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Glorious, Accursed Europe

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Glorious, Accursed Europe.

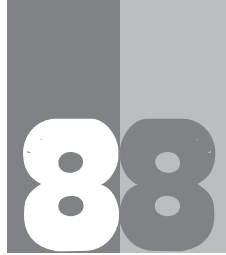
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I AM IN THE EAST, AND MY HEART IS IN THE WEST

*Judea has always seemed to me like a fragment
of the Occident misplaced in the Orient.*

HEINRICH HEINE,
“Geständnisse” (Confessions)¹

*Come, I will tell you, brothers, that not only our faces are
set to the East; the entire West travels eastward again.*

MORDECHAI ZEEV FEIERBERG,
*Whither?*²

*The Jewish people will become part of European
civilization or cease to exist entirely.*

NATHAN BIRNBAUM,
Ost und West (East and West)

On April 26, 1896, Herzl wrote to the Grand Duke Friedrich of Baden: “If it is God’s will that we return to our historic fatherland, we should like to do so as representatives of Western civilization, and bring cleanliness, order, and the well-distilled customs of the Occident to this plague-ridden, blighted corner of the Orient. We shall have to do this so as to be able to exist there, and this obligation will educate our people to the extent that they need it.”³

On September 21, 1898, he repeated: “The return of even the semi-Asiatic Jews under the leadership of thoroughly modern persons must undoubtedly mean the restoration to health of this neglected corner of the Orient.” According to him, this restoration would take place because the Jews would bring “civilization and order” with them and thereby alter the history of the region. They would be a “foundation of German culture in the Orient.”⁴ Germany’s patronage of the Zionist movement,

Herzl maintained, would permit Jews to love Germany: "If we should succeed in initiating an organized exodus of the proletarians to be settled, it would engage the interest of the German polity. Actually, it is an element of German culture that would come to the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean."⁵

By "thoroughly modern persons," Herzl was referring to the Jewish elite that had absorbed and internalized German culture. Herzl borrowed the classification of Jews as Asiatic from nineteenth-century anti-Jewish German literature, though he softened it and dubbed them "semi-Asiatic."

Moses Hess predated Herzl in this Zionist version of the white man's burden when he wrote: "It is well understood that we speak of a Jewish settlement in the Orient. We do not, however, mean to imply a total emigration of the Occidental Jews to Palestine. Even after the establishment of a Jewish State, the majority of the Jews who live at present in the civilized Occidental countries will undoubtedly remain where they are."⁶

Hess added that these Jews, "who have only recently broken their way through to culture and have acquired an honorable civic position, will not abandon the valuable acquisition so quickly even if the restoration of Judaea were more than a pious desire."⁷ If so, it was not "Asia that [would] regenerate Europe," as Gustave Flaubert wrote, but rather Europe that would "regenerate Asia."⁸

BETWEEN ASIA AND THE ORIENT

Three issues mentioned above pertain to the subject at hand. First, the majority of Europe's Jews are described as semi-Asiatics who would be led by an entirely modern elite, which had absorbed and internalized German culture, and which thus would be an "element of German culture" on the shores of the Mediterranean. Second, the Orient is described as a backward, neglected part of the world. And third, the Jews' return to the land of their forefathers in the Orient was intended to enable them not to shed their Europeanness, but to be European by choice. Not only did European Jews, whom Europe perceived as strangers, not perceive European culture as oppressive and wish to cast it off, but they undertook the mission of disseminating agents of European culture throughout the Orient.

But what was this "Orient"?

The Orient did not know itself as such; it was not aware that it was a single homogeneous entity until the West named and categorized it as the Orient, or the Middle East. The Arab Muslim world knew itself as *Dar*

al-Islam (the house of Islam) rather than as the Oriental world or the Arab world. “The Orient” was created as a name and categorization from the Eurocentric point of view, which attributed ontological characteristics that did not originate in religion to the followers of the Muslim faith. It should be noted that in Western literature, the Orient was not only the Muslim world: the name also referred to the Semitic nations of the ancient Near East, the cultures of Mesopotamia (and of ancient Egypt, which was not Semitic) as well as the Jews and Judaism of antiquity. These ancient cultures were described as the diametric opposite of Greco-Roman culture: Semitic culture was pitted against Indo-European (Aryan) culture. Orientalist expertise (*Orientalistik*) meant expertise in the Bible and the ancient Semitic languages, not just in Arabic. At times, the Orient was also divided into the biblical and the nonbiblical Orient.⁹ This terminology was accepted in Jewish literature; for example, Simon Dubnow titled the first part of his *History of the Jewish People*, published in 1923, “Orientalische Periode” (The Oriental period). In any case, within the nineteenth century’s categorization, the Jewish-Christian and Aryan-Semitic antinomies became more widespread and useful than the antinomy between the Orient and the West.

During the nineteenth century, the East-West antinomy found its way from European literature to Jewish literature, which employed the concept for its own purposes. These two imaginary geocultural regions—Asia and the Orient—also appeared in Jewish literature as denoting two homogeneous human cultural essences. The word “Orient” did not always refer to the (Arab or Ottoman) Muslim Orient; sometimes it meant a mythical, Semitic, or biblical Orient that was born of the imagination—an Orient depicted as a backward region awaiting salvation by the West, or, inversely, as an enlightened region awakened from a long slumber and destined to become the savior and hope of the West.¹⁰

There is a good deal of irony in the way Jewish columnists made use of the antinomy between the Orient and the West. European Jews, especially those who insisted on being considered Europeans for all intents and purposes, were described by German antisemites as *Orientalisches Fremdlingsvolk* (a foreign Asiatic people), dwelling in and polluting a continent which was not their own.¹¹ They claimed that the Jews were a nation whose origin lay in the Orient, and that its spirit and culture, which had been defined there, were fundamentally different from the spirit and culture of Europe’s Indo-European nations. The Jew was the enemy of humanity (that is, of the West), the French utopian Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

wrote in his diary in 1847; therefore it was “necessary to return this race to Asia or to destroy it.”¹² By “Asia,” he meant Semitic Asia rather than the Indo-European (Aryan) Asia. In Russian, the word *Aziat* (Азиат), which is the source of the common Hebrew pronunciation, was charged with negative connotations and indicated traits such as laziness, ignorance, and degeneration. The term acquired the same meaning in other European languages and made its way from these to Hebrew. The result was that nineteenth-century Hebrew literature contains more than a few scathing references to “idle, unruly Asiatics” and to an Asia “full of dark, rotten spirits.”¹³ “Asia,” according to the writer David Frischman, “was, for us, always a symbol of evil and darkness, of ignorance and trouble, to the extent that we called an evil deed an ‘Asian deed.’ Asia is the land to which we must arrive as intellectuals in every field and perfect in every science . . . the spirit of the Enlightenment in general flows eternally from East to West.”¹⁴ He therefore reasoned that it was necessary to guarantee that immigrants to Palestine would not assimilate with the Arabs, who were “Asians in the full sense of the word.”¹⁵ When Itamar Ben Avi, a journalist and the son of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, declared “we are Asiatics,” he was not, of course, referring to this “degenerate Asia.”

Within Jewish literature, there was a preference for terms such as the “Orient” and “the revival of the Orient” because, unlike the word “Asia,” the Russian word for Orient (*Vostok*) was not laden with negative connotations. In addition, there was a widespread fashion of “positive Orientalism”¹⁶ among German intellectual circles at the end of the nineteenth century, and the utopian Orient was not perceived negatively as it was under its Orientalist depiction in Britain and France—a depiction in which the Orient was a frozen, backward world inhabited by a society ruled for centuries by fatalism and fanaticism. Instead, it was considered the wellspring for a soul abundant in creative spirituality.¹⁷ Seemingly, therefore, the call to “return to the Orient” and the description of Arabs as “our brothers by blood, members of the Semitic tribes”¹⁸ attested to the fact that Zionism did not see itself as a colonialist movement attempting to instill its ancient native culture in a new and foreign place, but rather as the result of Jews’ bitter disappointment with European culture. The appearance of this positive depiction of the Orient in Zionist discourse seems to express a rejection of the degenerate West as well as a search for an old source of redemption that would inspire a new, complete, and authentic Jewish experience (*Jüdisches Wesen*). In Buber’s opinion, for example, only in Palestine could the Jewish people’s primordial strength

be renewed and expressed to its full extent.¹⁹ The utopian portrait of the Orient as a complete alternative to the West, and the belief that it would revive Europe, were borrowed primarily from the European counter-culture that depicted the imaginary Orient as the absolute alternative to European culture and the European character, with its bourgeois values. Since Europe was deeply mired in malaise—materialism, nihilism, decadence, and a Philistine, bourgeois mentality—it was necessary to escape from it to distant lands, even imaginary ones. German *Volkists* and Russian Slavophiles²⁰ proposed authentic medieval culture and an even earlier mythological past as alternatives. “Civilization,” Dostoevsky wrote, “has long since been condemned in the West itself.” What Russia needed was primarily “nature”; that is, “nature is needed first of all, then science, then an independent, native, unconstrained life and a faith in one’s own national strength.”²¹ “The monster of civilization,” predicted the Slavophile mystic Nikolai Berdyaev, was leading Europe toward destruction.²²

In contrast to Eduard Gans’s call to German Jews to shed their Oriental identity and assimilate into Europe, Martin Buber wrote that the way to salvation and rehabilitation for the Jewish collective “I” was to disconnect itself from Europe, which was sinking into a deep mire. Only then could Jews create an organic, rooted Judaism full of new strength. The utopian, imaginary Orient and its sensory nature were thus perceived by Buber as a cure for the profound schism and fatal illness that modern Western culture inflicted upon Jewish existence. The cure to the ills of the mechanical, atrophying Western culture would be found only outside of Europe, in the Orient. Only there could a complete, healthy, vital, and creative Judaism be reborn.²³ And only there, wrote the poet Uri Zvi Greenberg, could the Jews—an “Oriental handful,” whom Europe regarded as “low, Semitic creatures”—give expression to their identity as an organic and territorial racial group. For this reason, Greenberg extolled the pioneers who left behind all of Europe’s splendor in order to be “members of the cult of the barefoot and feverish” in Palestine.²⁴

In this context, it is impossible not to return to the exhortation that concludes Feierberg’s *Whither?*: “If it is true that there is a goal for Israel, then gird yourselves with Torah and its goal, and bring them along to the East . . . but not to Palestine alone, to all the East.”²⁵ Feierberg borrowed the imaginary portrait of the East from Benjamin Disraeli’s historical novel *Tancred*;²⁶ however, he did not clarify what he meant by “the East” or what were the spiritual and cultural traits of this East, which were to be a source of salvation for the Jewish people. Even earlier, on May 18, 1882,

the young writer Moshe Aizman published an article in *Hamelitz* titled “Pnei halot ve halot,” in which he called for separation from “European civilization with its belief in force and its manifest sins,” and for a return to the Orient: “There we will carry the principles of Semitic civilization among the Arab tribes, our relations. And the meaning of a Semitic civilization is wisdom and morality, love of mankind and peace.”²⁷

Not all intellectuals were enchanted by this exhortation. Lilienblum, for example, considered it a reactionary call to abandon the heritage of the Enlightenment, and warned against the Romantic perception that transformed “Asiatic laziness” and the Arab Orient—the latter, in his opinion, a world of unbearable backwardness—into an ideal.²⁸ However, even Lilienblum believed that Jews were “alien Asiatics” in Europe and must therefore return to the Orient, since Europe held no answers to the questions of life and religion: “In Europe our faith will not be reformed, and in Europe we have no life . . . The education here is a European one in all respects”—in other words, a corrupting education.²⁹ However, Lilienblum did not mean to claim that the immigrants to Palestine would leave behind the cultural assets of the West: “The majority of our people will labor mightily to follow in the Europeans’ way of life, and will resemble them in all their customs. And why would you bind them under the wings of *Asia’s spirit* when she will not succeed, for *Asia’s spirit* will wander and merely pass as a shadow before the spirit of Europe, whose path is one of storms and tempests” (emphasis in the original).³⁰ Despite this, his words were interpreted as a call to abandon Europeaness, and Y. L. Gordon believed that Lilienblum stood at the head of the camp of those who “revolt against Europe’s Enlightenment and say: Let us . . . return to Asia.” Gordon described the revolution he underwent from tradition to Enlightenment as a direct result of discovering that he was “a wild Asian . . . in enlightened Europe,” but his objection to the idea of a return to Zion derived from his opinion that the Jews had not yet absorbed the values of the European Enlightenment. It was thus too early to speak of a return to the Orient; a premature return would lead to a cultural reaction and the establishment of a dark, unenlightened, Orthodox Jewish state in which, among other things, “on holy days and the Sabbath the [trains] would suddenly cease to run, and the telegraph lines would be silent.”³¹ Gordon asked: “If we immigrate to Palestine from Europe and do not take with us the yield of its Enlightenment—what do we immigrate for?”³²

In 1897, the German Jewish statesman Walther Rathenau called upon German Jews to examine themselves in the mirror as a first step toward

self-criticism, and to shake off all Asiatic characteristics so that they might be accepted as an inseparable part of the Western experience.³³ In contrast, as noted above, Martin Buber—who, under the influence of Germany’s cultural pessimism, transformed himself from a disciple of Romantic nationalism into someone wary of the strengthening of conservative, nationalistic Romanticism and the disintegration of bourgeois, capitalistic society—saw the Orient as an alternative to the atrophying West. Buber described the Orient as a metacultural essence with unique ontological spiritual properties. In his opinion, Europe was eternally in need of a unified organic principle but was unable to generate it itself; hence it required the Orient. However, Buber refrained from calling for an exchange of European culture with Jewish or Chinese culture. Nor did he define the contents and values of the ideal Oriental culture. His call to Jews to return to the East declared only that the Jewish man needed to remove himself from his unnatural environment in Europe in order to achieve salvation of the soul (*Erlösung*) and realize his full human authenticity in his natural place. It is also important to note that there is no Islam in Buber’s Asia and Orient; his is the Asia of the prophet Isaiah, Buddha and Laotzu, Jesus and Paul—but not Mohammed.³⁴ The German Jewish writer Jakob Wassermann also described Jews as Oriental in the sense that they were creative and vigorous and did not yearn to detach themselves from their past, becoming lonely, rootless individualists. The Oriental Jewish man, in the mystical rather than ethnographical sense, was fully realized and confident in his humanity—a serene man, devoid of envy, creative, and free.³⁵ The Orient—that is, Palestine—was the place where Semitic Jews could detach themselves from divisive forces and create an authentic, or organic, Jewish culture and a modern civilization. Civilization was the jar; Judaism—after the renaissance that would transpire—would be its contents. In the Orient, the contradiction between civilization and culture would be erased, and a perfect harmony would arise between them. In Nathan Birnbaum’s vision, a Jewish *Volkstum* would arise in the Orient as a full partner in the great European civilization.³⁶

The European Semitic Jew would return to the Orient, which shrank from the spirit of the West, in order to serve it as a teacher and draw it closer to the culture of the West.³⁷ In a meeting of the Zionist General Council on August 28, 1919, Weizmann said: “Only in Palestine is it possible to achieve our lives’ ideal. We live in civilized countries and borrow their culture. This reality has given rise to the fundamental differences

between us. They erupt even when we set out to create our own country. Our role now is to erect a bridge between the two worlds, but those crossing this bridge must approach it from both ends.”³⁸

The myth of the Orient was one thing, reality another. Buber did not call on Germany’s Jews to dissociate themselves from Europe; moreover, he wrote that “those who travel to live in Palestine among a Hebrew community . . . will carry German spiritual assets in their very souls.”³⁹ That is, he did not call upon them to abandon the humanist tradition of the West, but simply to leave behind its dark side and the wild overgrowth it sprouted; certainly he did not ask them to leave behind every asset of that culture. In Buber’s utopian vision, Jews would assume a central role in the renewal of the world after World War I by serving as mediators between Europe and the Orient. In other words, the Zionist movement had a missionary calling in the Orient. Like Hess, Herzl, and others, Buber was not free of paternalism or a sense of superiority:

We, who wish to go to Palestine as mediators between Europe and Asia, are not able to appear before the Orient, which is rising from a deep dream, as the messengers of that same West that is soon due to decline, and thus incur its justified suspicion; we were chosen to be messengers to a West that is being recreated, to help our Oriental brothers to establish, through an alliance with this West and by their own efforts, a real society, a life which they did not even know to aspire to until now because of the Oriental effendis and the Western effendis, who prevented them from doing it . . . The matter is in our hands, whether we appear before the Orient’s waking eye as agents and hated spies or as beloved teachers and artist-creators.⁴⁰

A vision of a Middle East that underwent a profound process of Europeanization was also put forth by Hans Kohn, a Zionist activist who eventually became a fierce critic of Zionism and a well-known scholar of nationalism. From Jerusalem in 1934 he wrote that despite the fact that Europe was undergoing a difficult crisis, the magic of Europe ensured that a process of Europeanization took place throughout every nation in the Middle East, albeit at varying speeds. The culture of Western Europe had become a universal culture, influencing thought throughout the world and celebrating its victory across the globe. Now members of ancient cultures were stirring from their centuries-long sleep, and a new stage of human development was at hand.⁴¹

“WE ARE WESTERNERS”

Many Jews expressed fear that the exodus from Europe to the desert, or untamed Asia would result in a painful and intolerable separation from Europe and its culture. In September 1882, Vladimir Zeev Dubnow, a member of the Bilu movement, wrote from Jaffa to his brother Simon—the historian, then living in St. Petersburg—about the cultural deprivation he and his friends experienced because of the lack of newspapers in Palestine. He added, “In short—this is untamed Asia rather than cultured Europe, which becomes more precious to me every day.”⁴² In early 1910, Dov Ber Borochof wrote to his wife that he did not wish to tie his fate to the “sleepy cultures of the Orient,” and that the cultural foundations of his development would suffer if he went to Palestine because it “does not have the libraries I need.” If he nonetheless went to Palestine, he added, he would do so because it was better to develop thoughts on virgin ground than to live in an already mature culture.⁴³

However, the Jewish migration from Europe to Palestine was generally perceived not as an act that would bring about a complete disengagement from Western culture, but as one that would enable Jewish culture to be reborn by choice. An immigrant may decide which cultural assets he carries with him to sow in the new land, and which assets he relinquishes; he is also freed from the temptations and pressures of the surrounding foreign culture that he leaves. According to this perception, emigration to Palestine offered Jews their only option for acculturation into European culture without risk of assimilation and absorption, because it created the only possibility to selectively transfer Europe to Palestine. Only there could Jews be European and Jewish at the same time. Jews would create the real Europe—Europe as it should be—beyond the borders of that continent.⁴⁴

Statements of this sort were intended, among other things, to assuage concerns about the ramifications of distance and separation from Europe: not only would immigrants to Palestine not find themselves disconnected from European civilization, but they would act as missionaries and agents of that culture in the Orient. “Yes, we are Westerners, in life and in spirit. We can bring the West to the Orient; our strength is drawn from Europe”—these resolute words were written by the essayist Yaacov Rabinovitz in a 1922 article. These words and those he wrote a few years later—in a lengthy comment on his translation of an article by Nikolai Berdyaev⁴⁵—were a reaction to what Rabinovitz saw as mystical

and antirational perceptions that expressed a longing for a “new Asiatic culture”—a sort of Jewish Slavophilia that was nourished by the mistaken assumption that “the West was in decline,” and by the belief that salvation would come “from the Orient.” To speak of “the decline of the West” and of how rationalism and modernity had lost their way, wrote Rabinovitz, was to engage in reactionary eschatology. In effect, revelations of the crisis in Western society and culture were natural, and certainly not evidence of a decline. Rabinovitz ridiculed those who proposed the Orient as an alternative: “One can hate Europe; but he who loves Asia—let him first live in it and know it.” Jews not only belonged to Europe, they contributed to its construction:

The Bible itself proves how Western it is. It traveled to the West and not to the East . . . not only did the Bible go to the West, but we too went with it . . . It is a fact that the Orient neither absorbed nor expelled the Jew, while at the same time the persecution in the West was all in vain: the Jew remained there and his Bible joined the Western hearth . . . The shape of our lives in Palestine is also Western, and the Oriental Jew comes toward us rather than we toward him. By the way, he himself tended more toward France than toward the Arab world.⁴⁶

Rabinovitz also pointed to the disparity between, on the one hand, the call to return to the Orient as a slogan or metaphor that was—in the spirit of conservative ideology and Romanticism—nothing more than a longing for an organic way of life, and, on the other hand, the fact that those who called for a return to the East were strongly influenced by the European heritage and wished to live a typical European lifestyle.

Such declarations of loyalty toward Europe also arrived from Jews who profoundly criticized European society and culture and even described it as unhealthy. This represented an internal critique, not a delight in doomsaying or a bid for divorce. The sharpest critics of Western culture were unwilling to relinquish most of the European assets that European Jews had adopted throughout the nineteenth century. Even feelings of disappointment and disenchantment did not lead them to the conclusion that they must relinquish all of Europe’s spiritual and cultural assets and uproot the Europeaness from the Jewish experience. The situation in Palestine appeared different from the traditionalists’ perspective: for instance, in Avraham Shmuel Herschberg’s report about his journey to Palestine in 1899–1900, he tallied the pianos—ten in all—that he found

in settlers' houses in Rishon Letzion and wrote of one of the settlers of Petach-Tikva (a native of his own city, Białystok): "In Białystok this family would have seen several generations pass by before arriving at such a level: Palestine has become a shortcut to European culture." Evidence of "European education" were the books Herschberg found in the settlement's libraries: works by Emile Zola, Alphonse Daudet, Eugene Sue, as well as Russian novels. He wrote: "A native of my city would not see his daughters, even his granddaughters, attending a high school, nor his grandsons learning French." Herschberg criticized what seemed like an attempt to "bring in humanism and Europeanism," but at the same time he claimed that without the infusion of European material culture into Palestine, the Jewish settlers would not be able to rise above the "backward, Asiatic" living conditions of the Arab inhabitants.⁴⁷ In contrast, in 1898 the teacher David Yudlevitz expressed his pride in the books found in private homes in the settlement, including books by Ferdinand Lassalle, Charles Darwin, Victor Hugo, Ernest Renan, and Blaise Pascal, and British, Ashkenazi, Russian, and other classics—both in the original texts and in translation.⁴⁸ Another settler, Menashe Meirovitz, complained in an 1887 letter about the lack of world literature in the settlement: "We, who are already cut off from European civilization, need [books] in order to rest by reading them and to ponder over them after a day's hard labor. They are the greatest and most honest friends of humanity."⁴⁹

MIMICKING EUROPEAN CULTURE?— EUROPE AS CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ASSET

The return to the Orient—that is, to Palestine—was therefore not meant to uproot Europeaness from the Jewish experience. The accepted opinion was that the Jews had become a European people, and that in Palestine they intended to forge an amalgamation of Jewish and European culture. The urgent question was thus to determine the substance of this new culture, as well as how to create the desired blend of European culture and original Jewish culture (whose essence and substance were themselves a matter of contention). A stormy debate over this question erupted after the 1902 publication of *Altneuland*, Herzl's utopian novel. Ahad Haam wrote a venomous review of *Altneuland*, in which he described Herzl's fictional Jewish society as "blindly aping" European culture. According to him, Herzl promised the Jews that they would achieve in Palestine what they were unable to achieve in Europe. Ahad Haam's primary criticism was

aimed at what he saw as the absence of “Jewish and Hebrew character” in Herzl’s imagined future society. However, Ahad Haam did not specify which negative European foundations he believed Herzl wished to instill in this society and did not propose an alternative cultural repertoire.⁵⁰

Ahad Haam’s argument was justified to some extent. In *The Jewish State*, Herzl wished to reassure those who feared moving away from civilization. He declared that it was possible to transfer a culture from its location and to plant it elsewhere:

There are English hotels in Egypt and on the mountain peaks of Switzerland, Vienna cafes in South Africa, French theaters in Russia, German operas in America, and the best Bavarian beer in Paris. When we depart from Egypt once again we shall not leave the flesh-pots behind.⁵¹

In a similar spirit, Herzl wrote in his diary on June 7, 1895, that it would be necessary to supply the inhabitants of the Jewish state with *circenses* (mass entertainment): “‘German theaters,’ ‘international theaters,’ ‘operas,’ ‘operettas,’ ‘circuses,’ ‘concert cafés,’ and ‘cafés Champs-Élysées.’”⁵² The novel *Altneuland* is an ode to the utilization of European technology and science for the purpose of creating an advanced model society. There is almost no sign in the novel of the presence of Jewish culture in the new Jewish society. European culture has full reign: ladies chat about the latest Parisian hats and order their clothes directly from stores on the rue de la Paix; in a party held by the painter Isaacs in his charming Jerusalem villa, which is full of rare art treasures, his daughter, Miriam, sings songs by Schumann, Rubinstein, Wagner, and Gounod—but not songs of Zion—and concludes with the “Lied von Mignon” from Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meister*: “Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen?” (Know’st thou the land where lemon trees bloom).⁵³ Theater troupes from France and Italy appear in Haifa alongside popular comedies in Yiddish, the biblical play *Moses*, and the opera *Shabtai Tzvi*, but these are not, according to Herzl, the main part of the new Jewish high culture.

Herzl was defended by Nordau, who had pointed out the flaws of European civilization during the nineteenth century and had warned in 1897 that Europe was declining in status.⁵⁴ In Herzl’s defense, Nordau sang the praises of “Old Europe” and declared that Ahad Haam’s suggestion amounted to returning to a state of barbarism that would transform Jewish society into “a wild Asiatic enclave hostile to culture.”⁵⁵ The Jewish society of the future that Nordau envisioned was a liberal society whose

culture would perfectly combine Jewish culture with bourgeois European culture:

In effect, *Altneuland* is a slice of Europe in Asia. So Herzl has shown us the vision that suits us precisely, the one toward which we strive. We wish that the people returning to its homeland—the Jewish people, once again united and freed from the foreigners’ yoke—may remain a cultured people . . . We need not imitate others; we use only our own assets, and we develop them. We have contributed our part to European culture more than we have to our own culture; this culture belongs to us to the same degree that it belongs to the Germans, French, or English. We will not permit a contradiction to be posited between what belongs to us—what is Jewish—and what is European . . . The Jewish people will fully display its uniqueness amid the general European culture.⁵⁶

Nordau also pointed to the internal contradiction buried in the apparent anti-Europeanness voiced by Ahad Haam and several others. According to him, these critics were Europeans despite their outright rejection of Europe’s cultural assets and values.⁵⁷ Nordau, who had described European culture at the end of the nineteenth century as degenerate, did not believe that the Orient and Asiatic wildness would deliver Jews from the ravages of the decadent West, or East European Jews from the heritage of the ghetto. He came out decisively against those Zionist writers and thinkers who believed that in the Orient, the Jews would be freed from the corruption they inherited from Europe. What Nordau—like Herzl—did believe was that the Jews would bring the West to the Orient; along the way, they would be able to shed all of Europe’s ailments and establish a perfect European Jewish society.⁵⁸

The writer Y. C. Brenner responded in a similar manner, though less enthusiastically, to the criticism of Western culture in Hebrew literature. Although it was true, he wrote, that European humanity was faltering, and that it lacked equality:

What can we do—Europe does not cease to be what she is, even after her treatment of us. That is the truth! Even without her treatment of us she is no symbol of perfection, and even given her treatment of us she is no symbol of depravity. What she has earned and created—not without labor, nor without sacrificed lives—is hers; she is its sovereign, and she lives and lives on as she is able. She is, after all, Europe.⁵⁹

Brenner ridiculed those who claimed that Europe's "spiritual leanings" originated in Judaism and that "Europe, in her ambition to be inclusive—Europe, in following the fundamental line of subjectivity and uniqueness—Europe, in her wish to be elevated to a higher morality—Europe, in her concept of family life—borrowed it all from Israel!"⁶⁰

The most European among the nationalistic Jewish intelligentsia was Zeev Jabotinsky.⁶¹ He described the nineteenth century as a period shaped by an "instinct of the game"—a sort of drive for grand, creative adventure.⁶² Twentieth-century Europe had grown apart from the values of the previous century and now adhered to totalitarianism, but this was not necessarily reason to despair of it, and certainly no reason to see the Orient as the alternative to Western culture. In contrast to Buber and the other Zionist Orientalists who were swept along by Buber's opinions and charmed by shallow, exotic Orientalism, Jabotinsky declared: "we, the Jews, have nothing in common with what is known as the 'Orient.'" Like Nordau, he believed that Zionism would extend "Europe's borders to the Euphrates" and clear away all traces of the "Oriental soul" from the memories of the Jews in Palestine, both present and future. Jabotinsky described the Orient as characterized by fatalism and an absence of ethical protest, while Europe, in contrast, was characterized by unending searching, destruction, and reconstruction. The Orient was ruled by tyranny, while Europe had parliamentary democracy, freedom of the press, and public oversight. The Orient was ruled by Islam, which arbitrated every dimension of life, while in Europe, religion had a limited role and did not interfere with cultural and social life. The Orient was "the scarf, the harem, theological fanaticism, patriarchal (that is, despotic) family structure, and, worse yet, a feudal system of tribe and state . . . This 'picturesque' way of life is almost always the sort of existence whose structure must necessarily and mercilessly be changed from top to bottom."⁶³

If so, Jabotinsky asked, were the Jews who returned to the Orient not likely to fall into its trap? His answer was that Europe as a geographical concept was not identical to the cultural concept of European. An emigrant from Europe, he wrote—echoing Herzl—took Europe with him everywhere he went. A Jew who emigrated to Palestine would take with him the European tradition that was close to his heart and that had been absorbed into his people's blood for two thousand years; he would continue to cultivate and develop the tradition in Palestine: "We go to Palestine in order to shift Europe's traditional border to the Euphrates,"⁶⁴ since "the good of the land demands the replacement of the camel caravan

specifically with the train,” and “we wish the same for our neighbors in Asia: a living and vital ‘Orient’ as soon as possible.”⁶⁵

Jabotinsky called on the Arab population of the Middle East to “abolish the Orient with haste,” but he believed that it would be able to do so only after generations of Western guardianship that would replace the camel caravans with motor vehicles. Only after the Orient “passed through the British school,” he declared, would it be able to free itself from the Oriental spirit and be reborn.⁶⁶ And what, Jabotinsky asked, made Jews European in heart and soul? He answered: the fact was that “Europe from a moral point of view is ‘ours,’” just as much as it belonged to its nations. Its moral pathos and idea of progress—“the entire gap between two worldviews, which is expressed in the antithesis of two beliefs: the ‘Golden Age’ and the ‘Messiah,’ an ideal from the past and an ideal for the future—these traits were given to Europe by us, a long time before our ancestors came to Europe. We brought the Bible with us in a ready form.” The Jews made a decisive contribution toward Europe’s intellectual development in all areas and were among its primary creators. Western culture was therefore “part and parcel” of Judaism, flesh of its flesh and spirit of its spirit. Consequently, to escape from “Westernness” meant “to deny ourselves.” Still, he hastened to add a caveat: his reference was not to Europe as a single entity, but to “moral Europe.”

It should be observed that Jabotinsky objected strongly to the essentialist view and maintained that the Orient was “not just a specific stage in cultural development, but a type of development in itself,”⁶⁷ which could undergo change. It was a fact that various Oriental peoples imitated the West in their ways of life: they wore European clothes, established universities, abolished harems, and so forth. Furthermore, Europe was also undergoing similar processes of cultural transformation. No phenomena were particular to a single race; they were particular only to a specific stage in its development.

The radical revisionist Aba Achimeir also declared that the Zionists were by nature Western. “The nation of Israel is a Western nation, or, more precisely, *the* Western Nation, with a definite article!” (emphasis in the original).⁶⁸ This Western orientation was not only the province of the Zionist Right. Chaim Arlosoroff wrote:

I have a Western, European orientation (the Mediterranean has always been Europe, not Asia). We must not be ashamed of the fact that we wish to ensure that Palestine will look to the West, and not

to the dervishes. Europe has an interest in a European settlement existing here, and not in this land becoming part of Asia.⁶⁹

When Ben Gurion spoke of return to the Orient, he too referred to it as a place rather than an essence. Thus in August 1935, he said at the eighteenth Zionist Congress:

We are returning to the Orient, but we bring the enlightenment of Western culture to the land [of Palestine], and alongside all of our efforts to once again settle in our Oriental homeland and come into friendly contact with our Oriental neighbors, we will preserve the eternal contact with the centers of Western culture. The Mediterranean Sea will be a bridge to the cultural world of the West—of Europe and America—to the great centers of the Jewish Diaspora.⁷⁰

To Uri Zvi Greenberg, Europe did not symbolize moral values; on the contrary, he described Europe—Slavic Europe, in effect—as a place saturated with pathological hatred for Jews. According to him, Jews were forced to leave because “the land shrieked beneath their feet.” But Greenberg could not free himself from his profound affection for Europe, and he described it in two ways: the Jews’ natural landscape, at the center of which stood the autochthonous village, characterized by an organic rhythm of life and a direct affinity for nature; and the culture of the modern metropolis. The European experience as described by Greenberg included the following ingredients: buckets and challah; wells and mills; flutes and Ukrainian songs; the ringing of church bells; thatched roofs and red rafters; red apples and cows’ bellows; cafes, operas, boulevards, dance halls; museums and libraries; electricity and the steam engine.⁷¹ To abandon this Europe meant abandoning a familiar and formerly beloved world, which the Jews had been forced to hate. Greenberg saw Zionism as a movement established to take “a people born and buried in Europe for centuries upon centuries and move them to the alien Orient,” in order to transform them into “a landed people in the Arab sea, like a European lighthouse . . . to serve as an important political factor and avant-garde for European-Hebrew culture.”⁷² The Jews—“lowly Semitic creatures, a handful from the Orient”—came “from Europe to the home of Arab custom, and our vibrant cultural project, which is unique in the Orient, became the avant-garde for European progress and the entry of its government into that desert during the great industrial age.”⁷³ The portrait he proposed of Jewish revival combined ideas from the European school of Romantic and

religious conservatism and from the world of modern utopias that found in the steam engine, concrete, and steel the typical expression of the modern world: “If some Messiah is born, we hope he will not rise in the Galilean wilderness but in a Galilean district in which there are electricity, automobiles, hygienic houses, and motor-boats on the Sea of Galilee.”⁷⁴

Misgivings and longings for the Europe left behind appear in a chapter of a diary printed in the anthology *Kehiliateinu* (Our community):

Spiritual Europe—old, ostracized, accursed Europe, in which everyone finds faults—how spacious and lovely she is, and how I yearn for her! After all she is the spirit we inhaled, the marrow of our bones! The Orient, with its depths of wisdom, is shrouded in fog, a sort of region beyond the *Sambatyon*, which may not be approached except on the Sabbath.⁷⁵

At the same time, Europe was described in this anthology as “god-forsaken, with paltry culture, thirsting for pleasure,” and sentimental.⁷⁶ Its cultural assets—theaters, concerts, museums, and libraries—were only its outward expressions.⁷⁷ Europe symbolized unacceptable petit bourgeois values: “If an immigrant-pioneer were to import a ‘European’ suit—he would hide it in his wicker basket or wooden chest. On the street, wearing a blazer was a faux-pas that might suggest the taint of the micro-bourgeoisie on its wearer. Most proscribed and excluded of all was the necktie.”⁷⁸ Tel Aviv, the new Hebrew city, was characterized by a “childish, pitiable Europeanness.”⁷⁹ A longing for the organic culture of “a small community full of all that was sacred and hidden in the fog of pure beauty” was expressed in *Kehiliateinu*.⁸⁰ Greenberg wrote that the Hashomer Hazair movement (a Socialist Zionist youth movement) dwelled in the Jezreel Valley but “draws water from the wells of Poland and Germany, from Mickiewicz to Freud, and not from here. This is a sign of trouble, a sign that the water of life is not here.”⁸¹ That is, he believed that the counterculture of Hashomer Hazair was borrowed from the European counterculture and was not an authentic Jewish culture.⁸² If so, even the vision of a future national existence that has been through a socialist revolution was drawn from European wells, albeit from those of the European counterculture. Indeed, for example, in Hashomer Hazair’s educational program from the 1940s we read:

There are good Jews who mourn the destruction of our culture, the process of assimilation which leads to degeneracy and falseness, but

they are unaware of and do not understand the multitude of lies that exists in every other part of life. It is as though the uproar over the decline of Western culture has been silenced in current times; before having tasted the real taste of the West in Eastern Europe, we had already mourned its passing and now it permeates every corner of our lives and our souls, and we adapt, knowingly and unknowingly, to cultural Philistinism and none of us speaks up. Realistic criticism of the social reality, criticism in light of socialism and its revolt against the current regime will provide us with wide-ranging content.

There were those who believed that this counterculture gave birth to a radical wish to destroy every trace of Europeanness. The revolutionary pioneers, wrote Yehoshua Brandstetter, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1909 and was among the first members of Hashomer (Jewish Defense Organization) in Sejera and a member of the Beit Alfa kibbutz, preached against all European traits: “complacency, courtesy, politeness, cleanliness, etc. To such an extent that they no longer need to exercise or learn Hebrew . . . because these are European habits, of which we have no need.”⁸³

In any event, this romantic period and the almost primeval cries against Europe and bourgeois life were short-lived and marginal. In effect, the accepted position was that the purpose of Jewish settlement in Palestine was not to establish a provincial society similar to the Oriental or primitive East European village. Thus even during the 1880s, members of Bilu declared that Jewish settlement in Palestine needed to be undertaken “in accordance with the latest conclusions of modern science and the latest word of European culture in our generation.”⁸⁴ The widespread view was that since Palestine was a failed, Oriental land, it would be possible to build it up from the foundations according to modern models of European settlement, and to make it “as organized and neat as European nations”; its settlements would resemble “the pleasant cities in Europe” and display “European organization” and “European manners.” Consequently, as soon as the foundations were laid for the new Jewish society, it would be necessary to establish all of the European cultural institutions: theaters, museums, universities, playing fields, scientific centers, and the like.⁸⁵ In certain circles, there was admittedly an anti-urban sentiment, fueled by an image of the European city as a sort of hell, but this sentiment was short-lived. Tel Aviv—the modern Jewish city born in 1909 as a suburb of

Jaffa—was described at the start of the 1920s, as we have already seen, as a “bourgeois” city, but it was generally defended with the argument that it was neither Oriental nor Middle Eastern. Instead, it had been constructed from the start as a typical European city, with respect to both its urban structure and its characteristic lifestyle.

Thus immigrants to Palestine saw Europe in several different lights. It was an autochthonous village that followed nature’s steady rhythms, was organically embedded in the landscape, and offered a communal existence (*Gemeinschaft*). At the same time, it was also a great urban society, with its lofty cultural (bourgeois) assets and dimly lit backyards. The landscape of lost, faraway Europe gave way to romantic descriptions of Palestine’s landscape, which was occasionally depicted as similar to the European landscape—one containing cows and geese—but generally as something different: Palestine was an authentic biblical landscape with dates, figs, and fields of grains, as well as eucalyptus and citrus trees. Time and again, Palestine’s landscape was contrasted with that of Europe in order to emphasize the superiority of the former. No region in Europe, for example, had moonlit nights quite like those in Palestine, a hot country where “the sun burns like a ball of fire.”⁸⁶ Yet even as the landscape was depicted with biblical imagery, the climate was described as healthy, and one to which Jews immigrating from Europe should easily become accustomed.

The call to return to the Orient was sometimes interpreted as a declaration of an existing or desired kinship with the Arab world and as a willingness to adopt Oriental models. However, this was always a case of integrating into the Orient rather than drawing closer to Muslim culture and Islam, and under the influence of European Orientalism, several characteristics were chosen that were considered representative of the Oriental essence.⁸⁷ In the art and literature of Jewish Palestine, the Orient was typically depicted in exotic, Oriental colors and only rarely as a complex human and cultural reality. As we will see, the cultural debate in Israel also dealt, in general, with Oriental rather than Muslim culture. The Orient had an influential effect on various aspects of culture in Palestine—dress, architecture, nutrition, and the like—but not on the values of its society or its habitus.

The call to leave Europe and head eastward was not, therefore, a call to abandon Europe. The alternatives that were offered to European culture were taken from a repertoire of models drawn from the world of European thought and from the European reality. The return to the Oriental land of their fathers was not intended to rid Jews of the Europeanness that clung

to them, but to enable them to be European Jews by choice. This was considered a necessary condition for the success of the Zionist enterprise and for the creation of a modern, national Hebrew culture. External European characteristics—suits, coffeehouses, the opera, and the like—became cultural norms. Rather than a longing for a utopian Orient, Jews expressed fear of what were described as exilic values, the Levantinization of the society and culture, and the renunciation of their European heritage and its valuable assets.