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, 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. 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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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.’ 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’ 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 symbol-ist, 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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