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Shabtai and Gnessin: A Comparative Reading

. . . so he laughed and turned to Geena and Yaffa, who had come into the kitchen and placed coffee and sugar and a cake on the table, and asked Yaffa how her French was coming along, and Yaffa said "I remember what I already knew in the Gimnasia" and Besh said "it's a good thing there's French in the world," and told them that on three or four occasions already he had read in the paper about girls in France who had received the consent of the Church to marry lovers who had died, one a soldier killed in an accident and another a small-town policeman who was shot chasing a criminal, and said that he could not make up his mind if this was total madness or supreme wisdom, and then he turned to Geena and asked her roughly how come she, too, wasn't taking up French, and Geena said "maybe one day," and Besh said "you're not getting any younger, ma'am," and Geena said "yes, I know. You don't have to remind me," and moved the coffee cup closer to Ervin, who took it with a trembling hand and drank from it slowly, except that drops fell from his lips and stained his shirt and pants, and Geena, who did not take her eyes off him, helped him very discretely, and once in a while, also very discretely, wiped his lips and chin and pants with a handkerchief, Ervin's illness had breathed a new life into her and she almost forgot her aching feet and gave herself over to it with dedication and deep joy and would have been happy if it lasted forever, and then the doorbell rang and Geena got up and opened the door and Ruḥama, who a week ago, without telling anybody, had returned from America, entered. (Yaakov Shabtai, *Past Continuous* 173)¹

THIS COMPARATIVE READING is the product of an infatuation with the melancholic drifts of the prose of the Israeli writer Yaakov Shabtai.

I had been reading and rereading his novel, *Zikhron devarim* (*Past Continuous*), since it first came out in 1977, and those melancholic drifts were fatally creeping into my personal letters. Not only that, but I thought I recognized them everywhere in the literary prose written in Israel after Shabtai. This prose had acquired a distinctly conversational tone that sounded like an echo of the monotonous drone of Shabtai's narrative voice,² which yet remained inimitable in its relentless emotional affect. *Past Continuous* was Shabtai's only finished novel (the writer died in 1981, leaving a second, unfinished work that was edited and published a year later by his wife, Edna Shabtai, with the help of Professor Dan Miron). To what did it owe its effect of somber and impersonal grandeur, and conversely, with what previous literary model could it be usefully associated?

The most remarkable feature of the text is a pervasive tenuousness of closure: the text unfolds continuously, without chapters or paragraphs, and has the familiar, typographically unmarked look of a modernist monologue. Syntax is extremely relaxed. Periods are few and far between—someone counted 589 sentences in the 275 pages of text,³ but single sentences can reach a length of five pages—maintaining only sporadic control over large, sprawling sentences made up of aggregates of run-on clauses linked loosely with commas and coordinating conjunctions. A thin, steadily unreeling ribbon of narration loops and winds unevenly through time, shifting brusquely from one thing to another, cutting scenes in mid-dialogue and splicing together perspectives that are manifestly discrete and even incompatible.⁴ Is this a monologue? A tape-recorder effect? One might indeed recognize in the capricious rearrangement of reality along a casually persistent verbal continuum the traditional features of a stream of consciousness. But in this text, this evocation of the subject's speech remains mysteriously suspended, for there is no speaker or central consciousness in the novel, and the style bears no traces of rhetorical address. It is a pointed absence that the novel's Hebrew title captures well: an idiomatic term denoting "protocol" or "minutes," it literally means "memory of things," thus simultaneously invoking and deflating modernism's great signal of subjective presence.

This subverted evocation of the traditional activities of subjectivity lies at the source of the peculiar resonance of Shabtai's prose. A stream expressing the continuity of the internal experience here becomes merely pseudoassociative, linking dislocated pieces of the personal histories, mental life, and mundane daily activities of a group of friends and their innumerable cousins and relatives in Tel Aviv: the absence of a reason for this linkage resounds through the text.

The name of the influential modernist writer Uri Nissan Gnessin comes to mind in this connection as the initial creator of such monological

streams—complete with their original, psychological motivation—in modern Hebrew fiction. Gnessin (1879–1913) had crafted his lyrical prose primarily for the expression of the internal experience. His monologues and lyrical renditions of moods and landscapes indeed exude that subjective plenitude, so to speak, the lack of which gapes at us half a century later from the pages of Shabtai's book. Gnessin, unlike Shabtai, could not draw upon a tradition of fluently spoken Hebrew in choosing an idiom for his characters' internal experiences. He evolved—one might almost say "invented"—his own literary and highly convoluted prose style, which turned out to be so influential in the development of Hebrew lyrical fiction that it became a sort of manner. There is hardly a modern Hebrew writer intent on rendering a subject's impressions, thoughts, or moods who does not owe some formal debt to Gnessin's intricately qualifying and allusive prose, his expressively tortuous syntax and neologistic diction.⁵

While one may easily detect Gnessin's influence upon the *recherché* style of a psychological writer like S. Yizhar, for example, uncovering Shabtai's connection to Gnessin is a more complicated matter. Shabtai's casual language, for one, could be considered a direct repudiation, if not of Gnessin's work itself, then at least of a certain vein of excessive literariness and pompousness in modern Israeli fiction for which Gnessin inadvertently provided a source. Shabtai also alludes to certain Gnessinean excesses of style and sentiment in a manner that is clearly ironic. A case in point is the passage from *Past Continuous* that introduces the present essay, which shows the writer borrowing for his own heroines the names of Gnessin's famous female characters, Geena and Ruḥama. The homage seems ambiguous because Gnessin's women—his lovely and talented Ruḥama, a mere teenager in 1913 (when the novella *Etsel* appeared, in which she figures as the central female voice), as well as his restless, self-destructive Geena—have little in common with their tame and aging namesakes in *Past Continuous*,⁶ and the men gathered in Shabtai's suburban kitchen-turned-*salon-littéraire* are not Gnessin's Byronic *beaux parleurs* but greedy and decrepit *bons vivants*. Yet ironic as Shabtai's allusion to Gnessin's portraits of passion and young innocence might be, and different as the stylistic aura of his prose might be from Gnessin's, his writing responds to something that runs deep in the old master's work, and that it engages dialectically, so to speak, in a manner far more interesting—more mutually illuminating—than plain imitation.

To perceive this affinity, one might point first to the impressionism of Gnessin's prose, which traditional criticism did not properly identify.⁷ This prose expresses a subject so decentered and so inundated by the world that it really only exists in the text as a type of vibration: a style. This, in any case, seems to be the form toward which the lyrical streams in

Gnessin's four long novellas upon which his fame largely rests seem to migrate: a displacement of the subject onto stylistic structures that naturalizes the style's distinctive and almost eccentric character, endowing it with a mysterious substantiality and autonomy. It is to just this imperceptible dislocation of the subject in Gnessin that Shabtai's narrative responds. Itself a "memory of words" (for "things" and "words" translate as one in Hebrew), it draws upon and brings to our attention a hollowness within the verbal streams of Gnessin's monologues, which may well be their most characteristic aspect.

What are the marks of this subjective absence, and the marks of Gnessin's influence upon Shabtai? First, let me offer an interpretation of the typical construction of sentences in Gnessin. Here is a relatively brief sentence from the novella *Etsel* (*By the Way*), Gnessin's last, published in 1913.

וכשהיה אוחז בשיחי הפטל השחור, שצמחו מקומות-מקומות בשיפולי ההר מזה, ויורד בזהירות בשביל הצר והמתפתל, המוביל אל השפלה המדוּשאה והמצוננת, המסתתרת מתחת בינות להרים, שם משום-מה אל ליבו, שהוא בורר לו אגב הליכתו מהגרורים הבשלים והחמיצים וזרקם אל פיו בהנאה מרובה.

And as he held on to the bushes of blackberries that were growing here and there down this side of the mountain, and walked carefully down the narrow and winding path leading to the dewy and grassy valley that lay hidden underneath between the mountains, he noticed for some reason that as he walked he picked bunches of the tart, ripe berries and threw them with great pleasure into his mouth.⁸

Two complementary impulses seem to have shaped this sentence: the first describes the appearance and manner of things specifically; and the second restrains the spread of the descriptive threads. We recognize the first impulse by the fact that, for example, not just any bushes are growing along the path, but "bushes of blackberries growing here and there down the side of the mountain"; and Ephraim is not simply walking down this path of blackberries but rather "walking cautiously down a path that is narrow and winding and that leads to the valley that is dewy and grassy that lies hidden down below between the mountains." Evidence of restraint, on the other hand, is found in the complex construction of the sentence, in which the fluid experience of walking down the mountain is reined in by an event of conscious awareness, namely, that Ephraim noticed something.

In traditional Gnessin criticism, this arrangement would be seen as a classic, if relatively mild, example of what Shaked termed the writer's "spatial style":⁹ it provides a syntactical simulation of the subject's instantaneous experience of a complex and diffuse reality by placing everything within grasp of a single focus. However, this interpretation,

based on a textbook notion of the function of syntactical subordination in a sentence, hardly describes the reader's experience, which, on the contrary, seems to be one of extreme delay. For, far from giving us the sense of a significant order of emphases, the syntactical subordination brings out the near-uncontrollableness of the descriptive element. The exaggerated accumulation of subordinated clauses creates an off-center, drifting effect in the sentence, a swelling-at-the-joints, which is caused not so much by the large number of descriptive elements (for these would not appear to be so packed if they had been spread out across, say, four separate sentences) as by the pressure of their syntactical confinement. Syntax—sense—becomes disjoined, and we feel disoriented. We scramble back, *up* the tortuous sentence (holding on to the blackberry bushes), looking for the beginning of that main clause the furry tail-end of which has just inexplicably swished across our path. And when, as in the following example, that tail-end is some minuscule grammatical apposition—

בינתים הובילהו רגליו מנקרה לנקרה ובקרוב יצא את שלשלת ההרים הנפתלה ונשאר נצב ליד המסילה הרחבה והכבושה, שההרים היו לה מזה והמישור הפורה והגדול, שקמתו, האובדת באופק אצל הכנפים הפזורות של אותה טחנה רחוקה, כבר הלבנה ומקומות מקומות דיתה גם קצורה ושכובה, מזה.

Meanwhile his feet led him from crag to crag, and soon he emerged from the winding mountain gorge and found himself standing near the large, well-trodden pathway that had the mountains over here (*mize*) and the large and fertile valley the crops of which that disappeared in the horizon near the played-out wings of that distant water mill were already whitening and here and there were even mowed and piled down, over there (*mize*). (*Etsel* 469)

—we then realize that the bloated syntax is not the result of some sensuous appetite for detail, but its cause: descriptive elements have been piled into a single sentence in order to create an implosion of qualifiers that disrupts the movement of sense. This regressive drift is worthy of notice. It could be described as an edging toward nonsense, because it delays closure, contradicts the apparent movement of sense, and causes us to be uncomfortably aware that description is an additive thing, and might continue forever.

Here are some further examples from Gnessin, showing sense reaching out strenuously for completion over an implosion of qualifiers:

ומשום שהללו כבר לא היו פה והחצר היתה ריקניה וקריאתו של התרגול חרדה ממרחקים והיתה כה גואשה והחדרים הגדולים והמכובדים שבבית היו דלתותיהם פתוחות לרוחה והדממה היתה רבוצה בהם, והגמרא נשארה פתוחה באולם הגדול בסוגיית "פי פרשה" החמורה ואבא מרוגו במקצת מחכה לו אצלה, שיכנס, ומשום שטילי, אותה ריבה חיה תמיד ואדמונית תמיד וצוהלה תמיד היתה יושבת בבוקר מכונסה באותה פינה שבקרונם הרתום של אבא ואמא והיתה חיזורה קצת ושפתיה היו מתנפחות ודיתה רוגות, כשפנו אליה

ושאלוה דבר — משום כל אלה ביחד היתה השממה שבלב גדולה מאוד וחונקה מאוד ואותו קילוח חם, שהיה קולח בחוה מתחת לכפו מאז הבוקר, היה זורם רק באותו מקום אחד ונקב ונקב, כאילו תחבו והיו משלשלים לשם במתינות אכזרייה מקדח דק שבדק.

And since the guests had departed and the yard was empty and the call of the rooster trembled in the distance and was so desperate, and the large swept-up rooms in the house had their doors wide open, and silence reigned in them, and the *gemara* was left open in the large hall at the difficult *sugya* of *pi parasha*, and a slightly irritated Father was waiting there for him to come in, and because Tilly, that wench who was always lively and always rosy-cheeked and always happy, had been sitting that morning gathered into the corner of Father and Mother's yoked wagon, and was a bit pale, and her lips pouted, and would get mad when anyone turned to ask her anything—because of all these things together, the desolation in the heart was very great and very stifling, and that hot trickle that had been filtering through his chest under the palm of his hand since morning flowed in that one place alone and gnawed and gnawed, as if someone had inserted there and was now turning with cruel composure a very thin drill. (456)

וחלום היה הלילה האפל והשותק והרחובות ההווים והשלווים והמיית המים הרבים והשווקים, שבאה מאצל בית-הריחיים הרחוק, החולם יחידי אצל לשונות הנחל, אשר בשדות השלחים שבאד, השתפכה אל הדממה הגדולה ונתנה לה צורה מיוחדת.

And unreal was the dark and silent night and the calm and dreamy streets and the murmur of the rushing, foaming water coming from the distant mill house dreaming solitarily by the canals running through the irrigated fields that were enveloped in fog, flowed into the great silence and gave it a specific form. (481)

בדמי הצהריים הנוגים ההם קרא תרנגול קריאה נואשה בחצר אחת רחוקה מחצרות השכונה, המגודלת צמרות אילנות צפופים, שאצל הנהר החבוי שבשפלה שבמולדת.

In the middle of that sad afternoon a rooster had sounded a desperate call in one of the distant yards of the village overgrown with thick crowns of trees by the river hidden in the valley in the country, and that call whined on and on, like the sound of the weeping ram's horn, and ended there, at the place where the open abyss of oblivion began. (455)

There is a point in each of these examples in which syntax becomes distracting: we want the thing to end, because the excessive embedding and chaining hold the threat of divagation. Gnessin even seems to cheat with his commas in order to heighten this effect, as when, in the second example, he leads us to believe that "the murmur of the rushing, foaming water" is the last of three nominal phrases qualified by "unreal," when in fact—and there should have been a comma marking this new beginning—it is the first and only subject of a new clause, the predicate of which is "flowed." He successfully misled the editors of two successive editions of his collected works, who plugged the flow with an "and" inserted in front of the word "flowed." To see just how divagatory these

descriptive contexts can get, we might remove some of the qualifiers, baring a syntax of concentric digressions through which all sense of significant emphasis seems to want to evaporate:

... the murmur of the water that comes from the mill house that dreams by the canals that run through the fields that are enveloped in fog flows into the silence.

... the wooden pulleys over that well lying by the cemetery lying by the road.

... a rooster crowed in one of the yards in the neighborhood overgrown with trees lying by the river hidden in the valley at home.

... that had the mountains on one side and the valley the wheat crops of which that disappeared in the horizon near the wings of the watermill were already whitening and were even mowed and piled, on the other.

Let us not mistake these passages for examples of the subject's commanding visual control over a sweep of landscape, for, more often than not, they represent visualizations of familiar landscapes. Often triggered by nocturnal sounds, or taken from obstructed angles, they sketch a mental movement: consciousness drains itself out into the landscape, using its own memory of it and endowing the remembered objects with a sort of magnetic force to lure the gaze farther and farther away. The subject arranges things "out there" along an imagined pictorial trajectory, so as to lose itself somewhere along its path.

Now imagine that this obsessive expansion, this attempted escape by association, were actually successful; that these regressions, halted by the grammatical (though compressed) form of the Gnessinean sentence, were let loose and ruptured the sentence. Without closure, the sentence becomes a scene of sprawling irrelevancies. Let me use Shabtai's own metaphor of unraveling, *prima*, as of a fabric coming undone, since this is where he reenters my argument. When Shabtai links sentences loosely and ungrammatically together across 275 pages, allowing his narrative focus to float from this person, this scene, or this dialogue to another and using names for pivots, he re-creates with large, narrative strokes the same vortex effect that Gnessin had drawn minutely with elements of grammar. Like Gnessin's chains, which, under the guise of taking possession of a view, actually sketch a movement of subjective dissipation, Shabtai's chains do not create intense effects of linkage¹⁰ so much as disruptions of our normal, conventional modes of reading texts and integrating subjects in texts. In the following example from *Past Continuous*, episodes in the life of a family are summarized in a string of sentences using the conjunction "and":

עד שיואל וציפורה נאלצו למכור את המשק, שכן, במשך שנים סבלה ציפורה מאקומה קשה ומתופעות אלרגיות באביב ובראשית הקיץ, ואלה התגברו משנה לשנה, ועליהם נוספה

העייפות שהצטברה בגוף והכבידה עליו יותר ויותר, ואף-על-פי-כן התאמצו בכל כוחם לקיים את המשק ורק כשלא יכלו עוד חזרו העירה, אבל בלי מאיר, ששירת במדבר המערבי ואחר-כך באיטליה, שם נשאר עוד תקופה לא-ארוכה אחרי שהמלחמה נגמרה ועסק בענייני העלייה, ובלי ירמיהו, שהיה בפלמ"ח, ואילו אביעזר הצטרף לקיבוץ, אבל בעבור זמן קצר נטש אותו ועבד בנמל, ואחר-כך עבד כטראקטוריסט שכיר בחקלאות, ולפעמים בביצוע כל מיני עבודות עפר בכל קצות הארץ, ורק אחת לשבוע או לשבועיים היה מגיע אל ציפורה ויואל, שרכשו בית קטן בשכונה בפרברי העיר, שם גרו עם אסתר ורות ועם מוסוליני, אותו כלב ערבי ללא תואר שהביאו אתם מהמושב, ועם הסבתא רחל, אשר למרות גילה היתה עדיין אשה צלולה-דעת ושמרה על נקינות ושירתה את עצמה וקראה עיתונים באידיש ומעט בעברית וביקרה ידידים וידידות ובבית-הכנסת, שם כיבדו אותה מאוד, ולא נזקקה אלא לעזרה מעטה מצד ציפורה, שבמשך חודשים אחדים הקדישה חלק גדול מזמנה לנחמה, אשתו של מאיר, בת מושבה, אביה החזיק רפת וכמה דונמים של גידולי שלדן, שמאיר נשא אותה בעת חופשה שקיבל כששירת באיטליה, ובעוד הוא משרת שם ילדה לו בן.

Until Yoel and Tsipora were forced to sell the farm, because, for years Tsipora had been suffering from serious eczema and allergies in the spring and early summer, and these grew worse from year to year, and to these was added the weariness accumulated in the body which weighed it down more and more, and nevertheless they tried with all their force to maintain the farm and only when they were completely exhausted they returned to town, but without Meir, who was serving in the Western Desert and later in Italy, where he stayed on for a brief period after the war and was involved in immigration business, and without Yirmeyahu, who was in the Palmach, whereas Aviezer joined a kibbutz, but soon dropped out and worked on the shipping docks, and afterward worked as a hired tractor operator in agriculture, and sometimes as an operator of heavy machinery all over the country, and only once a week or every fortnight would arrive at Tsipora and Yoel's, who had purchased a small house in a suburban neighborhood, where they lived with Esther and Ruth and with Mussolini, that nondescript Arabic dog they had brought back with them from the moshav, and with Grandma Rachel, who in spite of her age was still a clear-headed woman and managed her personal hygiene and serviced herself and read Yiddish newspapers and some in Hebrew and went to visit friends and relatives and to the synagogue, where she was very highly respected, and needed very little help from Tsipora, who for several months devoted a large part of her time to Nehama, Meir's wife, a moshava girl, her father owned a dairy farm and several dunams of irrigated crops, whom Meir had married on an off-duty at the time that he was serving in Italy, and while he was still in the service she had borne him a son. (220)

How does this factual account of a family's life manage to sound like a lamentation on the return of flesh to dust? A brooding theme of decline and impermanence lurks in the hectic condensation of events; gloomy is the summary that dulls life's variety to a litany on changeability; gloomy is the household's unstable identity, the only fixture of which appears to be that nondescript Arabic dog that "they had brought back with them from the moshav"; gloomiest of all is the structural interminability of the circumstantial chain, an effect of the run-on syntax. The commas, as serial agents, impose a mournful equivalency upon the changeful lives; as

indicators of continuity, elaboration, and amplification, they also raise expectations of narrative cohesiveness that are constantly being disappointed by the rapidly shifting narrative focus. The focus flits from person to person, hitching rides on names; in the episodes associated with these names, other names appear that attract additional episodes; thus, each episode begins as an apparent supplement but quickly tips into an enumerative excess that signals the abandonment or deflation of whatever mattered previously. Time, the great equalizer: everything slips away, and the more we read—for clearly, Shabtai's functional style invites us to read quickly, unlike Gnessin's prose, which forces a second reading—the more we lose. And since the narrative is impersonal, the sense of loss cannot be dismissed as the expression of a subject's mood, haunting us instead with the inevitability of doom. So powerful is this effect that it overrides the real narrative closures—of incidents, thoughts, and scenes—that sooner or later come about. These actual closures leave us unaffected, since they are woven into the continuously disrupted semantic/syntactical organization of the text.

It is easier here than in Gnessin's miniaturistic drifts to locate the moment of syntactical excess when one narrative line tips into another to create a digression that is only felt as such because the punctuation promises a continuity that the text does not deliver.¹¹ But the associative drift, the unmotivated excessiveness of which expresses a hunger for continuity of such desperate proportions that it would feed on practically anything—the sound of a name, the proximity of a mountain to the line of the horizon, or two intersecting streets in Tel Aviv—is fundamentally similar. If Gnessin tells us that “the murmur of the water coming from the mill house dreaming by the river flowing through the fields disappearing in the fog flowed into the silence and gave it a specific form,” Shabtai tells us that Tsipora and Yoel moved in with Grandma Rachel who did not need Tsipora who devoted most of her time to Nehama who bore a son to Meir who was serving in the Western Desert and later in Italy where he stayed on for a period of time after the war and was engaged in immigration business, whereas Aviezer joined a kibbutz. In both cases, the accumulation quickly becomes significant, its objects incidental. These objects in Shabtai are people's lives, their hopes and vain plans tumbling down the torrent of time; in Gnessin they are natural signposts feeding the mind's craving for oblivion.

There is an element of divagation in these chains: they allow normal, conventionally meaningful forms of arrangement that unfold and end according to some redeeming logic to be disrupted by the rule of accident. Certainly, if we could accept that syntax can reflect a self, then these syntactical constructions invaded by disorder reflect exhaustion and renunciation.¹²

The intimate connection between overabundance and disease is hinted at with characteristic offhandedness in a passage in Shabtai's second novel, *Sof davar*.¹³ The passage could be read as a veiled statement about the writing situation:

[Meir is walking home on Ben Gurion Boulevard in Tel Aviv.] And as he walked northward and gazed, quite mindlessly, at the sidewalk and the trees and the stores and the houses, and registered them with that same unfocused gaze in all their details, down to the tiniest and most elusive ones, and at one and the same time also all the changes that had occurred in them and also what they were before these changes had occurred in them, like three superimposed photographs, he thought again about his illness, which, in truth, he really did not feel, and which therefore seemingly did not exist, and his spirits sank. (32)

There is a connection, first, between the simultaneous perception of stages of change and decay in the city and, on the other hand, awareness of the covert advance of the disease in the body, a truly creepy fantasy of which develops a few lines later; second, between that relaxation of conscious control evidenced in the oft-repeated absentmindedness of Meir's gaze and, on the other hand, the illogical abundance of his vision. Meir's somnambulism empowers his vision with the wealth of memory and imagination, but it is also a symptom of his disorientation and depression. Reading this interpretation back to *Past Continuous*, we could say that the enumerative nature of the text and its chatty, unfocused abundance testify to something being very wrong with "it." It is an account of what can be seen or told when there is no longer any reason for or possibility of discernment.

Gnessin died at age thirty-three of a pulmonary disease. He had not informed his family of his condition, although he had been aware of it for some time, and only a few friends were assembled at his bedside in the hospital when he died; Shabtai died at age forty-four of heart failure, following a long decline during which he attempted to complete his second novel; he died, as his wife recounts in the novel she wrote after his death, in the middle of the night, on the pavement outside his house, where his doctor had been trying to revive him by massaging his heart. But more than the mere poignancy of their untimely deaths, it is the way in which presentiment of death similarly determines their prose style that causes the two writers to be associated with each other. It seems to me that the movement of their sentences as observed here reflects a fantasy of death and, as such, well supports their macabre imagery. Indeed, the obsessive filtration of the theme of absence through style in these modernist texts has the effect of breathing into style (syntax) a representative, figurative value reminiscent of imagery.

Take the digressive chains in Gnessin's landscape descriptions—they express nothing, if not anxiety. The mind gathers the physical environment around itself like a reassuring mantle—that mill by those trees near that bridge—proclaiming, "I have put this scene together, therefore I am/have been." Parting from the view in the very act of seeing it, the mind shifts to mental image, ready for the moment when vision will be obscured. One might even consider such angled "takes" of the landscape as expressions of a childlike fantasy of burial: "this is your only line of vision when you're laid out rigidly down there," says the child. "If dirt were transparent, the sky and the treetops is where your gaze would stop; but really, it's so dark and quiet down here that you can only hear distant things, such as birdcalls or the flow of a river." The characteristic effects of distance, penumbra, and obstruction may be a transposition of the same imagined experience of sensing reality from under several feet of dirt. Following this interpretive divagation to its logical conclusion, we could say that in Gnessin's psychological imagery, the grave, as the point of ultimate fixity, becomes equated with point of view, so that, for the exhausted Gnessinean character, all looking—as well as all staying in one place—is a foretaste of dying (which well explains these characters' incurably nomadic way of life).

Similarly, it is possible to interpret Shabtai's subjectless discourse psychologically as a fantasy of life continuing after the subject is gone. As a disembodied *spoken* text, particularly, it works from within a model of immediate presence, bringing home the notion of absence with great force. The digressive syntax would then represent a pointlessness that is both literal—"point of an argument" and "grammatical full stop," along with other related concepts, being covered in Hebrew by the generic term *nekuda* (dot)—and figurative, the point being the subject.

An image in the first page of Shabtai's unfinished second novel embodies the subject's absence with bare simplicity: a man imagines his own death in the form of his wife, his friends, and the wife's lover walking together "at the end of Dizengoff" with an empty space cut alongside them in the shape of his own person. This image leads us to perceive, furthermore, that the whole narrative context has become an imagistic display of the operation of obsessive thought turning on death. This new imagistic density forms part of Shabtai's apparent return to traditional lyrical form at this late stage in his stylistic development. Certainly the prose of this late passage is more opaque and literary than that of *Past Continuous*. Distinguished by great syntactical complexity, equivocal phrasings, an elliptical referentiality, and evocative imagery, it marks the reemergence of what had probably always been Shabtai's primary model of style, the moody, image-laden lyricism of Gnessin:

ובך, מרגע שהתעורר בבוקר, בעודו שוכב בעיניים עצומות מכוסה בשמיכתו הדקה על יד אביבה אשתו, ועד שנרדם בלילה, בהפוגות קצרות של הסחת דעת רופפת, לא חדל מלערוך את חשבון חייו ולמדוד את המרחק שעוד נשאר בינו לבין המוות הזה, שהצטייר בדמיונו לפעמים בתמונת יום אביב שטוף שמש, ואשתו ופוזנר ועוד כמה חברים, לרוב מופיע פתאום גם הגבר ההוא ומצטרף, מטיילים בסוף דיונגוף בעוד הוא עצמו נעדר, אבל העדרות תמידית וסופית. הוא ראה את עצמו כחלל הגוזר בדמותו באוויר שביניהם, ולפעמים כשער ברזל צבוע בצבע מיניום מאובק ועליו פיתוחים שיגרתיים של ציצים ופרחים, קבוע בחומת אבן של בית-קברות, שראה על יד נצרת, כשנסע לפני שנים אחדות בסוף החורף עם גברוש לצפות בציפורים, אחרי שנכנע באירצון להפצרותיו הבלתי מפגיעות כביכול. שביל ישר כסרגל, מכוסה חצץ ומחטי אורן, נטוע משני צידיו ברושים עבותים ואורנים רוחשים ברוח הקלה, הוביל אל השער, שרוי בדומיה גמורה, ספוגה בריחם החריף והלא־נשכח של העצים והאדמה הלחה, אשר במשהו ממנה ומהרחש המונוטוני של העצים ברוח הקלה, שבו התגשמה, חש לרגעים גם עכשיו, בעודו שרוע באפס מעשה בחול הרך, "משולש ברמודה" בידיו, עיניו נשואות בלי תכלית אל הים הרועע ולאופק.

and so, from the minute he woke up in the morning, as he lay with his eyes closed, covered with his thin blanket, beside his wife Aviva, and until he fell asleep at night, with brief respites of fleeting diversion, he did not cease from drawing the account of his life and measuring the distance that still separated him from that death, which he sometimes pictured in his mind in the image of a sunny spring day, with his wife and Pozner and a few other friends, most of the time that other man would also suddenly appear and join them, walking at the end of Dizengoff with himself being absent, but a constant and final absence. He saw himself as a space cut in his shape in the air between them, and sometimes as an iron gate painted a dusty minium color with trite arabesques of flowers and leaves, set in the stone wall of a cemetery, which he saw near Nazareth, when he had gone there with Gavrush a few years ago toward the end of the winter to do some bird-watching, having reluctantly acceded to his friend's seemingly unpressing invitations. An arrow-straight path, covered with gravel and pine needles, flanked with thick cypresses and pine trees rustling in the soft wind, led to the gate, shrouded in a deep silence saturated with the sharp and unforgettable scent of the trees and damp earth, something of which and of the monotonous rustle of the trees in the soft wind, in which it took form, he felt at moments even now, as he lay idly in the soft sand, his hands holding *The Bermuda Triangle* and his eyes fixed purposelessly on the calm sea and the horizon. (10)

Drawing from the memory of a visit to a cemetery with Gavrush, who is now dead, Meir spins a fantasy of what it's like to be dead, which then becomes projected onto the beach scene: lying "idly" in the sand, his eyes "fixed purposelessly" on the horizon, his hands holding *The Bermuda Triangle* like a cross, Meir re-creates and sensuously tastes the peaceful commingling experienced by that hypothetical body, which, back in the cemetery, must have lain shrouded in a deep silence saturated with the unforgettable scent of pine trees and damp earth.

Notice the ambiguity surrounding the subject in this new, elliptical style: Who is the subject for whom the scent of pine trees and damp earth

is “unforgettable”? Is it the logical subject Meir who, recalling the scent as he lies on the beach, tells himself that it is unforgettable, or his illogical double buried in the cemetery who is incapable of forgetting? And where is that subject in the clause “having reluctantly acceded to his friend’s seemingly unpressing invitations”? The invitation (+) was unpressing (–) but only seemingly so (+), and the acceptance (+) was done reluctantly (–), with no display of continuity between intention and action.

Gnessin’s convoluted syntax had been a medium for referential equivocation, with pronouns of uncertain reference exuding a sense of absence. This late passage from Shabtai carries clear echoes of that method. In the second sentence, we find a “path . . . dipped in a silence saturated with a scent . . . felt even now,” in which is embedded a reference to an “it” (fem.) “becoming embodied” in “something” (masc., probably “the rustle of the trees”). We scan the passage for the feminine noun that might fulfill this promise of embodiment (*hitgashmut*). We find three: *demama* (silence), *ruah* (wind), and *adama* (soil). Which of them is the real one?

If we opted for *demama*, the clause could state that the silence was embodied in the rustle of leaves. Gnessin had used a similar paradox to render the sense of an absence: his silence was “given specific form” by the distant murmur of flowing water.

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NOTES

1. Yaakov Shabtai, *Zikhron devarim*, (Tel Aviv, 1977), p. 173 (translated as *Past Continuous*, Philadelphia, 1981). The English rendition for all Hebrew citations used in this article is mine. It is more literal than standard literary translations, and has allowed me to refer to the texts in English and to minimize the use of transliterations and other parenthetical notations.

2. Shabtai’s influence filters through the conversational undertones of the prose in Amos Oz’s 1991 novel *Hamatsav hashelishi* [The Third Condition]; it may be detected in the accounts of minute and obsessive routine in A. B. Yehoshua’s 1987 novel *Molkho*, or in the studied desultoriness of the dramatic voices in *Ma haya qore ‘im hayinu shokhahim et dov* [What Would Have Happened If We Had Forgotten Dov], a 1992 collection of short stories by the young writer Gadi Taub.

3. Moshe Ron, “Past Continuous: The Sentence” [Hebrew] *Siman qri’ah* 16–17 (1983): 272–78. Ron’s self-deprecating note explaining how he came to perform this uninspired task testifies to the novel’s powerful imaginative hold on some readers: “I took it upon myself to count the sentences in *Past Continuous*. It happened at a moment of nearly total spiritual paralysis [*hidalon ruhani kim’at muhlat*], in a different and distant city that is not Tel Aviv. I even numbered them for convenience, not (God forbid) with any intention of creating a new holy writ” (273).

4. Dan Miron, *Pinqas patuah: 'al hasiporet ha'ivrit betashlah* [Current Israeli Prose-Fiction: Views and Reviews] (Tel Aviv, 1979), p. 27; Ron 1983. There is a close affinity between Ron's object and method of observation and my own. Ron points out some of the unusual temporal shifts in Shabtai's sentences. They create a perspectival flatness in the story and determine its ambience of human frenzy: "If *Past Continuous* were a painting by Brueghel, then its subject would be "The Dance of Death"—that medieval fantasy in which skeletons hold hands and dance in a circle . . . to remind the living that in spite of all their differences, which guide all their actions in life, they will all suffer the same fate in death" (277).

5. Witness S. Yizhar, whose early stories, written in the 1930s and 1940s in a linguistic climate far different from Gnessin's, nevertheless echo the master's style so faithfully that they appear to form part of some earnest self-apprenticeship (S. Yizhar, *Haḥorsha bagiv'a* [The Wood on the Hill], 1947). Yizhar's work today still revolves within the same stylistic circle.

6. The temporal distance between the two Ruḥamas is less than sixty years, narrow enough to tempt us to imagine a *real*, aged and disillusioned woman returning home from restless voyages, as her Gnessinean predecessors all did before her. The small-town *salon littéraire* assembled around such figures recently returned from *artsot hayam* ("the lands of the sea") is a characteristic setting in Gnessin.

7. See Dan Miron, "Gnessin after Fifty Years" [Hebrew], *Kivun orot* [Back to Focus] (Tel Aviv, 1979), pp. 110–208, and Gershon Shaked, "Time and Space in Style" [Hebrew] reprinted in *U. N. Gnessin: miḥar ma'amarim 'al yetsirato* [U.N.G.: Selected Criticism], ed. Lily Rattok (Tel Aviv, 1977). That these critical studies did not formulate this facet of Gnessin's work may be because of some tenacious mimetic expectations that typically caused their writers to assume, and often to actively reconstruct expressive, verbally agile personalities out of the diffuse, extended, and reflexive surfaces of the novellas. The very notion of a literary impressionism, elucidated in the study of modernist poetry, had not been applied with equal clarity to Hebrew prose. I am indebted to the essays on David Fogel in the recent special issue of *Prooftexts* devoted to the poet for a better understanding of the diffusiveness of the subject in impressionist poetry and prose (*David Fogel and the Emergence of Hebrew Modernism*, eds. Michael Gluzman, Chana Kronfeld, and Eric Zakim, *Prooftexts* 13 [January 1993]). An earlier attempt by Hamutal Bar Yosef to describe metaphors in Gnessin in terms of a literary impressionism have also been helpful. See in particular "Gliding Metaphors in the Stories of U. N. Gnessin" [Hebrew] in *U. N. Gnessin: meḥqarim ute'udot* [U. N. Gnessin, Studies and Documents], eds. Dan Miron and Dan Laor (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 105–26. An earlier and important model of analysis was provided also by Joseph Ha'efrati's studies in modern Hebrew poetry in his *Hamar'ot vehalashon* [The Presented World] (Tel Aviv, 1976).

8. Uri Nissan Gnessin, *Etsel* [By the Way], *Kol kitvei U. N. Gnessin* [Collected Works], eds. Dan Miron and Israel Zamorah (Tel Aviv, 1982), 1:465. Page numbers refer to vol. 1 of this edition.

9. Shaked 1977, p. 192.

10. Some critics have interpreted the run-on discourse as an element of cohesion in this story of emotional and social dislocation. Thus, Miron finds in the novel the image of a "social organism," the narrative form reflecting the operation of an impersonal "metaphysical memory" that imposes a redeeming sense of order upon the chaotic social scene (Miron 1979). Nissim Kalderon expresses similar views in "Until the Seventeenth of May" [Hebrew], *Siman qri'ah* 10 (1980): 431–37.

11. The organizing idea, stated in the initial sentence, determines the first, but only the first, detail of each episodic segment. It concerns the family's move to town and the consequent changes in the household. Extending from this dramatic core, however, are details concerning the history of the members of the family that properly belong to a discursive register. For example, in the Meir segment, the clause "who was serving in Italy"

directly explains the previous "they returned to town, but without Meir (who was serving in Italy)," but it is followed by a summary of Meir's other activities over a long period of time. Note how a return to the dramatic focus, such as occurs in "whereas Aviezer joined a kibbutz" (and therefore he, too, did not come to live with his parents) can strike the reader, on the contrary, as a new deviation when it follows on the heels of some particularly long and engrossing digression.

12. The novel has been interpreted as a somber account of the demise of social ideologies. Stoic acceptance is the ideal intimated in Goldman's esoteric readings, and in the resigned figure of Uncle Lazar.

13. Translated as *Past Perfect*, Viking Penguin, 1987.