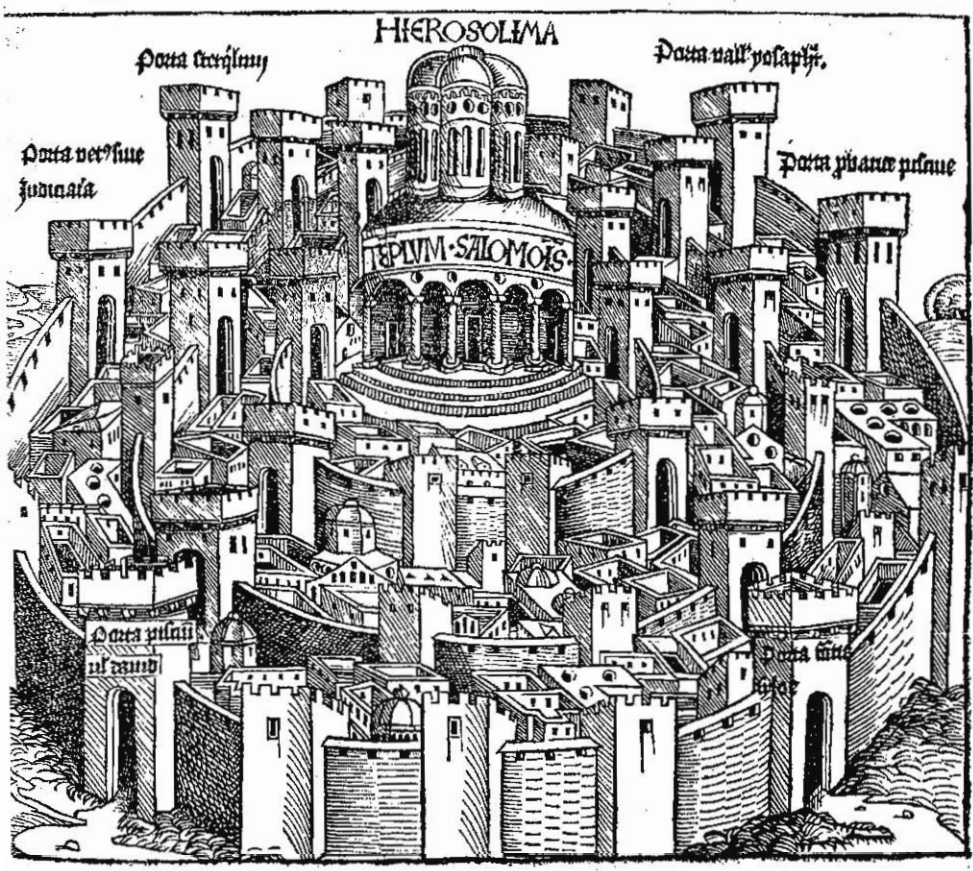


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Uri Zvi Greenberg: Conservative Revolutionarism and National Messianism

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Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981) has an ambiguous status in the annals of the modern Jewish national idea. In most of the literature concerned with the Zionist idea he is hardly mentioned,¹ and if he does rate a brief reference he is spoken of as belonging to the framework that is called 'the Revisionist ideology' or as one of the sharper articulators of the messianic-national stream within this framework, and even as one of the fathers of 'Zionist Fascism'. Among his admirers Uri Zvi Greenberg is granted not only the title of being the greatest Hebrew poet of our time, and even beyond our time, but also that of a great and revolutionary innovator in the history of Zionism, a veritable prophet. His poetry has been appreciated and evaluated not only for its quality and power, but for its thematics and for the prophecies spoken in it.

Poet-historiosopher, poet-prophet, poet-legislator – these are only some of the titles, only a sampling of the honorifics he has been accorded. Greenberg, then, has been considered the greatest innovator in the annals of the Zionist idea, and one who has read Jewish history wholly and correctly: hence he was able to warn of the approaching disaster and to envisage the redemption.

There is no doubt, therefore, that in the character, the life, and

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¹ He is not mentioned, for example, in Shlomo Avineri's book, *The Zionist Idea*, Tel Aviv, 1980 (in English: *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*, New York, 1981).

the great and prolific poetic output of Greenberg, in Yiddish and in Hebrew, there has been brought together one of the great *mythoi* of modern Hebrew poetry. Many admirers and followers raised the banner of his greatness in the thirties, and have since become loyal and zealous apostles of his poetry and thought. Those who rejected his national and historic thematics recognized him as the one great poet of his generation and as a superior thinker. They sought to distinguish between his poetic world and his ideological and political world – a distinction Greenberg himself rejected vigorously and categorically. From the position of a slandered and taboo soothsayer, Greenberg became a highly admired and respected poet even in circles which were not affiliated with his political and ideological camp – especially after 1967. Greenberg, we should recall, was not only a poet-ideologue; his influence on his contemporaries did not derive only from his poetry. Large portions of his poetry, especially of his early creations, were not known to many of his admirers, and his modernist poetry was beyond their comprehension. Only a defined segment of his poetry was known and influential, particularly his books *Ezor Magen u-ne'um Ben ha-Dam* (A Zone of Defense and Address of the Son of Blood) of 1930, and first and foremost *Sefer ha-Kitrug ve-ha-Emunah* (The Book of Arraignment and Faith) of 1936. On the other hand, Greenberg was a prolific publicist, who published a great number of articles and essays on current issues, in newspapers in Poland and in Eretz Israel, and was also very active in politics, a delegate at the conventions of the Revisionist movement, a propagandist, a speaker on behalf of the movement at public assemblies and conferences in Poland, and so on. Greenberg was thus a poet with a sense of mission that was profound, high, sweeping, and powerfully self-confident, one who did not remain secluded in a poetic ivory tower but 'descended to the street' and took part in the various public and political debates which were agitating the Yishuv and Zionism at that time.

Since the seventies his name has recurrently been linked with the messianic-mystic thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Cohen Kook (1865–1935) in the creation of a new topical and activist messianic-national idea. From a perspective such as this, the disciples of Uri Zvi Greenberg, who until the seventies had remained somewhere at the margins of Zionist ideology, linked up with the disciples of Rabbi Kook, in order to create a far-reaching upheaval in the Zionist movement and in Jewish national thought. Greenberg's messianism and Kook's messianism, though born of different intellectual and spiritual needs, conjoined, as it were, in the rupture and the swell that occurred after 1967, in order to produce a new Jewish national-religious movement, an activist messianic religiousness. It is no wonder that Greenberg's apostles, with Dr. Israel Eldad at their head, saw in Gush Emunim a group which embodied the long-desired ideal type of the religious-na-

tional Jew, one who places sovereignty over the 'whole' national territory at the head of his priorities in his world picture.

Disregard of Uri Zvi Greenberg's teaching and its place in the history of Zionist thought, or superficial treatment of it, constitute an error in the evaluation of its importance and its place. The definition of him as a 'court poet' of the Revisionist movement or as one of the spiritual fathers of 'Jewish Fascism' originated in simplistic ideological and party-political polemics. There is no need to be taken in by the exaggerated evaluations of Greenberg's public status or by the image of him as the sole prophet in his generation, a dedicated prophet who does not content himself with a correct reading of current historical events but also urges and calls to action, outlines a spiritual platform and shows the way to the movement or the nation, in order to appreciate the distinctive place of Greenberg in the history of Zionist thought.² It was Greenberg who turned the understanding of Zionism as a messianic movement into a political ideology and tried to propose not only a program for a new understanding of Jewish history, but also new guiding principles for Zionist activity.

Uri Zvi Greenberg's interpreters, of course, often emphasize his authentic 'Jewish' character, his being the spiritual heir of Israel's prophets (and especially of the historical eschatology of their prophecy), of the preachers of redemption and of eschatological literature. Any attempt to find in Greenberg sources of nourishment or inspiration in the intellectual world of the Europe of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is met with resistance and furious rejection. Parallels of this kind, among commentators unsympathetic to Greenberg, have generally amounted to no more than the noticing of a similarity between him and various European writers and poets who tended towards militant nationalism and fascism. The concept 'fascism' has become an all-encompassing notion which covers up complexities and blurs the uniqueness of diverse intellectual phenomena.

In actual fact we have before us two different questions: the first concerns Greenberg's real sources of inspiration; the second deals with parallels and with the similarity between his thematics and that of other poets and thinkers among his contemporaries, on the background of the circumstances of the period. Greenberg himself never denied the existence of outside influences, and never rejected parallels between him and other poets and thinkers: Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish messianic-national poet, for example – just as he never denied the influences of expressionism and futurism on his poetics.³ The parallels and similarities between him and earlier or contemporary poets and men of letters appear

² See my 'Uri Zvi Greenberg's Status as an Eschatological Poet', in: *The Mythologies of the Zionist Right Wing*, Tel Aviv, 1986, pp. 180–200 (Hebrew).

³ See David Weinfeld, 'Uri Zvi Greenberg and Futurism', *Siman Kriah*, April 1983, pp. 344–358 (Hebrew).

in such sharp and clear colors that no claim of 'originality' or 'organic Jewish authenticity' can blur them. It is evident that we have here a distinctive case, but not a unique one, of a poet and a poetry which have become a kind of 'religion' for a circle of admirers, a poetry and a thought which present a picture of the past and the present, which call for redemption, and draught a visionary picture in which an imaginary golden age from the historical past meets up with a mythic-allegoric golden age, enveloped in mysticizations, which belongs to the near future. Greenberg in his poetry offered his own interpretation of Jewish history and of 'Judaism', worked simultaneously on idealization on the one hand and on penetrating criticism on the other of the Jewish present, and called for a 'hastening of the end' and for activist-messianic action in the present; his poetry was not intended to be a kind of 'literary', 'poetic' world, and was not read as such by his followers. Its intention was to translate the idea into political terms. The intention of his 'Mystical *Hebraerthum*' was not to offer the present a utopian picture of a whole and perfect future, but to be translated into an ideological and political platform. From this point of view, therefore, Greenberg did not need his apostles and his interpreters in order to turn the metaphysical reality of his poetry into a political platform. He himself traversed the path from a consciousness of metaphysical despair and penetrating cultural criticism of existing conditions to an activist ideology serving a political movement; he was a conservative revolutionary, the greatest conservative revolutionary in the history of modern Jewish nationhood.

Greenberg's cultural pessimism (*Kulturpessimismus*) was directed, during the mid-twenties, against the Jewish bourgeoisie and Jewish clericalism; these appeared to him as a lifeless and spiritless body, one unable to take part in a movement of total cultural resurrection. The participants in the Fourth Aliyah, who were part and parcel of the Jewish petite-bourgeoisie in the Diaspora, were not fitted for the great spiritual metamorphosis which had to be undergone by each single new immigrant (*oleh*) and by the entire Jewish/Eretz-Israeli society as a whole. It was the Hebrew *chalutz* (pioneer) of the Third Aliyah who embodied the new Hebrew-Jew and the messianic-national disparity and breakthrough.

California is not Eretz Israel, and it is not because of its golden veins that we worship her soil
but because through her we hope to mend the flaws in our souls.
We want to establish a government there, a government of justice and honesty, the Kingdom of God.
Not a heavenly kingdom, though, that encourages idlers and flatterers,

nor a heavenly kingdom based on robbery and injustice,
or a kingdom that sets nation against nation, and man
against his brother,
but a kingdom of God, founded on physical work and the
labor of one's hand.

The Army of Labor 1927

Aliyah to Eretz Israel could not be immigration in flight from distress or oppression alone, but had to be the outcome of a rebirth. Eretz Israel was the leaving behind of Exile, a leaving behind which was not merely territorial-physical, but spiritual:

It is good that men with capital come, but woe unto us if pioneers don't come. The pioneer is not primarily in favor of the conquest of land and the establishment of Jewish agriculture, the pioneer is also the son, who will have to be the father of a new Hebrew son. The pioneer is the crucible in which the blood, in all its kinds, is purified, and the child born from it will be *liberated*, already from birth...

It is from this, then, that his pronouncement stems that in Eretz Israel will be established the 'Kingdom of Heaven', and not 'California in Eretz Israel', and that the process of establishing a new national ambience would last a hundred years. In other words, Greenberg placed cultural redemption – actually, metamorphosis – at the center of his world-picture – an eschatological picture of the creation of a new Hebrew man, somewhat like the new Soviet man who was born out of the storm of the Bolshevik revolution. Hence the central role he assigned to Hebrew poetry and to the Hebrew poet in the history of the national renaissance: the poet is the evangelist of the Messiah and the evangelist of the messianic period, both because true poetry knows how to read the signs of the times correctly and also because poetry has the power to form culture anew and to breathe a new soul and spirit into the national body.

The expressionist criticism of petite-bourgeois and clerical mentality was replaced towards the end of the twenties by a much more trenchant criticism of Socialist-Zionist ideology and of 'Zionist Constructivism'. Now Greenberg saw in these a combination of philistinism and of national spiritual degradation, cosmopolitan alienation, a form of Diaspora debasement and assimilation. He rejected Socialist-Zionism not because it was Communistic; Greenberg now rejected Communism because it was internationalistic and anti-Semitic, but nevertheless found in Communism positive elements: a consciousness of ideological mission and a willingness to realize a total ideology by means of intellectual and political coercion. For him as for other conservative critics, Communism was a demon, but at the same time a model to be imitated, of an ideology which had learned how to lead a popular move-

ment, to become a *Lebensgefuehle*, a new mass religion, and to transform reality at its base. Greenberg rejected Zionist Socialism because he believed it had become 'petite-bourgeois' and had rid itself of Bolshevik-dictatorial-messianic fervor. In this way, therefore, Greenberg's cultural criticism united anti-socialism with anti-liberalism, a strong objection to democratic and liberal values with a yearning and longing for the re-creation of an organic Jewish *Volksthum*. Greenberg, like Mickiewicz, wove visions of the redemption of his people, but eliminated from his messianic vision the universalistic elements present in Mickiewicz's messianism⁴. Like Walt Whitman, from whose poetics he learned, he had visions of the renaissance of a new nation, but he was at a tremendous distance from the popular and democratic world view of the great American poet. More than anything, then, he was close to the conservative critics of culture in Germany or in pre-revolutionary Russia. For him, as for them, the revolt against modernity was not against technology or science, but against all those post-revolutionary forces which were apprehended as disintegrating and splitting up the organic Jewish experience.

In this way, Greenberg gave the Jewish experience in the Diaspora a description that was ambivalent: on the one hand it was a passive and oppressed experience, a society planted deep in a soil that didn't belong to it, often expelled from it and scattered spiritlessly, a society living under a constant threat of destruction; but on the other hand it was an organic cultural-national-social experience, closed and complete, into which the modern world had burst, injuring its 'purity', tearing and splitting it into particles. The role of the Jewish-Hebrew state was, accordingly, to recombine the particles into a single organic cultural experience, to purge out of it the destructive and disintegrative foreign influences of the Enlightenment, the Emancipation, of Liberalism and Socialism, and to return to the organic and autarkic sources of 'Judaism'. In this central point, too, Greenberg was participating in the conservative-revolutionary trend prevalent in various circles in Europe from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, a trend which in each country and each culture was born out of specific conditions, but embodied a similar pattern of response to modern society and culture.⁵

Greenberg's affinity with the thinkers and men of letters who called for a national renaissance in terms of a conservative ro-

manticism, or of mystical romanticism, is evident. Greenberg could not content himself with calling for the formation of an autonomous Jewish society in Eretz Israel or even with the establishment of a state; his vision of collective redemption found embodiment in the dim concepts of the renaissance of an organic nation that was interwoven with threads of blood, historical, and cultural ties; a nation whose relation to its national territory was one of *adnut*, (lordship), (parallel to the *Herrschaft* of German national-territorial mysticism), the goal of which was to establish not a state but a kingdom, the Third Kingdom of Israel: a reproduction of historical reality – actually, of a visionary historical reality – and, paradoxically, a realization of messianic-historic visions born in periods of national crisis and destruction. Not a state, then, but a 'kingdom' – a quiddity transcending 'the state' or even 'the nation', as a combination of both.

Like critics of culture in Germany or in Russia – he saw in the rationalistic 'West' the sword which threatened the wholeness and unity of the authentic national organism, against which they opposed a model or utopia of anti-rationalistic 'integralism'. Like them he (and some of his disciples after him) became a typical representative of the anti-intellectual intellectuals, who saw in the Enlightenment, and in the intellectual (or the academic) a potential enemy, and who opposed 'cosmopolitan' rationalism with 'Vision', 'Will', and 'Passion'.

From an internal 'Jewish' perspective, Greenberg's national-messianic conception posited several important innovations, and thus created a correspondence and a similarity of content between it and other contemporary national-messianic outlooks. It burst out of the 'traditional' messianic conceptions and created a new type of messianism – 'nihilistic' and religious at once. The image of the Messiah was transformed in Greenberg's poetry: the body which activated the messianic movement and the utopian reality appeared at times in the figure of a man – a symbolic figure – and at times in the figure of an avant-garde political group. The historical period was described as a period of messianic labor pains, but in order that its potential be realized – and the historic moment not be missed – what was needed was a leadership of a messianic character, a human initiative. In any case, Greenberg stripped his messianism of any element or grain of the universalist dimension which exists in the historical Jewish messianic tradition. His messianic conception was decisively national and territorial. The Jewish people was posited in the center of the international arena of events, as this arena's principal object and subject. The nation had no mission to the gentiles, no destiny among the nations, other than establishing its own 'kingdom' and lordship. The messianic renaissance was not meant to be a period in which the morality of the prophets would rule, a period of return to religion; the redemption itself was not dependent on such

⁴ See Victor Weintraub, *Literature as Prophecy: Scholarship and Martinist Poetics in Mickiewicz's Parisian Lectures*, The Hague, 1959; Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland*, Oxford, 1982. On Greenberg and Mickiewicz, see my article, 'Between Pilsudski and Mickiewicz: Policy and Messianism in Zionist "Revisionism"', in: *The Mythologies of the Zionist Right Wing* op. cit., pp. 23–25.

⁵ For parallels see, for example, Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology*, Berkeley (University of California Press) 1962; Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy*, Oxford, 1975.

a return and was not intended to create a society ruled by religious precept (*halacha*).⁶ It was to be a national-territorial renaissance dependent on spiritual renaissance, on the rebirth of 'the spirit of the nation' and of its vitality, which would create, and at the same time need to bring about, a similar spiritual renaissance. The utopian intellectual profile of such a renaissance is not clear; in order to outline its portrait there is a need for a series of vague and dim slogans. But in the final analysis this utopia is a popular Jewish society with a distinctive 'soul' (*Volkseele*) living under the yoke of the Torah and its precepts, on the condition that the *halacha* be reformed, in a kind of second Mount Sinai event (or by a new charter), to become – as in 'ancient times' – the code of a national, independent, territorial Jewry. This messianic redemption would be realized not by 'hasteners of the end' but by realistic zealots who were full of faith; not by *ba'alei-teshuvah* (penitents) and observers of the Torah, but by nationalist zealots.

Greenberg's theogeography is similar, in principle, to the theogeography and theopolitics of Martin Buber: the affinity of the People of Israel to the Land of Israel is not similar to the affinities other nations have to their homelands, but is a 'mythic' affinity. But the political and intellectual conclusions drawn by the two thinkers from the same point of departure are diametrically opposed. For Buber, this unique affinity to the Land does not entail political sovereignty or defined borders, whereas for Greenberg the organic affinity between the nation and its territory must find expression in political sovereignty without any reservations, in the borders of the Promise – the borders of the Empire under David and Solomon – and any acceptance of conditions for this sovereignty (for example, reliance on the Balfour Declaration or on international recognition) is a violation of the sovereignty and independence of the 'national subject'; furthermore, the presence of another nation in the same territory, especially of a nation which has national claims of its own over this territory, is not only an injury to political sovereignty but is an attack on that organic-mythic affinity which exists between a nation and its homeland, which in this case is both its natural homeland and its Promised Land.

The similarity between Greenberg's world-view and other radical-conservative world-views is both structural and thematic. But

⁶ In the idea of the return to religion there was an important component of the zealot ideology of the time of the Second Temple, and return to religion was grasped as a necessary way to hasten the approach of the Redemption. There is a crucial difference between this conception and Uri Zvi Greenberg's modern traditionalism and religiosity. This was what created the possibility of a meeting between the messianic dialectics of Kook, which in practice manifested a pragmatic attitude towards secular nationalism, and the 'nihilistic' conception of Greenberg, which did not see in the establishment of a halachic state a condition or an end of the Redemption, or saw the creation of a 'religious' Jewish state as the work of non-religious people.

anyone examining the development of a world-view in a specific historic context in which it appeared and became accepted must give consideration to its embodiments in content, in message and in meaning, and especially in those places where an idea, a sense of the world, is translated into a program. From expressionistic criticism of the hollow values of the European bourgeoisie and from an eschatology of a universalistic character, Greenberg moved to a militant national eschatology as an emotional and intellectual response to Polish anti-Semitism – in which he saw the embodiment of Christian anti-Semitism of a meta-historical character – from the year 1929 on. He saw a reincarnation of this murderous anti-Semitism in the Arabs' violent resistance to Zionism. Greenberg's national messianism spoke in terms of 'historic mission', of national power and vitality and so on, but in the twenties and thirties this stemmed from a sense of existential dread and a consciousness of weakness, and certainly from a basic condition of national weakness. His eschatology grasped the sufferings and the threat of real extinction as a historical shock which had to give birth to complete redemption. The possibility that the existential condition of the Jews in the Diaspora would exist also in Eretz Israel, the historical homeland, was apprehended as a horrible threat and also as an insupportable injury to the dignity and the value of the collective-national subject, in the very place where this dignity was supposed to become fully actualized.

The national crisis and the cultural breakdown to which Greenberg was responding were thus different in essence to the crises which gave birth to the conservative romanticism and the revolutionary conservatism in Tzarist Russia from the forties of the previous century onwards, or in the Germany of Bismarck, and afterwards. From a subjective point of view, as an outside observer, it is of course possible to argue that in both instances the terrors were largely imaginary, the responses too extreme, and the alternatives proposed dim and utopian, and that in their transformations onto the political plane they gave birth to militaristic art and to political frenzy. But the outside observer – and all the more the outside observer who is nationally a Jew – cannot avoid deciding on the question: Are there indeed actual lines of similarity between the different realities out of which conservative revolutionarism and messianic nationalism grew in various countries? Greenberg's messianism was intended to extricate Zionism from what appeared to him as a cultural and political decadence which was endangering the existence of the nation and of the Yishuv, from Arab violence which was taking victims, through an eschatological reading of the historical situation and a sense of existential urgency. Greenberg was thus the sharpest critic from within of Jewish nationalism, which he sought – as he saw it – to raise to a higher level, but precisely where he sought to change his role from that of a critic of cultural behavior to that of a prophet of

the Six-Day War. The renewed meeting with Eretz-Israel gave the search for roots a new and more pressing significance. Each political and ideological group reacted according to its views and the literature too reacted in its own way, by acknowledging a type of Eretz-Israel story that is written in spoken Hebrew, located in the landscape of Eretz-Israel, placed in the present and related to the history of the land.