

DEKEL SHAY SCHORY

The Shadows of Death: Uri Nissan Gnessin

One day after the hundredth anniversary of his passing away, a small group of Hebrew literary scholars from Israel, the United States, and Poland gathered around Uri Nissan Gnessin's grave at the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw (fig. 1): "We stood excited, snowflakes and freezing wind around us. We said Kaddish and read from *Ezra*," wrote Avner Holtzman about this moment. And as the group kept strolling down the streets of what used to be Jewish Warsaw, the physical absence of Gnessin only emphasized his strong presence in Hebrew literature and in the hearts of his readers and researchers.¹

Uri Nissan Gnessin, a characteristic Eastern European Hebrew writer of the fin de siècle, was born in 1879 in Starodub, in the Russian Empire, to a Hasidic family. His father, Yehoshua Natan, was the

Fig. 1: Uri Nissan Gnessin's tombstone in Warsaw.

¹ The memorial service was part of a conference organized by the University of Warsaw and the Tel Aviv University in 2013. See Avner Holtzman, Man'ginat ha-mavet shel Uri Nisan Gnesin [Uri Nissan Gnessin's Death Melody], in: Haaretz, 27 March 2013, <<https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/.premium-1.1975272>> (1 July 2022).

student newspaper entitled *Ha-Kof* (The Monkey),² a precursor of literary collaborations to come.

The Uprooted Protagonist: Life and the Work of Literature

“In a generation of Hebrew authors in whose collective biography wandering was a basic component,” writes Avner Holtzman, “Gnessin is the most frequent flyer of all.”³ Gnessin was approximately eighteen when he first ventured from his hometown of Pochep to Warsaw, the greatest Jewish metropolis of the time, to find his place in the literary world. From there, he visited other cities in the expanse of Eastern Europe, such as Kyiv, Vilna, and Gomel’. Over the years, he also spent several months in the Land of Israel and London (1907–1908). He returned to Warsaw in late 1912, in the final stages of the heart disease from which he had suffered all his life. He died at the age of 34 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery on Gęsia Street.

Warsaw was a bustling literary nexus, home to printshops, publishing houses, and newspaper headquarters, as well as Ben-Avigor (Abraham Leib Shalkovich), Nahum Sokolow, David Frishman, Yeruham Fishel Lachower, Hillel Tseytlin, and other friends and supporters of Gnessin. Upon his arrival in Warsaw, he began publishing on the city’s literary platforms. His first article appeared in *Ha-Meliz* (The Advocate), followed by poems and translations in *Ha-Zefirah* (The Dawn) and *Ha-Dor* (The Generation). He made a meager living doing translation work for Tushiya (Wisdom) publishing house, and in 1906, together with Shimon Bikhovski, he founded Niseyonot (Attempts), a publishing house for original and translated Hebrew literature, including Gnessin’s own novella *Beintayim* (Meanwhile) (fig. 3).

Gnessin’s life reads like the classic biography of other young Jews in Eastern Europe of his time:⁴ a childhood spent in a traditional, observant family; leaving home at a young age to obtain an education or earn a living; peregrinations around the big cities of Europe; excitement for, and involve-

Fig. 2: Article Theater “Habimah” in Moscow in a Russian journal with a picture of Uri Nissan Gnessin’s brother Menahem, co-founder of Hebrew theater (first on the left).

dean of a yeshiva in Pochep, and his brother, Menahem (1882–1951), would be among the founders of Hebrew theater in the Land of Israel (fig. 2). Gnessin was engaged in literary work from his adolescent years onward. During his studies in Pochep, where he attended his father’s yeshiva, he made the acquaintance of Yosef Hayyim Brenner (Gnessin was fifteen and Brenner thirteen at the time). Together, they edited a handwritten daily

² Michael Gluzman, “Te’udati–ha-pirekus.” He’arot aḥadot al sig’nono ha-me’uḥar shel Gnesin [“My Diploma—the Adornment.” Some Remarks on Gnessin’s Late Style], in: *Ot. A Journal of Literary Criticism and Theory* 5 (2015), 5–29, here 8.

³ Avner Holtzman, Uri Nisan Gnesin be-Varshah. Taḥana ri’shona ve-taḥana aḥarona [Uri Nissan Gnessin in Warsaw. A First and Last Stop], in: *Gal-Ed. On the History and Culture of Polish Jewry* 24 (2015), 15–26, here 15.

⁴ Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo’adam. Li-de’yokanah shel ha-republikah ha-sifrutit ha-ivrit be-teḥilat ha-me’ah ha-esrim* [When Loners Come Together. A Portrait of Hebrew Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century], Tel Aviv 1987.

ment in, the Varsovian literary center; a back and forth between other centers of Hebrew literature; connections to contemporary authors and other literary figures. Gershon Shofman, for example, met Gnessin in Gomel', while they were both young authors, and described in great warmth their encounter.⁵

Of all Gnessin's companions in the literary world, particularly salient is the association with, and then dissociation from, Brenner. Their relationship has been

debated at length in scholarly literature, but it is clear that they were close friends from their teenage years. It is clear, as well, that Gnessin helped Brenner edit *Ha-Me'orer* (The Awakener) in London in 1907, and that they then became thoroughly alienated. In retrospect, Brenner reminisced about his relationship with Gnessin: "There was love, there was—without any doubt. Esteem? That perhaps was not so strong and deep, especially after we both fell into what is called 'life.'"⁶

Despite his diverse literary activity, Gnessin is known mainly for his prose. He left an oeuvre of limited scope—just eleven stories and novellas. Yet, his unique poetic style and worldview, together with the fact that he lived a brief life and died before his time, have made him a mythic figure still unforgettable more than a century after his death.

Fig. 3: From left to right: The Pochev-born journalist Shimon Bikhovski, Uri Nissan Gnessin, and the poet Yitzhak Alterman, 1907/08.

⁵ G. Shofman, Uri Nisan Gnesin, in: Kol kitve G. Shofman [The Collected Works of G. Shofman], 5 vols., here vol. 4, Tel Aviv 1960, 259. Gershon Shofman (1880–1972) was a Hebrew author. His first book was published in 1902 in Warsaw. Although he wrote in Hebrew in a German-speaking environment for twenty-five years, a first translation from his work into German appeared only recently: Gerschon Schoffmann, *Nicht für immer. Erzählungen*, transl. by Ruth Achlama, Graz/Vienna 2017.

⁶ Yosef Hayim Brenner, Uri-Nisan (milim aḥadot) [Uri-Nisan (A Few Words)], in: Project Ben-Yehuda, Complete Collection of Uri Nissan Gnessin's Works, <<https://benyehuda.org/read/601>> (1 July 2022).

Literary Works

Gnessin's first book, *Zilele ha-ḥayim* (Shadows of Life), part of a Hebrew library series published by Ben-Avigdor's Tushiya, appeared in 1904, when the author was in his early twenties. The collection contained three short stories, *Genya* (Zhenya), *Ma'ase be-Otelo* (The Story of Othello), and *Shemu'el ben Shemu'el* (Shemu'el, Son of Shemu'el), that hewed close to the publisher's realism and naturalism. The stories have been taken by critics as a single piece. Conspicuous in them all, as for instance described by Dan Miron, is "the twisted and perverted Eros."⁷

In the same year, Gnessin completed his story *Ba-bait sab'a* (In Grandfather's House). He sent it to Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, the editor of *Ha-Shiloaḥ* (The Sending), who rejected the piece several months later. The story describes a single evening in the life of Shemu'el, who is experiencing a confusing period of maturation in general and sexual maturation in particular. In the story, he faces his strict, devout grandfather, who forbids him to submit to his sexuality. Gnessin was deeply hurt by the rejection of the story, and declined to send it to other platforms or even to show it to friends. It was published only posthumously, in 1921.⁸

Forming the core of Gnessin's oeuvre are his four long novellas: *Ha-ḥidah* (Sideways, 1905), *Beintayim* (1906), *Be-terem* (Before, 1909), and *Ezel* (Besides, 1913). Prominent in these is Gnessin's poetic singularity, first and foremost in his language, and his intensive use of free indirect speech. Michael Gluzman has claimed that the plots of Gnessin's later stories are slower and dismantled until they seem undirected or lacking purpose. The absence of purpose is not only a mental situation but is also disintegrating the syntax of the sentences. The absence of purpose also creates a shocking affect, *pirekus* (convulsion), in particular in stories like *Ezel* on the threshold of death.⁹

As Josef Even has argued, "Gnessin's main inventory of scenery is quite uniform and not particularly varied. In nearly all of his stories, there emerge similar, repetitive details drawn from the childhood experience of a person in an Eastern European town and its characteristic land-

⁷ Dan Miron, Ḥayim be'apo shel ha-nezaḥ. Yizirato shel Uri Nisan Gnesin [Posterity Hooked. The Travail and Achievement of Uri Nissan Gnessin], Jerusalem 1997, 31.

⁸ Dana Olmert has identified a link between the young Shemu'el's castration anxiety and the fear of rejection that Gnessin himself felt toward the authority figure of Bialik, and this may be why he chose to put the work aside. Dana Olmert, Mah hitgalah le-Gnesin ba-bait sab'a? [What Did Gnessin Come to Discover in "Ba-bait sab'a" (In Grandfather's House)?], in: *Ot. A Journal of Literary Criticism and Theory* 5 (2015), 93–108.

⁹ Gluzman, "Te'udati-ha-pirekus."

scapes.”¹⁰ Indeed, one can find in almost every story the forests, the fog, and the rain.

A central focus of the novellas is the exposition of the leading characters’ psychology and the revelation of the protagonist’s thoughts as a matter of utmost importance—features that inhibit in-depth development of the plot, secondary characters, and background. As Eyal Bassan has demonstrated convincingly, the weather is very intense in Gnessin’s stories, from the narrators’ and characters’ perspective. One can sense a tendency to reflect the weather as a field saturated in sensational richness. It can be noticed at the opening of *Ba-ganim* (In the Gardens), in the detailed description of the chill morning sky becoming warmer and stifling as the sun comes out.¹¹

Although Gnessin endeavors in his early works to depict landscapes, he also chooses to ensoul nature (*Durchseelung*), and to give emotive descriptions to objects. Thus he “vigorously manipulates nature so as to mold with it the stream of experiences of the protagonist who is present in that scenery [...] and turns it into a fundamental aspect of his inner life.”¹² Gnessin’s portrayals of scenery, described by Brenner as “symbolic realism,” serve as an efficient mechanism for bringing the objects closer to the person observing them and to that person’s psychological needs.

As Natasha Gordinsky describes in her article in this volume, the publication of Gnessin’s novella *Ha-zidah* in 1905 marked the turning point in the literary attention that he received. Unlike Gnessin’s other works, *Ha-zidah* possesses, at least chronologically, the scope of a novel, and it plumbs greater psychological depths. The plot extends across the seasons of three years in the life of the protagonist, Naḥum Ḥagzar. Although at the outset of the story, Ḥagzar is a young man who is certain of his future, according to Miron, he gradually descends “into slackness of life and idle tranquility due to his inertness, reflected in the dreariness of the small city.”¹³ Ḥagzar is an author, a common feature in Hebrew fiction of the early twentieth century. Furthermore, “Ḥagzar’s literary pretensions are an expression of his aspiration to impose order and discipline on his life, and they therefore become his test, trial, and sentence.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Josef Even, *Temunot ha-nof be-siporaw shel U. N. Gnesin* [Landscape Images in the Stories of U. N. Gnessin], in: Dan Miron/Dan Laor (eds.), *Uri Nisan Gnesin. Mehkarim ve-te’udot* [Uri Nisan Gnessin. Studies and Documents], Jerusalem 1986, 42–59, here 44.

¹¹ Eyal Bassan is referring in his discussion to the affect theory, that places its focus on sensations rather than emotions. See idem, *Mezeg ha-awir ezel Gnesin, o ha-afekt shel ha-sigenun* [The Weather in Gnessin, or the Affect of Style], in: *Ot. A Journal of Literary Criticism and Theory* 5 (2015), 31–51.

¹² Bassan, *Mezeg ha-awir ezel Gnesin, o ha-afekt shel ha-sig’nun*, 58.

¹³ Miron, *Ḥaḥim be’apo shel ha-nezah*, 145.

¹⁴ Miron, *Ḥaḥim be’apo shel ha-nezah*, 147.

The protagonist of *Beintayim* is facing a limbic situation in every aspect of his life. Naftali Berger (and note, *nif’tal* can be translated as twisted or complexed) is a private tutor of two young teenagers in a provincial town. His life seems boring, filthy, and meaningless. The story emphasizes sensory description of Naftali’s existentialist thoughts and confronts him with his “Devil’s advocate,”¹⁵ David Ratner, who believes suicide is the only possible way.

Be-terem, published as a serial from 1909 to 1910, describes the return of Uriel Efrat, the uprooted son, to his parents’ home in the town. He returns there from a pursuit of pleasure in Kyiv, where he lived with his “matron,” Irena Vasil’evna. Chapter after chapter, the book follows the stops along Uriel’s journey back to “the oaks of his nativity.” Most commentators have seen the book as using the model of the return home—here, an unsuccessful return. Uriel arrives at his parents’ home at a late hour of the night, spends a short time with them, and leaves the house early the next morning only to drift about, not returning to the house for eight days. It is clear that Uriel, more than a returnee, is a drifter. For him, the house is merely a stop on a journey—a significant stop, to be sure, yet merely a stop. Poetically, it was in this story that Gnessin apparently first used an internal monologue reflecting the stream of consciousness of his protagonist. According to Eyal Bassan, one can find in this story a “restless strangeness” that forms a surprising movement. He interprets this movement as a nomadic movement, deterritorialization, as opposed to the literature of the literary group *Tlushim* (The Uprooted), whose motivation is reterritorialization. Thus, the restless wandering is at the center, and not the movement of an (unsuccessful) return home.¹⁶

Ezel was completed in 1912 but published only in 1913, after the death of the author. For this reason, it is difficult not to see within it Gnessin’s own efforts to come to terms with his impending death. This is the story of Efraim Margalit, a brilliant intellectual who suffers greatly from a serious disease, as he thinks back to all the young women who have pined for his love. Across the chapters of the story, there is a progression of recollections, his stream of consciousness, and flashes of memory, interspersed with depictions of nature and of pain. In the introduction, Efraim arrives in the rural area outside the town, where he meticulously scrutinizes the nature around him, even as his physical pain sporadically rises to consciousness. A powerful question posed by the story is whether the creation of a great

¹⁵ Dan Miron, *Madu’a Gnesin? Shlosha iyunim* [Why Gnessin? Three Studies], Jerusalem 2014, 57–64.

¹⁶ Eyal Bassan, *Elef ha-mishurim shel Uri Nisan Gnesin* [The Thousand Plateaus of Uri Nisan Gnessin], in: *Ot. A Journal of Literary Criticism and Theory* 2 (2012), 55–89.

literary work can give its creator some degree of immortality—a question that naturally cannot be uncoupled from Gnessin himself.¹⁷

The literary career of Uri Nissan Gnessin spanned thirteen short years, from his arrival in 1900 on the Hebrew literary scene in Warsaw to his death in 1913 in the same city. Not long after he came to Warsaw, Gnessin wrote in a literary critique that, in his view, “the purpose of literature lies in the needs of the present, and its function is to grapple with the hardships of a bewildered generation and to show it a way forward.” As the contemporary reader of Gnessin’s work knows, it can also be relevant after more than a hundred years.

Translated from the Hebrew by David B. Greenberg

Literature

Uri Nissan Gnessin, *Beside and Other Stories*, with an introduction by Rachel Albeck-Gidron, New Milford, Conn., 2005.

Dan Miron, *Ḥaḥim be'apo shel ha-neṣaḥ. Yizirato shel Uri Nisan Gnesin* [Posterity Hooked. The Travail and Achievement of Uri Nissan Gnessin], Jerusalem 1997.

Dan Miron, *Madu'a Gnesin? Shlosa iyunim* [Why Gnessin? Three Studies], Jerusalem 2014.

Project Ben-Yehuda, Complete Collection of Uri Nissan Gnessin’s Works (Heb.), <<https://benyehuda.org/author/9>> (1 July 2022).

Author

Dekel Shay Schory studied Hebrew literature at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU), where she completed her PhD in 2019. In her MA thesis, she studied the work of Gershon Shofman, and her PhD dissertation examines the relations between German and Hebrew literature and language from 1900 to 1933. She has been teaching at the Department of Hebrew Literature at BGU since 2011. At the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, she is head of IDEA, a program for youth excellence in the humanities. Schory is also a literary editor. In 2016, she founded a series of fiction books, *Ruah Zad* (Side Wind), together with Yigal Schwartz and Moria Dayan Codish. She is currently preparing a monograph on Jewish authors in twentieth-century Vienna. *Selected Publications*: The Hebrew Translations of Wilhelm Herzberg’s Jewish Family Papers. Interpretation and Reception in Multiple Layers, in: Manja Herrmann (ed.), *Wilhelm Herzberg’s Jewish Family Papers (1868). Interdisciplinary Readings of a Forgotten Bestseller*, Berlin/Boston, Mass., 2021 (with Judith Müller); *The Uncanny Meeting Point of Languages. Hebrew in G. Shofman and David Vogel’s Vienna*, in: *Yod. Revue des études hébraïques et juives* 23 (2021), 169–184.

¹⁷ Holtzman, Uri Nisan Gnesin be-Varshah.