl, Will Stone’s comments about Trakl are eerily applicable to Vogel as well—or perhaps Vogel’s debt to Trakl was more direct than has been remarked or admitted:

<sup>5</sup> Dan Pagis, ‘David Vogel: Ha-’ish veshirato’, *Molad*, June–July 1964, 196.

<sup>6</sup> In *Hatsefirah*, in an anthology entitled *Gevulot* edited by Gershon Shoffman, in *Miklat* (New York) and others.

<sup>7</sup> *Tahanot kavot*, ed. with an afterword by Menaḥem Peri (Tel Aviv: Hasifriyah haḥadasha/Haḳibuts Hame’uḥad, 1990), pp. 271–326 (entry 22.8.1914).

Like Coleridge, Trakl employs the visionary image as the principal means to express himself but, unlike Coleridge and other romantics with a visionary capacity who interspersed their visions with a framing language to support their occasional images, there is no place in Trakl's work for such conscious construction in the traditional way a poem evolves. For Trakl the imagery has become the entire poem, or the world of Trakl is one long uninterrupted visionary image, cut and pasted into individual poems. All Trakl's essential concerns become an essential part of this new language and cannot be separated from it.

Certain images often appear to have no connection to those that follow or precede them, so to some people reading Trakl for the first time it may appear to be a random display, seemingly incoherent, colours thrown in at will.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Vogel's poetry contains an inner coherence in that the image being the poem, it does not require a beginning, an end or an anchor in any world other than that of the poem itself. Within this consistency, nature is generally no more than a symbolic barometer of mood, its predominant colours, 'pale', 'grey', 'dark', being metaphors of the speaker's experienced solitude. Natan Zach, one of the Israeli admirers of Vogel and active in his 'rediscovery' explains,

The totality of the situation in Vogel's poetry is derived from the totality of the relationship between the emotion and the image in the poem. Vogel has an uncanny talent for placing in the same lines [...] a complete picture which contains the emotional content of his experience, or sometimes it is no more than an impressionistic observation of the landscape.<sup>9</sup>

However, Vogel's nature imagery most frequently embraces the dull hues generally attributed to a cityscape, rather than the rich colours of the countryside. Paradoxically much of his poetry is concerned with evocation of nature, at odds with his daily experience as a city dweller (from 1909). His real, experienced environments, apart from the short period of his Austrian incarceration, were almost exclusively urban, Vilna, Lemberg, Vienna, Berlin and Paris but his urban sensibility was often represented by indeterminate landscapes, for example, images of a river, forests and bare-branched trees, hilltops, juxtaposed with vignettes of city girls in the streets, wearing purple and blue hats and a sidewalk covered with autumn leaves. Whether these are observed,

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<sup>8</sup> Will Stone, 'A Visionary Infection: The Anatomy of Movement in Georg Trakl's Poetry', *Agenda*, 42, 3-4 (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Natan Zach 'Lailah kvar shokhen shaḥor', *Davar*, 11 December 1959, 7.



remembered, or fabricated settings, the words ‘dull’ (*kaheh*) and ‘pale’ (*hiver*) are the twin poles of Vogel’s landscapes, *kaheh* in particular recurring with synaesthetic intensity: as an adjective, ‘dull noise’; as an adverb, ‘Dully I’ll cling’; and as a noun that personifies the object, ‘The dark [one], the solitary [one] (*hakehah, habodedah*, 93)’. This dullness and colourlessness suggest that he is not *describing* landscapes at all, but imagining a space upon which his self is being projected. It is this space that he peoples with solitary wanderers in a dream terrain that is superimposed upon the city streets that the wanderers walk.

In Vienna, after his release from imprisonment in 1916, Vogel’s most customary landscape indicators in his lexicon of tropes, ‘night’, ‘wasteland’, ‘mist’, ‘autumn’, ‘dark’, ‘dull’, ‘pale’, are, characteristically, extended to the city. Houses, rooftops, sidewalks also figure in poetry whose locus is in fact ambiguous, neither countryside nor city, but a dark realm of mood whose ‘strange, consumptive shadows’ create a wasteland (*shemamah*) that ‘will oppress me forever’.<sup>10</sup> It is true that wartime Vienna was no longer the *fin-de-siècle* playground it had been; ‘the last of the lights went out’, writes Vogel in 1916, during the war that had already changed the city forever (95). It is possible that Vogel’s view of it as something akin to a photographic negative was an accurate portrayal of it in 1916. However, while the war was raging through Europe, while the city was in turmoil, the healthy young men gone, their places taken by thousands of refugees and the war wounded, Vogel was repeating his usual lexicon of autumn, shadows, greyness and isolation that transcends the actual city. Any shard of sunshine is soon subdued by the shadows:

Top storey windows  
burn gold in the sunset.  
Dark shadows, fearful of longing  
slip heavily into the hearts. (94)

After the sunshine a ‘pale dawn’ rests on the grey city roofs, a ‘heavy, painful sky’ hangs over Vienna (94). The paleness extends to a love poem that uncharacteristically ends on a note of joy; still, the woman’s breasts are ‘like pale lilies’ and the joy itself is tempered: ‘And the heart *quietly* rejoices’ (98, italics mine). The oxymoron in this line (*tsohel*, shout with joy, rejoice) exemplifies the poetry’s intrinsic restraint

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<sup>10</sup> David Vogel, *Le’ever Hademamah*, p. 95; hereafter page numbers in the text will refer to this edition.

of passion, just as its colours are confined to a colourless palette. When, in a poem, colour does intrude, when young women enjoy the city in spring, wearing hats of purple and blue, the speaker sits indoors watching them silently through his window (119–120). Generally wintry external and internal vistas, whether urban or rural, define Vogel's Vienna poetry, some decade and a half before the publication of his Viennese novel *Married Life* which features Vienna as a recognisable twentieth-century metropolis. Yet that modernist Vienna was written in Paris and possibly in Tel Aviv, long after Vogel had left the actual Austrian city behind.

Vogel reached Paris in 1925 or 1926 and immediately succumbed to its charms. Moshe Ben Menahem tells us that Vogel eagerly learned French and became familiar with the city, including its outskirts and its museums.<sup>11</sup> Vogel was a great walker and traversed the cities he lived in from one side to the other. In Paris his regular haunt, to which he went almost every day, was the La Coupole café in Montparnasse, opened in 1927. The twenties' émigrés were closely identified with the cafés and La Coupole, which is an historic monument today, was popular with writers and artists, many of them Jews. Vogel also frequented two other cafes popular with Jewish expatriates, Central and Herrenhof. Unfortunately we know too little about Vogel's life to know which museums he visited, whom he met, who his friends were, what he discussed. What is clear, however, is that despite his love of Paris it seems Paris did not love him: as in his Vienna sojourn, he was never able to find a means of sustenance and a secure home there, resulting in extreme poverty, homelessness and ill health. Nevertheless he wrote two novels *Babeit hamarpeh* (In the Sanatorium) in 1927, and *Lenokhah hayam* (Facing the Sea), 1932, and at least part of *Haye Nisuim* in Paris, but none of his novels relieved his financial situation.<sup>12</sup> Vogel lived in Paris for three years and then left, returning in 1933, after wandering through Europe and enduring a year in Palestine. He wrote to Ben Menahem:

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<sup>11</sup> Pagis, p. 196.

<sup>12</sup> One of his friends was the Yiddish writer Meir Wiener who encouraged him with these words: 'You will write prose! A good one! Very good one! Don't fall in despair after the first unsuccessful attempts!', see Mikhail Krutikov, 'Yiddish between East and West: Expressionism, Revolution, and the Habsburg Myth in the Soviet Union', *TRANS. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, no. 16 (2005) ([www.inst.at/trans/16Nr/06\\_6/krutikov16.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/16Nr/06_6/krutikov16.htm)).

We have again been in Paris for about a month. We have had many moves and innumerable tribulations in the past two years. My return to Berlin was useless—no flour and no Torah. We escaped from there while we still could and travelled around Poland for two months. I was hoping to find some concrete advantage in all this, but even there I didn't succeed and left empty-handed. Now Paris [...] In the difficulty of these times it seems that there is no place in the world for people like us.<sup>13</sup>

While the Hebrew writer Yeshurun Keshet was in Paris in the 1920s he came upon a small group of what he called *'anashim 'wriyim* [Hebrew folk], including Vogel and the poet Zalman Shneour. He hoped that they were the vanguard 'for the nurturing of Hebrew culture in the Jewish community of Paris'<sup>14</sup> but discovered that no such thing was happening. While both Shneour and Vogel were actively writing while in Paris, they did not advance the notional cause of 'Hebrewness' within the Jewish and literary community. In his memoirs Shlomo Zemah, a Hebrew critic and scholar who spent three years in Paris at that time, noted only the presence of Jewish artists, but not of Hebrew writers.

Vogel made few friends for not only his odd personality but also his dreadful circumstances tended to estrange him from his contemporaries. Keshet, who took pity on him, describes an encounter with him in Paris in 1926:

In the evenings I would often go to the Café de la Rotonde on Boulevard Montparnasse. This café was a meeting point for artists and writers, mainly from abroad, and Jewish writers from America and Palestine would meet there when they were in Paris. For example, the same evening I met David Vogel I found him sitting in the company of Shneur, Shalom Asch, Moshe Nadir and others. He and his 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 the isolation and sadness that enveloped them like a kind of fine mist, like a sort of transparent, vague imprint.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Pagis, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Yeshurun Keshet, 'Bizekhorit 'et David Vogel', *Moznayim*, July, 1972, 165; see also 'Rishmei masa' be'eropa', *Hado'ar*, 13 Oct. 1967, 739.

<sup>15</sup> Keshet, p. 739; see also Glenda Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), p. 252.

It was not only Vogel's circumstances that alienated him from the Hebrew literary arbiters, but what I suppose could be called his disjunctive world view. At the time the Hebrew writers were participating in the romantic enterprise of creating an agrarian utopia in Palestine, Vogel was creating both a misty European landscape and an urban nightmare

Vogel remained in Paris from 1933 until his internment in the early 1940s in Hauteville and deportation by the Nazis in 1944. Few of these events are recounted factually in his poetry; the only mark they have left is a sense of personal poverty, despair and barrenness, evoked in the same repeated tropes and linguistic patterns that mirror the speaker's dark mood.

A manifestation of the European modernist spirit was an awareness of the city not only as a shaper of individual destinies, but as a symbol of sociopolitical crisis. Raymond Williams detected many themes common to writers reacting to the modern metropolis: the collapse of normal relationships and the loss of what Williams termed 'the ballast of familiar life'; crowding; loneliness and alienation; the diversity and mobility of the city.<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth had identified the same condition of urban mass society in 1800 (*The Prelude* VII) as did Baudelaire later. Georg Simmel, like Wordsworth, wrote of the valuelessness and baseness embedded in modern city life.<sup>17</sup> Until the 20th century western, especially English, literature incorporated an anti-urban bias; the movement from the land to the cities was, in a sense, a movement from pastoralism to modernism.<sup>18</sup>

Literary confrontation of the city assumes various forms, for example, the narrator outside the city observing it, the narrator or protagonist as part of the city, often demonstrating extreme subjectivity, and the city itself as text. Vogel's Paris poetry combines all these methods:

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London; New York: Verso, 1989), p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Georg Simmel, *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (Dresden: Zahn & Jaensch, 1903).

<sup>18</sup> The case of Israel is instructive. The pastoral, romantic phase of the new Israeli culture was associated closely with the Middle Eastern landscape, with childhood, the *moshavah*, Arab neighbourliness and the orchards and orange groves. This was the 'open' *Eretz Yisrael*, according to Ehud Ben Ezer, rather than the closed and besieged State of Israel with the awareness of the Arabs as the true heirs to the pastoral dream. A combination of sociopolitical events, among them the influx of urbanized European Jewish refugees, not all of whom were Zionists, overwhelmed the faith in the land and romantic utopianism. 'Ehud Ben 'Ezer, 'Portsim unetsurim', *Keshet*, 3 (1968), 158.

to begin with, the spokesman is himself subservient to the city, as narrator or as protagonist, whether or not he is at the centre of the poetic vista. In common with expressionist poets, Vogel's speaker is a victim of the city, part of its flotsam, the 'human rejects', identified in his day by Baudelaire, stressed by the expressionists, and summarized by Vogel in a portrait of a black alley in which pass the child, the prostitute and the hangman. (175) Vogel's Paris poems of the mid-1920s reveal his extreme subjectivity, his texts providing more insight into his personality than into the period or the place. For example, his city contains few crowds, no bustle, no stores or arcades and few lights. Vogel's response to the city is in its sense of the speaker's isolation, either in the street or in his room, within the normative city tumult. Generally, the words 'heder' (room) or 'hadarim' (rooms) recur, emphasising not only the isolation and fragmentation in the modern city but also as metonyms of the lives lived within them.

In addition to its other qualities, urban art was 'based on the principles of surprise and "shock", disruption and displacement of any assumption of a coherent "centre" to experience.'<sup>19</sup> Expressionist art emphasizes the disjunction of city crowds and the solitary viewer observing them. According to Benjamin, 'Fear, revulsion and horror were the emotions which the big city crowd aroused in those who first observed it.'<sup>20</sup> The urban shock that preoccupies him is produced by the tension between open spaces and crowded urban spaces, that is, between the country and the city. Vogel's largely unpeopled cityscapes engender no such tension. If he expresses the urban 'shock' at all, it is both associated with existential responses to the urban encounter, deriving from his own personality adrift in the cities of Europe, and political, reflecting the development of a sensitivity to the times culminating in his shocking intuition of what was to come. Even Vogel's solipsism could not withstand the ominous atmosphere:

This city dwelling on the shores of nothingness  
Is sunken in eternal silence, humming evil—  
Its inhabitants lie defeated, their soul darkening  
Until they are sent to a land of no bread, no wine.

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Prendergast, 'Framing the City: Two Parisian Windows', in *City Images: Perspectives from Literature, Philosophy, and Film*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1991), pp. 179–196 (p. 181).

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 176. Benjamin quotes Valéry: 'The inhabitant of the great urban centres [...] reverts to a state of savagery—that is, of isolation.'

A silent community, here the world has forgotten.  
 But at twilight fear overcomes it  
 And suddenly a girl's scream flares beside the living  
 Whose voices have faded in the distance.

Every evening and morning the sounds of bells erupt  
 Like black crows in encasing, pulpy fog  
 And on the people in bed they proclaim the order:  
 Today your neighbour went, tomorrow you'll go too. (223)

Yet this undated, but later, poem could reflect no more than Vogel's usual urban desperation and fear, even paranoia, his characters' enclosure within a mysterious city that exists out of time and space. For once, however, the speaker is not at the poem's centre, and perhaps some awareness of historical process intrudes upon his manufactured world. Even the language of this poem is less hermetic and concise.

The undertones of impending disaster were commonplace in expressionist verse: whether or not the poets had been affected by the First World War, they expressed an awareness of an evil embodied in some kind of massive force against which they could not prevail. The city becomes 'the emblem of an insoluble historical crisis'<sup>21</sup> symbolized by terror, madness and illness. Vogel writes of 'sick women/ in the depths of a strange night'; 'In the morning our children awaken filled with fear'; 'The great night approaches my door/ in the paleness of winter.' Altered circumstances infuse the city with menace:

When the sick person  
 gathers all the crumbs of his strength  
 to step in childish confusion  
 over the threshold of the leaden day  
 like someone who returns from afar  
 to see his dwelling changed,  
 he wonders at his day, himself  
 and the strangeness of the city. (228) [1938]

The force threatening the expressionist poets, precipitating their sense of calamity, was more than an undefined terror of technology, so well defined by Benjamin, or the city's corruption and oppression. Many of the poets lined their verse with a subtext of social protest, in keeping with their strong sense of political chaos of which the perceptive

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Timms, 'Expressionists and Georgians', in *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*, ed. Edward Timms and David Kelley (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985), p. 118.

artist was both the chronicler and the victim. Vogel, on the other hand, generally confined his urban awareness to *intimations* of devastation, unspecified and undescribed.

In an example of Vogel's poetry of the 1920s, which has startling similarities to that of Georg Heym, Vogel's view of Paris is vividly rendered without presenting an objective city topos:

Life weighs heavily on you  
 Until your streets go mad;  
 People light a great flame—  
 Your lights, Paris.

The night sleeps lonely on the rooftops—  
 You are awake and naked,  
 My unkempt city.  
 Desire forever exults from your rooms.

Your sadness and fire  
 Above humpbacked walls  
 Are eternal streams  
 Flowing to frightened hearts.

Once I looked away from the stranger  
 Who always walks behind me.  
 Why does he await me at the gates  
 And stealthily remain with me  
 Throughout the night? (171) [1925]

The undisclosed urban 'other', a staple of expressionist art, is present throughout Vogel's poetry, often as a figment of menace. In the modern city, eye contact, which potentially increases the threat, is seldom made and when we do gaze, 'Sight introduces us to an unbearable shock. Reality when seen inspires horror.'<sup>22</sup> Terror, according to Jacques Elul, is always visual. In the graphic art of German Expressionism the observed urban vista is a savage panorama which physically and emotionally overwhelms the human beings.

The subject of this poem is not the speaker who stands on the side, narrating. Paris is the centre and focal point, unrelated to the observing man, except in the last stanza when he comes into focus as the

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Elul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, tr. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1985), p. 12. For a discussion of the passing stranger in the city, and the question of visual perception see William Chapman Sharpe, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams*. Baltimore (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 39–68.

terrified urban dweller. Like his contemporary, Heym, Vogel depicts the depressing chaos of city life, by means of personifications of the city and particularly of its component parts. But the person-city is itself ill or mad. Its flame-imagery indicates its demonic force which Vogel elsewhere symbolizes as 'a city of black fire' (or 'a fiery black city', 'ir'esh shehorah). An unspecified threat lurks at the heart of these poems (Heym's *drohn*, a parasite), an oppressive power, represented by Vogel as a strange, shadowy figure. In fact his Paris poetry is filled with images of violence, knives, killing, fire, drowning. In one poem the Seine itself swallows Paris's evenings with a shudder.

All the themes characterising the Paris poetry are present in the second stanza of the poem, beginning with *bedad* (lonely). In fact, the themes closely relate to the personality of the speaker: his isolation within the urban environment, which is his projected interior landscape, and therefore 'unkempt'. The city is not only 'naked' (*aromah*) but 'eryah' (nakedness) with its implications of sexuality, together with 'desire', reinforce the femaleness of the city entity. Vogel's urban fiction links cities and tortured love and desire. For example, in *Married Life* perversion, infidelity, sexual jealousy and despair are the narrative's inner lining, personified by the protagonist and his masochistic relationship with his wife.

In Vogel's Paris poetry, psychological and textual landscapes overshadow the accurately portrayed city. His delocalised, symbolic streets confirm the essential 'metaphoricity of the modern city'<sup>23</sup> that avoids the authentic cityscape of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, for example. It is clear that Vogel's Parisian topos is both an extension of himself, viewed through attributes rather than locations, and a female entity which he apostrophises by using the feminine singular pronoun. In his apostrophe he describes the city in a personal colloquy, as if 'she' were his lover. He paints Paris's portrait as he sees it: beautiful and ugly, erotic and tired, mysterious and threatening. His metaphorical effects closely link the man and the city: 'yearning' city squares, 'tired' alleys, a 'weary' day, 'unkempt' city. The city as inner narrative replaces a narrative about the city or the city itself as text.

The personification is ultimately reduced to only a few of the city's physical features, one being the alley or street. Paris is emblematised by

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<sup>23</sup> See Sharpe, p. 10.



its allegorical alleys: in Vogel's poetry there are few interiors, gardens, buildings, only one or two cafés and squares. The word *simṭah* (alley) recurs in almost every one of Vogel's 'Paris' poems as 'dark', 'bowed', 'humble' or 'tired', a territory he consistently associates with the unconscious. Streets and alleys are the city's nerves, conducting impulses and sexual desire against which the poet-*flâneur* is helpless. They create a powerful metaphor for the erotic, associated with the speaker himself. At night the dark urban enclosure of impulse and instinct incarnates the 'city of black fire' (*'ir 'esh shehora*) which is kindled in the speaker. *Simtot* (alleys) occurs with images of 'innerness' (*tokhi, kirbi*): 'All your weary alleys/ turn toward the inside of me' 'It's cool and dark inside me' 'Inside me (*tokhi*) is paved/ a narrow tall alley/these thousand years.' These phrases link the external urban feature, the alley as a channel both of narrative and of impulse, with the speaker's inner landscape. In fiction the street or alley sometimes conducts the characters, together with the reader, to the core of the plot; but within short plotless structures such as Vogel's this is not possible and in any case, his exitless alleys, as symbols of inner disorder, do not lead him anywhere.

Vogel was capable of writing splendid love poetry but his view of love in the city is devoid of affection containing, rather, the unpleasant edge which expressionist painters, such as Otto Dix, for example, were adept at rendering. Vogel's Paris women are exclusively sexually motivated, as is the city itself: the speaker professes love for the 'slim daughters' of Paris; girls rush home after a night of love, women display their breasts from the windows, their eyes burn, prostitutes prowl the alleys. Vogel's speaker apostrophizes 'my modest (*'anavot*) whores'; Paris as a wanton feminine entity encloses clandestine (*balat*) love. Vogel's representation of his city as feminine may be considered ambiguous since *ir* is in any case feminine (as are *cité* and *stadt*) but it is clear from Vogel's poetry that the city 'the harlotized metropolis' to use William Sharpe's term,<sup>24</sup> is a female space by which to be seduced: 'awake and naked/ my unkempt city' whose rooms exude sexuality. The whore, a favoured persona of expressionist art, epitomizes the commodification of the human being in the modern city while *ner* and *esh*, the lighting of candles or fire, signifies the ritual beginning of love.

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<sup>24</sup> Sharpe, p. 10

City lights are often linked to sexuality: in Vogel's poetry the light, including the candle, is exclusively allied to the erotic night. Day, by contrast, is 'pale', morning is 'withered' and 'tired' and night's 'thousand fires' of desire sleep all day.

The poetry links the urban environment with misery: a woman separated (*karut*, cut off) from her husband contemplates suicide. She has 'wallowed' in a foreign, or strange, city; the suggestion being the wantonness of a city that has destroyed a marriage. The verb *mitpaleshet* (wallows) has overtones of wallowing in misery, echoed, in the poem, by the yowling of 'rotting' cats. Whereas for Baudelaire a cat is a sensuous reminder of a woman, here both woman and cat suggest corruption. The speaker himself wallows to a certain extent: this is the 'song of my lost hope': he is far from the city and his metaphorical wine has run out; he contemplates inscribing his misery into his flesh.

I survive but I have no-one.  
 Far away no city will bring me joy.  
 My storm has dampened the hearth  
 All my wine has gone.  
 Bring a knife!  
 Tonight I'll engrave my flesh  
 With the sorrows of yesterday and tomorrow. (164)

The vocabulary of the poem offers an objective correlative of urban corruption: 'broken', 'empty', 'rotten', 'wallowing', 'poison'.

Together with all his metaphoricity, Vogel occasionally unites city and text; he describes recognisable aspects of Paris, for the most part according to the expressionist technique of simultaneity, a synchronic portrait of the city, its inhabitants and the dissociated observer, in a series of declarative sentences:

Solid with smoke and people,  
 cafés have burst into the marketplaces  
 A morning, not winter, has spread—  
 but frost's signature lies on roof and lintel  
 and on the faces of girls  
 hurrying from a night of love  
 to a steel machine. [1925] (173)

There is a hint here of factory chimneys spreading smoke and ash, of machinery and streams of workers, leading to one of the most graphic of Vogel's vignettes, his description of the modern city as portrayed in numerous paintings of interwar expressionism, as a sulphurous vista:

Pillows of ash were spread for a sick sun  
 To make softness for it  
 A yellow tongue lengthens  
 Facing the rippling Seine. [1925] (173)

This view of the city's smoky veil recalls Heym's prophetic 'A great city sunken in yellow smoke'. On the other hand, Paris's blurred outlines suggest its amorphous values and lack of virtue. The sun is always defeated by shadows, and in this poem the sun's sickness has infected the city which displays the metonymic 'yellow tongue' signifying the pollution of the human body no less than of the city and its masses. Still, the speaker occasionally finds beauty in it, conveyed in lines in which the language play, to which no translation can do justice, constitutes the poetic image:

In your nights  
 float a myriad colours of light,  
 a reddish sky curving over them. (175)

These poems reveal not only the urban modernism of Vogel's aesthetic perspective. but also those factors in his life that were typical of the life of an East European Jewish intellectual at that time, predominantly his rootlessness, detachment and poverty. These characteristics were shared by other *talushim* (*déracinés*) passing through or settling in Paris, Vienna and Berlin after the Great War and the destruction of their East European communities. Many of them indulged in memories of the lost *shtetl*; Vogel, however, was devoid of nostalgia and his speaker, the *talush*, squarely faced the city.

Turbulent streets  
 destroyed my rooms  
 and carried me with them. (161)

Vogel's bleakness, which well accorded with European interwar modernism, was perhaps less alien to his fellow Hebrew writers in Europe at the time than to the positive, masculine attitudes of the *yishuv*, to its ideologies and also to the severely demarcated thematics and styles prescribed by tradition, convention and the critics responsible for establishing the modern Hebrew canon. Vogel was disliked and misunderstood by most of the contemporary literary arbiters for his idiosyncratic introversion at a time that communalism was regarded as paramount.

Above all, his poetry revealed a disjunction between the language and the national aspirations its use encoded. Hebrew, so much a standard of the rebirth of the nation and a link to ancient autonomy, was used in all its biblical grandeur by a writer whose contents utterly undermined its connotations of idealism and hope.

Nonetheless, some 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?'<sup>25</sup> It was indeed so. This 'difference' that constituted Vogel's poetic sensibility was strange to the developing Hebrew literature both in Europe and in Palestine during the first two decades of the twentieth century. A number of other Hebrew writers, including S.Y. Agnon, Gershon Shoffman, M.Y. Berdyczewsky, Avraham Ben-Yitzhak, Saul Tchernichowsky and Y.H. Brenner, made their homes in Western Europe and England, either temporarily or permanently, yet, apart from Ben-Yitzhak, whose poetry exhibits many Vogelian fingerprints, and perhaps Shoffman, their writing remained true to the Hebrew spirit without creating a definable émigré Hebrew culture with specific markers. The question is whether Vogel succeeded in doing so, by blending his modernist European sensibility with the Hebrew language and its traditional resonances. Yet neither he nor similar Hebrew-European writers, such as U.N. Gnessin and Gershon Shoffman, established a 'group' or attracted followers who could have represented 'Hebrewness' of any kind in Western Europe. Moreover, few Hebrew writers settled in Paris for long, the majority residing in Berlin or Vienna but even there a 'centre' for European Hebrew literature did not emerge. As for exile, despite his frequent changes of location, Vogel seemed to be free of any nostalgia, and if there is evidence of a sense of exile, it is not from a place or a homeland but from some idealised state of being, never defined, from which he has been separated. He did not, as exiles do, inhabit one place while projecting the memories of another.

It is probably best to view him as an intermediary between European modernism and Hebrew literary modernism which, a little later in Israel, became receptive to his gloomy vision. When he was in Paris, the home of a large group of Russian-Jewish modernist artists, he might have discovered literary styles that he intuitively knew suited his 'new

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<sup>25</sup> Pagis, p. 198.

garb' as a European writer.<sup>26</sup> It was in Paris that his modernist European sensibility was consolidated. Therefore, as a stylistic innovator he made an important contribution to Hebrew modernism through his encounters with—or at least his awareness of—the expatriate Jewish artistic community. It was not only his affinity with symbolism and expressionism that signal his distinctiveness—after all, U.Z. Greenberg was one of the initiators of Yiddish Expressionism—but Vogel's complete break with the aesthetic norms of Jewish and Hebrew creativity that was revealed with the composition of his novels and poetry in Paris. Shaked, who was perhaps not the greatest admirer of Vogel, offers him a rather back-handed compliment: 'Having produced in *Facing the Sea* (*Lanokhah hayam* 1934) one of the most truly outstanding works of Hebrew fiction, Vogel may be considered the second most important non-mainstream writer in the tradition (after Gnessin).'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In his notorious essay on Hebrew literature Vogel writes: 'We have already given ourselves in the great world to a new moulding, to European garb.' See *Moznayim* 3–4 (July–August, 1987), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Shaked, p. 131.

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