‘Time for the Orient has come’:
The Orient as a spiritual–cultural domain
in the work of Uri Zvi Grinberg

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ABSTRACT The Yiddish–Hebrew poet Uri Zvi Grinberg migrated to Eretz Yisrael on 4 December 1923. It was the end of the Third Aliyah, a time of stagnation and decline, of hunger, housing shortages and fighting for a half-day’s wages. Young pioneers were leaving in droves, disappointed and bitter. Why did he choose to migrate just then? Why not earlier, when the Third Aliyah was at its height? Why did Grinberg absent himself in the early 1920s, when the Zionist-pioneering discourse was being shaped? What did Grinberg himself think about his belated move and the fact that he had not taken part in the formative stages of the Third Aliyah? This article is an attempt to examine from a cultural-historical perspective the evolution of Grinberg’s attitude towards Eretz Yisrael and the ‘Orient’ as a spiritual and cultural concept.

Prologue

URI ZVI GRINBERG was one of the most outstanding and prolific Jewish poets of the twentieth century. His writing, spanning over sixty years, included some 3,000 poems in Hebrew and Yiddish, and hundreds of journalistic articles and essays. Over that time, his poetic style and politics changed: He went through several phases that were very distinct from one another, and sometimes even contradictory.¹ In the public mind, however, his poems have been associated almost entirely with the nationalist right

¹ For a clear, concise review of these distinct periods, see D. Miron, Introduction to UZG (in Hebrew; Mevo’ot series; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2002).
wing. From the 1930s onwards, Uri Zvi Grinberg (UZG) was perceived as the lyrical spokesman of the Revisionist movement. He shaped its ideology and thinking, so much so that his many admirers on the right worshipped him as their prophet. Yet his opponents, who were even more numerous, branded his poetry immoral, fascist and racist.

UZG’s poetic career was characterized by sharp transitions: The absolute identification of his work with nationalist ideology all but obscured his profound spiritual and emotional bond with the Zionist pioneers just a few years earlier. From his aliyah to Eretz Yisrael at the end of 1923 until 1928, Grinberg served as their emissary and voice. His poem ‘Tur Malka’, written a year after his arrival, ends with a verse that alludes to his mobilization to their cause and deep sense of commitment: ‘Proletarians in the Land of Israel called upon me to be their poet and send tenderness / and delight – to Hell! / and like them to quarry from marble an image – of their lives.’

At the end of the 1920s, UZG crossed the lines from the pioneering camp to the right wing. This dramatic swing to the right drew the attention – and ire – of the Labor movement. Literary critics like Menachem Dorman and David Cnaani depicted him as a traitor and a turncoat, a man who had gone from fan to foe. He was ostracized and his poetry considered taboo for many years. While much has been written about this political shift, no attention has been paid to another turning point in his life that occurred several years earlier, which was no less dramatic: UZG’s move from coldness and indifference to the pioneering enterprise in Eretz Yisrael to open identification with the activist school of Zionism, which led to his decision to migrate. UZG reached Eretz Yisrael on 4 December 1923. It was the end of the Third Aliyah, a period of stagnation and decline, a time of hunger, housing shortages and fighting for a half-day’s wages. Young pioneers were leaving in droves, disappointed and bitter. Why did he choose to migrate just then? Why not earlier, when the Third Aliyah was at its height? Why was he absent in the early 1920s, when the Zionist-pioneering discourse was

being shaped? What did he feel about this belated move and the fact that he had taken no part in the formative stages of the Third Aliyah? This article is an attempt to examine from a cultural-historical perspective the evolution of Grinberg’s attitude toward Eretz Yisrael and the ‘Orient’ as a spiritual and cultural concept.

The Third Aliyah as a backdrop

Looking at the history of the Third Aliyah, UZG’s reluctance to become involved in the Zionist discourse of the early 1920s becomes even more mystifying. The Balfour Declaration,6 the beginning of the British Mandate7 and the end of World War I (November 1918) paved the way for a massive influx of Jewish immigration. Hundreds of thousands of refugees had been milling around Europe, prevented from going to Eretz Yisrael while the war was in progress. Many of them gravitated to Odessa, which had become a kind of way station for Jews bound for Eretz Yisrael. In November 1919, the SS Ruslan set sail on its voyage from Europe to Eretz Yisrael. Arriving in Jaffa on 19 December with 637 Jewish passengers aboard, this ship became the bellwether of the Third Aliyah.

Between 1919 and 1921, close to 20,000 Jews migrated to Eretz Yisrael from Eastern Europe, most of them single. These were the glory days of the Third Aliyah: young pioneers were making aliyah for ideological reasons and out of personal choice, all fired up to change the social fabric of the Jewish Yishuv and lay the groundwork for implementing national goals.8 They were in their physical prime, and not being married freed them from the financial burden of supporting a family. It was easier for them to cope with

6. The Balfour Declaration was a letter from the British foreign secretary, Arthur James Balfour, to Baron Walter Rothschild on November 1917 based on principles drawn up by Dr Chaim Weizmann and Nahum Sokolov, which called upon the British government to declare Eretz Yisrael the national home of the Jewish people and recognize the right of the Jews to build a national life there.

7. The country was under British military rule from the end of 1917 to July 1920, until the civil administration of the British Mandate headed by the first High Commissioner of Eretz Yisrael, Herbert Samuel, was formally installed.

malaria, scorching heat, especially in the Jordan Valley settlements, hunger and overcrowded living conditions. The fact that this wave of immigration did not include old people eliminated the extra stress of dealing with an elderly population.

One of the features of the Third Aliyah was the arrival of organized groups that were formed on the basis of a common ideology. Some had undergone agricultural training and preparation for communal life before their arrival. Among the poets who embraced the pioneering ethos was Yitzhak Lamdan, who joined Sarona in the Galilee and worked in farming and road building, while teaching Hebrew on the side. Others were Avraham Shlonsky, who joined Gdud Ha-Avoda (the ‘Labor Battalion’) in Nuris (Ein Harod) together with his girlfriend, Lucia; and Luba Alami who joined Havurat Ha-Emek, another workers’ group in Ein Harod. In the early years of the Third Aliyah, almost a dozen poets settled in Eretz Yisrael, leaving their imprint on the poetry of the country and the culture of the pioneers.

The lyrical story Eretz Yisroel: nostalgia

While the Third Aliyah was at its peak, UZG did not publish a single poem or article expressing belonging, empathy or any kind of feeling towards the pioneering enterprise in Eretz Yisrael. He had just discovered Polish modernism in poetry and the fine arts, and his interest lay in meeting with Jewish and Polish modernists. He actively participated in the literary evenings

9. Most prominent were (a) the Hehalutz movement, active mainly in Russia. Most of them were members of Tzeirei Tzion (Youth of Zion), who saw themselves as the spearhead of the Zionist movement, serving as a trailblazer for the rest of the camp. Because of the high physical and emotional demands, some thought that Hehalutz should not accept married people on the assumption that they would be unable to dedicate themselves to the cause; and (b) Hashomer Hatzair, active mainly in Galicia – a movement with solid ideological underpinnings that earmarked most of its members for agricultural work. Hashomer Hatzair groups were a kind of substitute for the parental home, a communal model that was also preserved after aliyah.

10. See A. Lipsker (introduction, editing and annotation), ‘Igrot Yitzhak Lamdan’, in Gnaim 7 (New York and Tel Aviv: Yisrael Metz Foundation and Asher Barash Gnaim Institute affiliated with the Hebrew Writers Association, 1998), pp. 37–126. Many of the letters were sent to Avraham Shlonsky, who was living in Ein Harod at the time.

11. Hagit Halperin claims that Shlonsky did not join Gdud Ha-Avoda for ideological reasons, but more out of a desire to experience authentic pioneering life. See H. Halperin, Ha-Maestro [The Maestro], (Tel Aviv University: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2011), p. 128.


in Lvov devoted to readings of expressionist and futuristic poetry, and had grown increasingly close to the Jung Idysz group in Lodz.

Nevertheless, a short lyrical-autobiographical story published in Togblatt in September 1919 called ‘Eretz Yisroel’ is worthy of mention. It revolves around childhood scenes permeated with love and longing for the Land of Israel.14 The world of the child narrator is full of details alluding to the connection to Eretz Yisrael and Jerusalem: earth from the Land of Israel dumped on the body of his dead grandfather from a little fabric bag; a skullcap with a silver Star of David crocheted in the centre encircled by the words ‘If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither’, and more. The child’s perspective intertwines with the critical eye of the adult narrator as he describes how he burst into tears at hearing his father say: א יי יד טא טא dofטסן, א יי יד מוז געדענקען (‘A Jew must never forget, a Jew must remember’). Later he says to himself:

האָז יי יד מיִּשְׁאָל מסַּה / אָז בַּזְזָרָה יִּמְצָא אָז בַּכְּלִמָּה נַעַר רַאו
פַּאָל / רבַּא לַמְּנָה אָז בַּרְזְחוֹת רַאו
אָז / בַּאֲבָנִי מִצְוָה אָז לַמְּנָה אָז
שַּׁאָר מַרְכָּז
אָז פַּרְצָן נַעַר פַּאָל / אָז פַּרְצָן מִיְּמָה הזַר

The Land of Israel is far, far away
But my longing goes further. I don’t ask the people. I ask my heart.

What this seems to be saying is that people tend to think of Jerusalem as some remote and intangible object of longing to which a Jew turns in prayer, rather than some concrete place that they aspire to travel to and live in. The statement ‘I don’t ask the people. I ask my heart’ opens the door to the opposite approach. In pragmatic terms, the next step would be aliyah. However, this idea is not developed in the text, and the words ‘Eretz Yisrael’ are never mentioned again in UZG’s poems or articles until 1923.

In 1921, UZG published his third book, מפישטו (Mephisto), which brought him great acclaim. This lengthy poem (54 chapters and close to 1,900 lines of verse) reflects the nihilistic picture of a world that has been drained of values and belief in God. Stepping in to fill the vacuum is Mephisto, a satanic character who spreads pessimism and despair, wars, disease and loneliness.

and causes man to doubt that happiness can ever be achieved. Mephisto also contains no mention or allusion to the Eretz Yisrael experience. The thematic focus is on the feelings of the modern European who cannot accept the absurdity of existence, and whose confusion and despair lead to apocalyptic fears of impending cosmic destruction, of Weltende. One reviewer called Mephisto the ‘most authentic record of the period, especially for the Jews’, but the motifs, as we have said, are universal, and there is nothing in it that is specific to the Zionist enterprise in Eretz Yisrael.

Affiliation with modernist Jews in Warsaw

In the second half of 1921, UZG moved from Lvov to Warsaw, which had become a magnet for writers and culture lovers from Russia, Galicia and provincial towns in Poland. The major newspapers, publishers and printers were headquartered in Warsaw, and the city was the centre of literary life for Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish-Jewish writers. The Association of Jewish

16. B. Karlinius, ‘Bein ha-shmashot – Literarishe natitze: Mefista’, Der Moment, 8 July 1921. In 1922, when he was in Warsaw, UZG published a second edition of Mephisto with only slight revisions. The book was handsomely printed with a portrait of UZG by the constructivist artist Henryk Berlewi.
17. In a manuscript in the poet’s archive (UZG Archive 2:2280), UZG describes Eyma Gedola Ve-Yare’ah (A Great Fear and the Moon) as his first Land of Israel book, calling it the ‘Hebrew brother of Mephisto’. While the book was in its final stages, he seems to have reached a decision that once he was bidding farewell to Europe and its cultural world, it was also time to reject the gloomy nihilism of Mephisto in favour of a productive optimism inspired by faith and vision. On this unpublished manuscript, see T. Wolf-Monzon, ‘Petakh davar to Eyma Gedola Ve-Yare’ah – Ars poetica gluya usmuyah al reka bikoret oyenet’ [Prologue to A Great Fear and the Moon – Open and hidden art poetica in the wake of hostile criticism], Khulyot: Journal of Yiddish Research 6 (Autumn 2000), pp. 213–31.
18. For authentic testimony of the centrality of Warsaw in Jewish literary life, see M. Ravitch, Sefer Ha-Ma’asiyat Shel Khaiyai (trans. M. Jungman; Tel Aviv: American Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 377–94. Ravitch wrote excitedly about his feelings on his first day in the city: ‘Yiddish writers the world over, all those who are serious about their great mission, are coming to Warsaw. Warsaw is becoming the center of Yiddish literature… Yiddish literature will conquer the world… For me, this is a spiritual rebirth. I have found a job that will take me right to the target’ (p. 392).
Writers and Journalists on 13 Tłomackie Street 20 drew a bohemian literary crowd and served as a kind of spiritual club. The Jewish theatre was housed in a building to the left of it, and across the street was the Association of Jewish Actors. The Jewish Writers and Journalists House was thus a seismograph of Jewish life in the city, attracting journalists and writers, members of Zionist and non-Zionist political parties, actors, critics and theatre lovers. 21

Upon his arrival in Warsaw, UZG joined the lively cultural activity at Tłomackie 13, and was a founding member of Di Khalyastre (“The gang”), a group of young Yiddish writers that included Melech Ravitch, Peretz Markish and J.J. Singer. Di Khalyastre organized literary get-togethers on Saturday mornings at which UZG read out his own poems and those of other modernists. These readings, called *ringen* (links), were held at the Central Theatre. They were a great success and boosted public interest in Yiddish poetry. 22

In September 1922, UZG began to publish a poetry journal of his own, *Albatros*. 23 Contributors to the first issue included Markish, Rawitch, Peretz Hirshbein and Esther Shumiatscher. The journal opened with a manifesto declaring its goals: to provide a platform for expressionist artists in the cruel, chaotic, blood-soaked modern world. The main facets of its poetic philosophy were also presented: a call for innovation and rejecting of convention and cliché; condemnation of the modern tendency to employ expressionism in an artificial, hackneyed way that merely hid lack of talent; a rejection of

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21. On the history of the Jewish Cultural Centre in Warsaw and how it developed from a marginal society in the 1880s into a vibrant institution that attracted dozens of Jewish writers and artists, see N. Cohen, Sefer, Sofer Ve’iton: Mercaz Ha-tarbut Ha-yehudit Bevarsha, 1918–1942 [Books, Writers and Newspapers: The Jewish Cultural Centre in Warsaw, 1918–1942], (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003).


23. On the significance of the name Albatros and the connection to the Baudelaire poem of that title, see A. Lipsker, Shir Adam Shir Kakhol [Red Poem, Blue Poem]: Sheva masot al shirat Uri Zvi Grinberg ushtayim al shirat Else Lasker-Schuler (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2010), pp. 21–3.
attempts to impose limits on poetry; and a call for introspection, to give voice to the naked and free human being.  

These are the principles that guided UZG’s Yiddish expressionism, which largely continued into his Eretz Yisrael poems. Next, he appealed to opponents of this new poetry, explaining the background and circumstances that led to the founding of Albatross: the scenes of horror etched in his mind from the battles of World War I, the global frenzy that followed the war and the sense of orphanhood, loss and detachment among the younger generation in particular.

UZG was thus rooted in the European experience, which affected his poetic outlook and visual thinking so profoundly, but he hooked up with the modernist bohemian crowd seeking a unique mode of expression that could fuse his Jewish world and the European avant-garde. His heart and mind were preoccupied with the universal existential problems that faced Europe after the war, and the great chasm that had opened up, socially, culturally and intellectually. His writing was fuelled by pessimism and despair that did not mesh with the spirit of faith and vision that characterized the pioneering revolution then taking place in Eretz Yisrael.

INRI
– אורי צבי פַ ארן צלם

Opening up to the pioneering enterprise

The second issue of Albatros came out in November 1922. In אורי צבי פַ ארן צלם INRI 26 UZG addresses the pioneering enterprise for the first time. Through the cruciform typography of the poem, he forces the reader into a face-to-face encounter with the cross. The poem is written as a monologue in which the poetic narrator speaks to the crucified Jesus, in a kind of metamorphosis from symbol to a concrete figure that restores his humanity. Jesus weeps bitterly and tries to free himself from the cross, but then goes back to being an immobile statue with a frozen stare. The empathy that the poet feels for Jesus as a man turns into a lament over the icon he has become, which strips him of this element of human suffering.  

27. For a discussion of this poem, see N. Stahl, Tselem Yehudi- Yitzugav shel Yeshu Besifrut Ha’ivrit
course of his national and historic soul-searching on the subject of Jesus, the narrator divides his Jewish brethren into three categories:

I have slaughtered brothers, I have brothers in the Red Hooligan Army and I have young brothers planting eucalyptus in the swamps of Hadera. Malaria is consuming them. But they have a sea, they have mountains, and the Kinneret, after all, is the Kinneret…

The description of the pioneers in this poem is interesting from several standpoints. Unlike his approach elsewhere, UZG does not rely on the exotic-romantic pictorial convention of the Orient that was entrenched in the European mind in the early twentieth century. This depiction is founded on concrete data that UZG received while he was in Warsaw about life in Eretz Yisrael at that time: pioneers draining malaria-infested swamps as jackals howled in the background, with the stunning view of Lake Kinneret as a kind of compensation or consolation for the hardships they suffered. There is no further expansion of these motifs in UZG’s Yiddish work. We find them only in his Eretz Yisrael poems, where components of the social reality – poverty, malaria and hunger – become the poetic building blocks that shape the lyrical reality and inner world, and serve as stimulants for psychological processes and spiritual experiences.

‘The dying spark of the Orient suddenly reignites’

The second issue of Albatros was confiscated by the Polish commissioner of culture. The controversy was set off by UZG’s prose poem רטוע עפל פון ויי-ביימער (Red apples from the trees of pain), published under a pseudonym, ‘Mustafa Zahib’. It was a collage of horrifying scenes based on the narrator’s experiences in World War I as a soldier who fought in the occupation of

shel Ha-me’ah Ha’esrim [Jewish Cross: Jesus in Twentieth Century Hebrew Literature], (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), pp. 37–42.

28. Most of the agricultural colonies founded at the beginning of the Third Aliyah period were in the Jordan Valley, the Jezreel Valley and the coastal plain of the Sharon District. The marshy land was very fertile, but malaria-ridden.

Albania. Depictions of the immorality and devastation of war are woven together with sacred Christian symbols. The commissioner, regarding this as blasphemy, barred further publication of the magazine. In response, Grinberg packed his bags and left for Berlin, although it seems likely that relocating to this city and joining its dynamic cultural scene was already in his mind before that.

During his short stay in Berlin, the young poet mingled with the lively modernist Bohemian crowd, where he developed a close relationship with the poet Else Lasker-Schüler. She became an important personal guide, helping him navigate the maze of Berlin expressionism. In July 1923 he published another issue of *Albatros*, no. 3–4, whose unique graphic design was clearly influenced by the German periodicals of the time. This issue is particularly significant for our purposes because it contains the first published reference to the possibility of migrating to Eretz Yisrael versus the alternative of remaining in Europe.

UZG alludes to this possibility in two texts: his poem *אין מלכות פון צלם* (In the kingdom of the Cross) and *ביהים שלוס: ווייטיקן־היים אויף שלואווישער טערד* (Pain-home on Slavic land). At the core of the first, a lengthy poem, is the speaker’s crippling fear of the cross, as a Jew living in Europe. Towards the end of the poem, the suffocation and terror dissipate as the action is transposed to another place—an imaginary place—the Orient:

Dress me in a billowing abaya, drape a talis around my shoulders,
Suddenly the extinguished spark of the East sets my feeble blood afire.
Take back the frock coat and the bow tie
The patent leather shoes I bought here in Eu-ro-pa
Sit me on a horse and give the command: Gallop! Take me far away to the desert
Give me back my dunes, Leave the boulevards behind, To the sands of the desert I go…

The frock coat, the bow tie and the lacquered shoes, metonyms for Europe, are replaced by Eastern apparel – an Arab abaya and a prayer shawl, and the thick forests of Europe by desert sands. Yet his portrayal of the Orient is a far cry from the reality of the Eretz Yisrael pioneers and clearly evokes the exotic Romantic images that were widespread in Europe.33

In the same issue of Albatros, UZG published a ‘farewell to Europe’ essay in which he adopts a personal introspective style. A careful reading shows the soul-searching and doubt that led up to his decision to migrate to Eretz Yisrael, as well as his ambivalent and complex feelings for Europe. The essay begins as follows:

It is not so simple to leave a homeland of torment like the one in which I was born and raised, and travel to a distant land with this whole bundle of Jewish misery and the painful essence of the kind of human being that is me… But this homeland of torment in the land of the Slavs spits out its Jewish inhabitants.

The collocations ‘homeland of torment’ and ‘homeland of affliction’ are a protest against Europe for persecuting and emotionally humiliating its Jews. At the same time, they emphasize that Europe was a homeland – a physical and spiritual place that was vital in shaping the poet’s cultural world and consolidating his visual thinking.

33. On this subject, see also D. Miron, Akdamot le-UZG, p. 38.
I am not Slavic. Hebrew blood, Eastern blood, fox blood flows in my veins. Certainly not Slavic. When the Russian muzhik goes to church in the morning, my father’s transparent body is wrapped in a prayer shawl, his head covered with a crown of phylacteries... Once I loved church music and church art. Today I am more circumspect.  

This ambivalence towards Europe as a homeland is given a surprising twist in the last sentence of the essay:

כַּחַסब נְתוֹנוּלַת וְרוֹטְנִית אָרוּחַ אֱלֹאָרַסְטְנָן. וְזָאָרְךָ בָּרֹחַ טְבוּבֶּיָרָךְ מְבְּרֵה– תַּש

I wanted to live in Europe but cannot. Will the East take me back?

Settling in Eretz Yisrael, it turns out, is not really a free choice. His heart’s desire and natural inclination are to remain in Europe — more a reflection of his emotional affinity for the culture and mentality of Europe than of his love of it as a geographical place. Nevertheless, the line ‘will the East take me back’ suggests that the Orient option is not entirely new to him, but rather an idea that was mulled over and possibly suppressed.

Decline of the West, rise of the East

This wondering whether the East will take him back, along with ‘suddenly the extinguished spark of the East / Sets my feeble blood afire’ (אין מלכות פון צלם), are evidence of a deeply rooted bond to the East in the narrator’s collective subconscious. During his years in Warsaw and Berlin, it lay dormant within him, but now sprang back to life. The concept of the East — Mizrah — is an integral part of Judaism and Jewish culture. East is the direction Jews face when they pray, in keeping with a verse in the Book of Psalms: ‘From east to west the name of the Lord is praised’ (113:3). But, even more so, Mizrah symbolizes a place that one yearns for, in particular the deep longing of the Jewish people in exile to return to Eretz Yisrael and Jerusalem.  

The concept of the ‘Mizrah’ is part of synagogue iconography:

35. In Eastern Europe and among Mizrahi Jews the eastern wall was often called shiviti, based on the verse ‘shiviti hashem lenegdi tamid’ (I am ever mindful of the Lord’s presence) (Psalms 16:8). Incorporated as a central motif in artistic plaques hung in Jewish homes and synagogues, this verse, or just the word shiviti, was a tangible symbol of the importance of the East in Jewish spiritual life. See A. Frank, ‘Eyzo emet me’eretz titzmakh? Al luakh mizrakh nadir veshurat psukim mistorit’ [On a rare Mizrahi plaque and a mysterious set of verses], Etmol 209 (February 2010), pp. 2–3.
The word is incorporated in Jewish ritual objects, as well as paintings, etchings and papercuts hung on the eastern wall or the prayer leader’s lecturn.\(^{36}\) Hanging a Mizrah plaque was a concrete visual reminder of the longing for Zion and national revival.

In early-twentieth-century Europe, the culture of the Far East was embraced as an alternative to Western culture, which was seen as decadent and rotten. The prevailing view was that the Western world was going downhill and its precarious psychological and mental state was irreversible. Every day, the newspapers carried stories about the falling birthrate, the doubling suicide rate, the rise in mental illness and the spiralling use of drugs and alcohol. There was a very clear sense that Europe was sick.

Viewed in this context, one begins to understand the great stir caused by Oswald Spengler’s \textit{The Decline of the West}, which appeared in German and Austrian bookshops towards the end of World War I.\(^{37}\) The book traced the decline of culture in Europe and America from 1800 onwards and offered a forecast up to the year 2000. It was a blend of painstaking historical analysis and subjective futuristic prophecy based on mathematics, metaphysics, biology, psychology, art and more. The main premiss of the book is that history is not the product of current events but a lengthy process that evolves over hundreds of years.

Instead of the diachronic approach, Spengler proposed a morphological analysis: a set of comparative criteria for cultures which posits that the organism of each culture follows a predictable cycle – birth, development, maturity, decay – which he metaphorically compared to the growth cycle in nature. Spengler regarded the social-cultural deterioration of the West as an irreversible process: there was no chance for revival. On the other hand, he saw the culture of the Far East as an appealing alternative with its authentic character, moral values and long-standing traditions. Spengler’s book reflected the chaos, confusion and pessimism of his time, which may be why it won such a wide readership. But the book also triggered a large body of writing by contemporaries who not only rejected its methodology but...

\(^{36}\) See B. Yaniv, ‘Migzeret ha-mizrah (Mizrah papercuts),’ \textit{Mekhkaray yerushalyim befoklor yehudi [Jerusalem Research on Jewish Folklore]}, 3 (June 1982), pp. 105–12.

and scientific value, but passionately refused to accept Spengler’s decree that the culture and spirit of the West were doomed.  

The Far East, with its vitality and great potential, was presented in Spengler’s book as the answer to the decline of the West. In this atmosphere, UZG’s Yiddish poetry painted the Orient in an exotic Romantic light, as the antithesis of the urban-industrial lifestyle of the West. At the same time, we see the first signs of the Zionist enterprise being promoted as an alternative to the instability of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and living in fear of the Christians.

Interestingly, one of Grinberg’s closest friends, Abba Geisinovich, later Ahimeir, wrote his doctorate at the University of Vienna on The Decline of the West. Bemerkungen zu Spenglers Auffassung Russlands (Observations on Spengler’s View of Russia), submitted by Ahimeir in 1924, explored Spengler’s historical outlook and compared it to the perception of Russia as a culture based on a literary analysis of Blok, Gorky, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov. Ahimeir accepted Spengler’s historical approach to the development of nations, with its distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’; that is, the idea that culture signifies a positive stage in the emergence of a nation whereas ‘civilization’ signifies the onset of stagnation and decline. At the same time, Ahimeir argued that Russia was a special case where culture developed in isolation, untouched by Western influence. Zionism was perceived as a revolutionary process that underwent a transformation from civilization to culture in its bid to sever the Jews from the Western Christian world and return them to their territorial and national homeland.

Ahimeir wrote this before he ever met UZG. However, the trajectory of their lives reveals a similar world-view and a mindset that was strikingly alike, harking back to shared cultural roots. In July 1924, Ahimeir arrived in Eretz Yisrael and followed a path that was much like Grinberg’s: he also published ideological musings and views on history in the Labor movement periodicals Kuntres and Hapoel Hatza’ir but, like UZG, refused to become a card-carrying member. He, too, tried to mingle in pioneer society and,

39. The doctoral dissertation of Abba Geisinovich (Ahimeir) is in the archives at Beit Abba in Ramat Gan, run by his son Yosef Ahimeir. Many thanks to Yosef Ahimeir for enabling me to read the dissertation and quote from it. See also Y. Aviv, Abba Ahimeir and Maximalist Revisionism in the Revisionist Movement, Ph.D. thesis, Bar Ilan University, 2008, p. 57.
like UZG, had no qualms about criticizing its political leadership. Taking his cue from the work of Spengler, he voiced misgivings about allowing leaders to turn liberalism and democracy into a political tool.

In 1927, Yehoshua Heschel Yeivin introduced Ahimeir to UZG, and the three became fast friends. The manoeuvre in February 1928 that led to their split from the Labor movement and the establishment of the Revisionist Labor bloc goes beyond the scope of this article, but it is not unlikely that it was inspired by the ideas expounded in *The Decline of the West* on the evolutionary development of nations in general and the Jewish nation in particular.40

Western decline viewed from Eretz Yisrael

How Spengler’s book was received in Eretz Yisrael, in the cultural circles of the Third Aliyah, is a fascinating subject in its own right. The newspapers of the time devoted broad coverage to the social developments in Europe and catered to the great interest in Far Eastern culture.41 Dozens of announcements appear for lectures and debates on *The Decline of the West*, and leading periodicals, among them *Hapoel Hatza’ir* and *Ma’abarot*, published translated chapters in instalments, synopses of the book and reviews.42 They portrayed the book as the *Mene, Mene, Tekel u-Pharsin* of Europe, thereby establishing a natural link, possibly subconscious, between Jewish apocalyptic literature, specifically the Book of Daniel, and this book in Europe.

A comparison of the articles about Spengler’s book in these Eretz Yisrael periodicals reveals an interesting phenomenon: alongside their exploration

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40. On 10–11 February 1928, the national convention of the Revisionist Labor movement took place at the farm colony of Nahalat Yehuda. The purpose of the convention was to establish a workers’ movement with a nationalist orientation as a counterbalance to the Histadrut labour federation. It was here that UZG, Yeivin and Ahimeir joined the Revisionists. From then on, the three met frequently, sowing the seeds for the formation of the maximalist ideological group known as Brit HaBiryonim, which was active from 1930 until the murder of Haim Arlosoroff in 1933.

41. In the early 1920s, *Hapoel Hatza’ir* published several articles on Mahatma Gandhi, reviewed books about China and Chinese culture, and ran a comprehensive series on the religious revival in India.

of the main themes in the book and attempts to grapple with his literary style, most of the articles set up an analogy between the concepts Spengler uses and his portrayal of the Orient as a cultural and moral alternative, and the ethos of the pioneers, who sought to create an alternative model of ethical living in Eretz Yisrael that was symbolized by the Jewish ‘Mizrah’. For example, S. Ben-Yosef of Kibbutz Beit Alfa declared that, spiritually and culturally, the processes in Europe and the pioneer experience in Eretz Yisrael were inextricably linked:

We, the babes of the House of Israel, who grew up amid the gentiles and absorbed their culture, also feel something of the powerful jolt going through the body of Western Europe under the blows of the sledge hammer known as Oswald Spengler.\(^{43}\)

Hugo Bergmann’s article makes an explicit analogy:

And what about us? Have we, sons of the East, left the declining West and returned to our Eastern homeland to preach the philosophy of decline? Can we build our house on the broken reed of European culture? What does the future hold? Will we pick through the ruins, too, or will we be the builders of a new era? Where are we heading – towards the sinking West or the rising East?\(^{44}\)

Shlomo Zemach, on the other hand, questions the relevance and legitimacy of the comparison:

I do not know how this happened, but Spengler’s historical insight is now being used as a principle and a guideline by our public, too. The phrase ‘decline of the West’ is uttered with secret glee, as if it were a synonym for the ascent of the East, our East. We ought to think carefully before comparing the Hebrew life being lived today to a decline as complicated, exaggerated and convoluted as that conceived and conjured up by Oswald Spengler.\(^{45}\)

**Zionism as an Eastern revolutionary movement**

A few days after the appearance of *Albatros* 3–4, and ten days before the opening of the Thirteenth Zionist Congress in Carlsbad in August 1923, *Ha’olam* published UZG’s article ‘Ha-tzionut ha-artila’it vehamekonenim beshuleha’ (Bare Zionism and those who mourn it). In the article, he criticized

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44. Bergmann, ‘Shki’aat hama’arav’, p. 224.
the compromising and melancholy spirit of the Zionist camp led by Chaim Weizmann, and heaped scorn on politicos for whom talk was foremost. He called for politics and diplomacy to be replaced by ‘bare’ (in the sense of pure and unadorned) Zionism – a natural, authentic Zionism based on emotional attachment to Eretz Yisrael that was not swayed by personal convenience or global public opinion.

This is an important article in that it provides the first exposition of UZG’s Zionist outlook and his unstinting support for the activist school of Zionism. At the same time, UZG dwells on another facet of the Orient: ‘Zionism is an Eastern revolutionary movement engaged in spiritual imperialism against various kingdoms yet aspires to become a kingdom itself.’ UZG sharpens the link between the Orient and the deliverance of the Jewish people through a reference to Isaiah 41:2:

Who has roused a victor from the East
Summoned him to His service?
Has delivered up nations to him
And trodden sovereigns down?
Has rendered their swords like dust
Their bows like wind-blown straw.

Redemption, physical and spiritual, begins in the Orient, and it is this redemption that will lead to the revival of Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael.

On 14 December 1923, ten days after his arrival in Eretz Yisrael, UZG’s article ‘Aley karka kan’ (Upon this land) was published in Kuntres, the organ of the Ahdut Ha’avoda party. This article was characteristic of his journalistic writing in the 1920s, not only in its programmatic approach but in its rhetorical style. The first part addresses the experience of persecution as a basic, existential condition. Everyone is against us: the Arabs, the Christians in Europe, the British. The second part focuses on the poet’s complicated relationship with Europe as he takes his first steps in Eretz Yisrael:

Did we not want to love this homeland of torment? Did we not gnaw the earth to stay put? Did we not pour thousands of pints of blood into the gutter to quench the whore’s thirst and silence her roar? Did we not shave our beard

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47. According to the commentators, the verse may be referring to Abraham, who came from Ur Kasdim, east of Eretz Yisrael, and founded the Hebrew nation. Another possibility is the deliverance of the Jews by Cyrus, king of Persia, who also hailed from the East.
and sidelocks and wear our holiday best to rejoice with the masses when the morning bells rang in their steeples? The Christians roared: Go east! Their land became alien for us, and terror filled our nights.

Even after settling in Eretz Yisrael and expressing clear support for the pioneering enterprise, UZG continued to call Europe the ‘homeland of torment’. Europe was the homeland and cultural wellspring, but it was also a place that aroused deep feelings of estrangement and alienation. The experience of otherness did not cancel out the need to be accepted, to belong. On the contrary, the more Europe pushed its Jews away, the harder they dug in their heels. They were willing to give up the hallmarks of Jewish identity and adopt the symbols of Christianity – anything, to be part of the homeland. But to no avail: ‘The Christians roared: Go east! Their land rejected us.’

At the end of the article, the poet comes across, in the spirit of German expressionism, as a Hebrew savage, bold and naked. He mocks the Romantic conceptual world represented in his text by a young female speaker. He pokes fun at the self-absorption, the pointless melancholy longings, the nostalgia evoked by scenes of snowy Europe etched in the mind. Instead, he calls upon his readers to adapt to the harsh reality of Eretz Yisrael, recognizing the vision embodied in the pioneering way of life. This conflict between the expressionist and the Romantic reflected the inner conflict experienced by UZG himself – the ‘pain of two homelands’ he continued to feel after settling in Eretz Yisrael.49 ‘Europe … sealed in my blood, an acrid fire in my bones’, he wrote in his article ‘Bamorad’ (Downward) published the following month in the New York-based Hebrew newspaper Ha-Doar.50

‘Bama’arav’: A farewell to Europe and its symbols

In his poem ‘Bama’arav’ (In the West), UZG returned to the themes and images of INRI אורי צבי פארן צלם, and developed them further. The first version of the poem, written while he was in Berlin, was published in the Berlin periodical Rimon as ‘Al drakhim bama’arav’ (On the road in the West).51 In the version that appears in A Great Fear and the Moon, UZG made many

49. Actually, this sense of being torn between two homelands was characteristic of Hebrew poets who migrated to Eretz Yisrael in the early twentieth century. The phrase ‘pain of two homelands’ first appears in a poem by Leah Goldberg, Ha-oren. See L. Goldberg, Shirim, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim/Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1973), p. 143.
changes that reflect his ideological and spiritual transformation after settling in Eretz Yisrael and becoming involved with the pioneers. Both the Yiddish poem and the Hebrew poem set up an analogy between Jesus of Galilee, the ‘crucified brother’, and UZG’s ‘younger brothers’ in Eretz Yisrael. In ‘Bama’arav’, this analogy is expanded into a three-way relationship between Jesus, the poet and the Galilean shepherds. Jesus, who preached in the Galilee but was turned into an icon in Europe, will bridge the gap between European mentality and the Eretz Yisrael experience of the shepherds in the Galilee, of which the poet will soon become part after making aliyah. UZG’s intensive preoccupation with the historic figure of Jesus as he probes the roots of his own identity leads him to the conclusion that he will never fully understand himself until he works out the secret of his emotional connection to Jesus.

‘Bama’arav’ consists of four parts, each a self-standing poem: ‘Mahalakh’, ‘Lefanav’, ‘Ha-ma’aneh’ and ‘Ein shai lapilegesh’. The first and last poems look outward, exploring the poet’s leave-taking from Europe and its symbols, while the middle poems look inward, presenting a conversation with Jesus as a cross looms behind him. The poems are linked structurally and rhetorically: each raises an argument that leads to the next one. ‘Mahalakh’ portrays longing for the Ganges as a metaphor for purification from the ills of the West, versus Eretz Yisrael as a Hebrew alternative to the Orient.

On the roads in the West, looking outward to the edge of the continent where the land of Europe ends … At the Holy Ganges a man like me on the run but Christian from birth bends to imbibe purity… And I to a Hebrew stream shall go to refresh my eyes sick of the sight of crosses.52

The sunrise represents the tidings of Eretz Yisrael, and the sunset the decline of the West from which the poet seeks to detach himself. Whereas the light of the European sun is consumed by the smoke of factory chimneys, the sunrise in Eretz Yisrael is colourful as roses in bloom and brings forth the jubilation of nature – the call of the eagle, the dance of the waves, the joy of the sky.

Although he makes his choice – ‘time for the Orient has come’ – the poet’s emotional conflict is not entirely resolved. He is still perturbed by thoughts that the East is not his natural place, that settling there does not ‘burn in his bones’, and that he needs to work on his sense of belonging. On the eve of his aliyah, he feels uncomfortable about the future encounter with the shepherds of the Galilee, tanned by the Eastern sun. In ‘Lefanav’ he shares his worries with Jesus, who went through the opposite ordeal when the Church plucked him against his will from the East and transplanted him in the declining West:

What shall I say in Galilee, crucified brother, if I come and find the shepherds of Galilee tanned and dreamy-eyed and they see me in European garb no trace in my eyes of the blaze of an Eastern sunrise Just broken fragments of the sunset: dark blood.

‘And these are the poet’s foundations here’

In an essay entitled ‘Ve’elu yesodot lameshorer kan’ (And these are the poet’s foundations here), UZG sets out his *ars poetica* as a poet-pioneer and explores the political and spiritual influence of living in Eretz Yisrael on the creative and literary process.\(^{34}\) His unusual use of the conjunctive *vav* – ‘ve’elu’ (and these) in the title – may reflect the poet’s psychological state upon immigrating to Eretz Yisrael, a consequence of the mental ‘reorganization’ that such a move required. As a member of the school of Diaspora poets who wrote in Yiddish, he admits that his strong emotional ties to the visual world of Europe stifled him and made it hard to find a fresh, clean voice to portray the reality of Eretz Yisrael: ‘We bound ourselves to the ropes of the bells in the bellfry and pulled them / the jingle of the reindeer ringing in our black sabbath and their red feast day.’ This was not just a personal problem unique to UZG but one that affected a whole generation: collective, shared experiences of suffering, anxiety and loneliness echoed louder than individualized experience in Eretz Yisrael. The poet remained steeped in the conceptual language of Europe and its narrative models, which took precedence over local imagery.

As clear evidence of this, UZG brings the response of the writers and journalists of his day, including the newspapers in Eretz Yisrael, to Spengler’s book *The Decline of the West*:

> The decline of the West, the revolution, the misery of the collapsing human race, like one giant machine that has ceased to function – in every country people have written about it, less in ink than etched in stone. It is a fact, beyond dispute. But our thrashing around in blood and brains, the tribulations of every Jew born in Europe who has gone East, the sanctified red poverty, day in and day out – not a Hebrew word has been written about it, even in watered down ink.

**Epilogue**

About half a year after his aliyah, UZG published a poem titled ‘Yerushalayim shel mata’ (Terrestrial Jerusalem).\(^{35}\) It appeared in the last section of *A Great Fear and the Moon* as the third poem in a series portraying life in Eretz Yisrael.

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\(^{35}\) Idem, ‘Yerushalayim shel mata’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 61–8. The poem was originally published in two instalments in *Hapoel Hatza’ir* (18 April 1924; 1 July 1924).
This poem illustrates perhaps more than any other the process of adaptation to the cultural climate of the Third Aliyah and the localization of UZG’s poetry. The metaphoric use of language, with its abundance of oxymorons, shows how even the lowliest materials can contain sublime seeds of poetic vision. These materials not only add a naturalistic dimension to the social reality of the pioneers, plagued by poverty, malaria and hunger, but become a basic structural component of the poetic reality and the poet’s inner world. In ‘Yerushalayim shel mata’, UZG reiterates his desire to become more deeply immersed in the pioneering experience and an integral part of it: ‘Oh, to be a poet, wandering always among you, from Ashdod to Metulla, beneath prickly pear and shady palm’. Yet, even after he becomes the poet and spokesman of the pioneers, he remains torn between two homelands. His declarations of brotherhood and belonging are accompanied in this poem by a confession that he has come too late. The sense that he has missed out by not making aliyah earlier gives him no rest. It follows him around like a sin demanding repentance:

I admit, you were stronger than I, even back in the Diaspora
You preceded me, with your burning fire-dream: East – and you went
And my dream came belatedly, like a sinner’s body purified
I tore a heart from its chamber and poured it into me.

Transcribed from the Hebrew by Gila Brand