

NATASHA GORDINSKY

Staging Provincial Poetics: A Close Reading of Uri Nissan Gnessin's *Ha-zidah* (Sideways, 1905)

Like thousands of other young Jewish men of his generation from Eastern Europe, Uri Nissan Gnessin (1879–1913) was an autodidact. He constantly sought and absorbed new knowledge and developed proficiency in three European languages, Russian, German, and French, translating from all of them into Hebrew, his second and literary language (fig. 1). The first volume of Gnessin's short stories appeared in 1904 in Warsaw. Yet, it was not until the publication of his novella *Ha-zidah* (Sideways), edited by David Frishman, in the prestigious Hebrew literary monthly *Ha-Zman* (The Time), that Gnessin was discovered as a wholly unique and innovative voice in the evolving modernist Hebrew republic of letters.

Decades after Gnessin's untimely death at the age of 33, prominent writers from different generations reflected on their enchantment with Gnessin's highly sophisticated and lyrically charged prose as well as his influence on their writings. It was Dan Miron, however, who paved the way for a scholarly work on Gnessin back in the sixties. In the eighties, he edited Gnessin's collected writings with annotations together with Israel Zmora, and published two monographies on his poetics—the second one only a few years ago, in 2014.¹

Discovering the Aesthetic Place

“The first time that Nachum Hagzar set foot in that pleasant house at the far end of the quiet street,” Gnessin begins his novella *Ha-zidah*, “was due to some trivial reason that was forgotten by him no sooner than

¹ Dan Miron, *Ḥaḥim be'apo shel ha-nezah. Yizirato shel Uri Nisan Gnesin* [Posterity Hooked. The Travail and Achievement of Uri Nissan Gnessin], Jerusalem 1997; idem, *Madu'a Gnessin? Shlosha iyunim* [Why Gnessin? Three Studies], Jerusalem 2014; Kol kitve Uri Nisan Gnesin [Collected Works of Uri Nissan Gnessin], ed. by Dan Miron and Israel Zmora, 2 vols., Tel Aviv 1982.

it had occurred.”² Perhaps no other early twentieth-century Hebrew novella or novel begins with a similar sentence, a sentence so exceptional that it forms the core of this paper’s argument. First of all, there were not many “pleasant houses” in modern Hebrew prose until the appearance of *Ha-zidah* in 1905. It is important to note that literary houses should not merely be understood as metaphors for something else. They are, as Diana Fuss asserts, “important constructs in their own right.”³ Taking heed of Fuss’ warning against figurative interpretations of domestic spaces, I would like to offer a reading of the novella that pays special attention to Gnessin’s spatial sensitivities. It would appear that he began developing a notion of spatiality in this early text, which

sought to tie together the lifeworld of the provincial town and aesthetic issues occupying early modernist Hebrew fiction. Or, to put it differently: He sought to probe the possibility of housing his modernist writing in a provincial town.

Since its publication, Uri Nissan Gnessin’s first novella and its enigmatic protagonist, Nachum Hagzar, a literary critic experiencing writer’s block and spending three years in a provincial town, have never ceased to fasci-

Fig. 1: Uri Nissan Gnessin, undated.

² Uri Nissan Gnessin, *Sideways*, transl. by Hillel Halkin, in: *Beside and Other Stories*, with an introduction by Rachel Albeck-Gidron, New Milford, Conn., 2005, 1–30, here 1.

³ Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior. Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, New York/London 2004, 1.

nate Hebrew writers, poets, and literary critics (figs. 2 and 3).⁴ Nevertheless, and without wishing to diminish the importance of his achievements, Miron’s hermeneutic frame, established more than half a century ago, remains almost entirely uncontested to this day. Miron interpreted the novella as the story of Hagzar’s gradual spiritual deterioration caused by the development of his relationship with three sisters, who captivate him with their erotic allure and become the main reason for his growing inability to write.

Even fifty years later, when Shachar Pinsker addressed the issues of writing and erotic desire in Gnessin’s work, the focus lay on the story of Nachum Hagzar and what Pinsker saw as the character’s repeated failures. This essay, however, shifts our hermeneutic attention to Hagzar’s cultural activities during his sojourn in the provincial town and reads his story alongside that of the three female protagonists, thus including an exploration of the novella’s margins in our interpretation. Whereas the first part of this paper outlines Gnessin’s spatial thinking, the second part offers a close reading of one key part of the novella and connects its spatial relations to aesthetic issues.

The Benefits of Provinciality

Among the nearly seventy Jewish women writers who lived and worked in Tsarist Russia, only a handful wrote in Hebrew, including Devorah Baron and Hava Shapiro. Since the social and cultural sphere surrounding Hebrew literature excluded women almost entirely until well into the 1920s, the first generation of young educated Jewish women appeared only as characters in fiction written by men. It was a hallmark of turn-of-the-century Hebrew fiction to imagine and translate conversations, which these young women and men would have had in other languages. Gnessin’s novella *Ha-zidah* shows some acoustic traces of this multilingualism. In fact, the narrator of the story is a translator from Yiddish—the primary language in which the protagonists converse—to the written language of the story. Apart from Yiddish, characters are also found to read and speak Russian and to speak Ukrainian, at least well enough to sing in it. Hebrew, on the other hand, hardly exceeds its role as a written language, since the only other speaker aside from Hagzar is Gavriel Carmel, who does not

⁴ For a summary of the various interpretations of the novella, see Natasha Gordinsky, *Ha-zidah mi-Moskvah. Ketivato ha-provinzi’alit shel Uri Nisan Gnesin [Sideways from Moscow. Uri Nissan Gnessin’s Provincial Writing]*, in: *Mehkere Yerushalayim be-sifrut ivrit/Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* (2019), no. 30, 33–56, here 1f.

Figs. 2 and 3: Uri Nissan Gnessin, *Ha-zidah*, Jerusalem 1913. The handwritten passage is an earlier poem by Gnessin from 1900.

make his appearance until the end of the novella. Gnessin's perspective thus proves to be crucial for understanding "the benefits of marginality," to borrow Iris Parush's notion of the unique situation of Jewish women in the nineteenth century who, while denied access to the Hebrew language, were fluent in European languages and equally well-read.⁵ The young women in *Ha-zidah*—Rosa, Manya, and Ida—are representative of this milieu and speak Yiddish, Russian, and French effortlessly.

The epistemological frame of my close reading of Gnessin's novella originates in Gabriele Schwab's concept of "imaginary ethnography," which proposes that texts "*write culture* by inventing a language that redraws the boundaries of imaginable worlds and by providing *thick descriptions* of the desires, fears, and fantasies that shape the imaginary lives and cultural encounters of invented protagonists."⁶ "But imaginary ethnographies," asserts Schwab, "do more than write life stories; they also rewrite cultural narratives."⁷ One of these cultural narratives is rewritten

⁵ Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women. Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*, Waltham, Mass., 172–207.

⁶ Gabriele Schwab, *Imaginary Ethnographies. Literature, Culture, and Subjectivity*, New York 2012, 2.

⁷ Schwab, *Imaginary Ethnographies*, 2.

by Gnessin when he imagines the encounter between Nachum Hagzar and the three sisters, challenging the perception of provinciality as the antithesis of modernism. This essay thus offers a poetic reflection on the emergence of women as potential agents of cultural change in provincial settings. Gnessin's spatial thinking has been wonderfully summarized by the unusual title of his novella, *Ha-zidah*, which captures a poetic movement that travels sideways from the center, both geographically and aesthetically. The trajectory of this close reading of *Ha-zidah* traces spatial configurations in Gnessin's writing as well as their relation to the aesthetics of provincial modernism developed throughout his work. Implementing the methodology of imagined ethnographies, the reading builds on Iris Parush's groundbreaking insights into the literacy practices of Eastern European Jews in the nineteenth century. Such a hermeneutic frame allows to situate these literacy practices, which are at the core of Gnessin's text, within the provincial space. To make this relation between space and key cultural practices visible, we shall focus on the representation of reading, which functions as one of the important sites of modernity in the provincial town.

My argument regarding the relation of modernist writing and provinciality may sound contradictory, since the prevailing view of modernism creates a divide between the metropolis and the provinces; yet, current studies call for a decentralized understanding of the different forms of modernism, which leads to the "provincialization of Europe," to use the expression of the cultural historian Dipesh Chakrabarty.⁸ As early as the 1980s, the cultural theorist Raymond Williams urged a critical rethinking of the theoretical approach to the relationship between the metropolis and modernism.⁹ On the one hand, Williams recognized that the social and cultural character of imperial cities, shaped by mass immigration, was highly conducive to the modernist turn. Thus, the general component underlying the formal innovations inaugurated by modernist aesthetics was immigration to the metropolis. On the other hand, he warned scholars of the inadequacy of a universal version of modernism that ignores the socioeconomic and aesthetic differences between the various places where the movement took hold. In order to account for these differences, Williams proposed, *inter alia*, the investigation of places far from metropolitan cities, where other forces operate. Williams's approach sheds new light on Gnessin's literary thinking because it highlights its dual movement: to the

⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, N. J., 2012.

⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism*, in: Peter Brooker (ed.), *Modernism / Postmodernism*, London / New York 1992, 82–94.

big city and, at the same time, to the small, provincial town. Returning to Gnessin's novella, the complete opening passage reads:

”בפעם הראשונה בא נחום חגזר לאותו הבית היפה, אשר בקצה הרחוב השוקטה, לרגלי סיבה אחת טפילה, שלפרקים היא עולה על לבו והוא חוזר ושוכחה מיד. לתמהונו, פגש אז שם את שכנתו השמנה, העלמה חנה היליה, המשחקת תמיד בקול רם ולמקוטעים, שלא כדרך הטבע, ושם בא עמה גם בדברים בפעם הראשונה. אז דווקא לא שהה שם הרבה, כי היה לבו הפעם אל חלומותיו, והוא מיהר הביתה וכנפי אדרתו פזורות ולבו קודח והוא מחכה ליום מחר ואל העבודה הקבועה ואל החיים המלאים עניין, המתחילים לו בעיר הקטנה החדשה, אשר בחר לו לשבתו אחרי צאתו את וילנה.”¹⁰

“The first time that Nachum Hagzar set foot in that pleasant house at the far end of the quiet street was due to some trivial reason that was forgotten by him no sooner than it had occurred. Much to his surprise, he met there his stout neighbor, young Hanna Heler, with her unnaturally loud staccato laugh, and conversed with her for the first time, too. Yet he didn't stay long on that occasion, for he was dreaming of other things; feverishly, his coattails flapping behind him, he hurried home to await the new job and the challenging life that would begin the next day, here in this provincial town to which he had chosen to move from Vilna.”¹¹

This narrative exposition provides a number of important clues for interpreting the story. Right away, the reader learns that Nachum Hagzar attends the “pleasant house” at least more than once, for there is a “first time.” It is moreover evident that the narrator withholds information when he hints at “some trivial reason” that brings Hagzar to the house of the three sisters. Thus, this is also the moment in which the temporal texture of the narrative becomes visible, as it represents the act of emplotment.

The reader further discovers that Hagzar has left Vilna, one of the centers of Jewish culture, to settle in a provincial town, where he is about to start teaching in the homes of four different families and, most importantly, where he hopes “to find the leisure to carry out his many literary projects, and afterward to travel in Europe, as had always been his dream.”¹² It is not of interest here that none of these hopes and dreams will be truly fulfilled in the end. What potentially lies at the core of Gnessin's text is more than the wish to tell a story; it is his attempt to find a new aesthetic form of telling it.

¹⁰ Kol kitve Uri Nisan Gnesin, vol. 1, 135.

¹¹ Gnessin, *Sideways*, 3.

¹² Gnessin, *Sideways*, 4.

In *Reading the City*, the Israeli literary scholar Oded Menda-Levy argues that the representation of the metropolis and the urban experience was a major theme of early twentieth-century Hebrew literature. Menda-Levy contends that the Hebrew and Yiddish literatures of this period preserved the binary pattern created in the works of Jewish writers of the previous generation, such as Perez Smolenskin and Sholem Aleichem, who placed the metropolis in stark contrast to the shtetl. However, the literature of the early twentieth century reduced the basis of comparison by focusing on “the passages between the urban space and the shtetl.”¹³ Menda-Levy's poetic-historical statement helps to pinpoint Gnessin's aesthetic choice of moving sideways from the dominant literary model of his time. First of all, it is important to stress that his novella does not take place in a shtetl but in a provincial town and, more specifically, in the movement between the “pleasant house” and the protagonist's room. Second, the passage between the two kinds of space is left outside the narration. For even if we seek to examine *Ha-zidah* only from Hagzar's point of view, his narrative of spatial movement contains two contesting, if not contradictory, trajectories. On the one hand, there is the generational phenomenon of young Jewish men (and only very gradually of women, who were much less socially mobile at that time), who aspire to migrate from small towns to one of the metropolises of Western Europe. However, it is not a sense of longing for the big city that stands at the novella's heart, but the possibility of a return to the province and to writing in Hebrew. It seems that Gnessin incrementally suspends the geographical and cultural telos of the yearning that Hagzar experiences for Western Europe until the end of the novella. However, by then, the protagonist's nostalgic gaze is directed toward the Vilna of his youth, which he remembers as a place of learning, where he spent “long, monumental nights of writing in his room” and working in the Strashun Library.¹⁴ At the same time, the novella offers a competing narrative, that of Rosa, who seeks to create a local culture in collaboration with other young women and men.

Ha-zidah should be read as an imaginary ethnography not only because Gnessin rewrites the trajectory of the dominant cultural narrative of movement, shifting the point of gravitation from the metropolis to the province, but also, and no less importantly, because he reflects on the literacy practices of young Jewish women and men at the turn of the twentieth century at the two foundational sites of culture, namely of read-

¹³ Oded Menda-Levy, *Likro' et ha-ir. Ha-hawayah ha-urbanit ba-siporet ha-ivrit me-emza ha-me'ah ha-19 ad emza ha-me'ah ha-20* [Reading the City. The Urban Experience in Hebrew Fiction from the Mid-Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century], Tel Aviv 2010, 117.

¹⁴ Gnessin, *Sideways*, 30.

Fig. 4: Synagogue in Gnessin's hometown Pochep.

ing and writing (fig. 4). In her recent groundbreaking book *The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature*, Iris Parush traces the writing revolution that took place in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish society. She reveals how the dominance of “oral literacy” gradually gave way to a new perception of written culture, which eventually took over during the Haskalah.¹⁵ Such a shift in literary practices enabled the *mitmaskilim* to constitute new forms of subjectivities through their own writing. In Parush's words, the writing revolution “was one of the main engines of secularization and modernization in this society, and there was hardly any area that it left unchanged.”¹⁶ In the concluding remarks of her book, Parush contends that in maskilic culture, writing was seen as a forbidden source of pleasure—an act of sin and hubris. This relationship reverberated in texts written by later generations of Eastern European writers, especially in the corpus of the following generation, who started publishing after 1881, and to which also Gnessin belonged, the *tehiyah* (the Hebrew revival). But whereas writing in Hebrew was an almost exclusively male cultural practice at the turn of the twentieth century, reading in a European language, as Iris Parush shows in her book *Reading Jewish Women*, was a literary practice in which women not only participated but also excelled—they often acquired a more advanced knowledge of European languages and literatures than men.¹⁷

The Space of Reading

In the absence of social mobility in the provinces, education becomes an important goal for the three sisters in *Ha-zidah*, which is exemplified by Manya's attempt to enter a Russian gymnasium, Ida's effort to become an excellent student, and the three sisters' desire to create a space for study and intellectual discussion in their drawing room. Thus, in one of the

¹⁵ Iris Parush, *The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature*, transl. by Jeffrey M. Green, Cham 2022, 9.

¹⁶ Parush, *The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature*, 8.

¹⁷ Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, 244.

most beautiful parts of the novella, Gnessin describes a reading group in which Hagzar participates together with the three sisters. This scene can be interpreted as a continuous act of reading that starts with Hagzar's anticipation of both the approaching fall and the time that he will be able to spend with the three sisters: “[T]hat dear, pleasant house would be warm and well lit. Beneath its spread of red velvet the couch would be spacious and soft; the lively eyes of the three pretty sisters would glow with a tender light.”¹⁸ Once autumn arrives, Hagzar's vision of a delightful time together comes true, as the reader discovers in this longer passage:

“אחרי כן בא הסתיו, וחגור סר פעם אחת אל הביבילייתקה, ואירע לידו סיפור אחד יפה מאוד, ולקח אותו בערב ובא אתו לשם ויקראהו באוזני העלמות עד תומו בלילה אחד. ולמוחרת בבוקר כבר הלכה אתו יחד רוזה אל הביבילייתקה לבחור ב'עוד איזה דבר יפה'; שיהיה להם למקרא בלילה הבא. והשמים היו כבר קודרים, והרוחות היו מלילות, והבצה עמוקה, וטיפות הגשמים דוקרות ומטפחות ומרטיבות. בימים הראשונים היו קוראים רק שלושתם; אולם מעט מעט היתה גם אידה לאחת השומעות התדירות. היא היתה באה חיוורת, והפר הצחור בידה, והיתה יושבת חרש באחת הפינות ומשלבת את ידיה על חזה ומקשיבה דומם. מאניה היתה יושבת על קצה הסופה ונשענת בזרועה על אדן החלון, ורוזה היתה סרוחה על משענת הנדנדה ומפנה אותה בעצלתיים לעברים, ומעומק היציע האדומה היה קולו קולו הצלול של חגור וקורא להם בהטעמה ובמתניות רוגשת מתוך הספר אשר בידו. יש שהיתה מאניה שואלת דבר בזהירות ובמאמרים מרוסקים, והוא היה מבאר לה בברכותי לב כבושה ובהשתדלות יתירה, או שהיתה רוזה משגת דבר מה, והוא היה משיב בתחילה בותרנות קלילה וחיישנית קצת ואחרי כן בכובד-ראש ההולך הלך וקבור. וכשהיתה רוזה עומדת עת רבה על שלה, בלי דברים ברורים, רק בהחלטה בטוחה, הוא היה מתחיל חושב בפני עצמו, כי רוזה קוראה מדברי הספר את שְׁלָה, והיה בא לידי החלטה, כי היא הוגה מחשבות ולה יש רכוש נפש טמיר, המדבר מתוך גרונה, אותו רכוש הנפש, שישנו לכל האנשים אשר עברו גלים על ראשם. והיה זוכר פתאום את הצעיר העלז ואת הלצותיה הארסיות של רוזה, והיה דבר-מה מתחיל קוסס את לבו, והוא היה חושב במרירות, כי בכלל הלא נשמת האשה מגילה סתומה לו לגמרי — ולא עוד, אלא שככה יהיה הדבר לעולמים ואין לזה תקנה; משום שיחוסיו אל הנשים הרי הם במהותם שגיאה אחת גדולה, שאין לה כל תקנה. והיה זוכר רגע את שכנתו השמנה, אשר קיבורותיה השמנות נתקלות תמיד בשלו, מדי לכתה אתו שכס אל שכס, והיו מתחילים מרפרפים בלבבו ונגוזים, כצללי הינשופים בלילות ירח קפואים, צללי מחשבות ארעיות וניצני הרגשות שנעלבו מימי היות לו שיח ושיג עם רוזה ואפילו עם מאניה זו. והיה מסתכל בפני רוזה הטהורים והנאצלים ולא היה מוצא בהם לכאורה כלום, אלא שהיה בטוח משום מה, כי יש שענייה מזכירות לו רגע אחד את החתול האפור אשר לו, הרובץ תמיד על הקומודה האדומה אשר בחדרו. והיה נדמה לו אפילו, כי דווקא דבר זה מהנה אותו מאוד. ורוזה היתה בינתיים פוסקת מנהיג את הנדנדה, ועיניה היו מזהירות, ולחיה היו מוורידות משהו, וקולה היה נפעם ונרעד מהתרגשות

¹⁸ Gnessin, *Sideways*, 10.

של הנאת הרוח, והוא היה נייעור פתאום ומתחיל סותר, גם כן בלי דברים ברורים, את טענותיה של זו, המטושטשות, והיה מתרגש ושואל מרגע לרגע: 'התביני? התביניני?'¹⁹

“One autumn day Hagzar went to the public library and borrowed an absorbing new book which he took that same night to the pleasant house and read aloud there in a single sitting. When he went the next day to return it, Rosa accompanied him in the hope of finding ‘something else just nice’ which they might read the following night. The sky was covered with clouds. The wind raged, the mud reached their ankles, and raindrops spattered down. At first they formed a trio for these readings. Gradually, though, Ida had joined their little group too. Palely holding her white pillow, she would enter the room and sit listening silently in one of the corners with her arms crossed before her. Manya sat on the couch’s edge, one arm draped over the window sill, while Rosa leaned against the back of the rocking chair, swaying slowly with it back and forth. Ensnared in red velvet, Hagzar read clearly and with controlled emotion from the volume that he held in his hands. Sometimes Manya asked a spiteful, disjointed question, which he did his best to answer without showing his distress. Sometimes Rosa challenged him too. In the beginning he deferred to her by blithely, almost shyly agreeing, yet soon he took to arguing back. And when she refused to back down—not with any great show of logic, to be sure, but with an adamancy that spoke for itself—he concluded that she was a person with a mind of her own and rare properties of soul such as belonged only to those who have been through a great deal in life. [...] Her voice, which trembled when she spoke with the excitement of the pleasures of the mind, brought him back to himself. At once he began to refute her, none too logically himself, stopping repeatedly to ask: ‘Do you follow me? Well, do you?’”²⁰

As if written as an additional act for Anton Chekhov’s play *Tri sestry* (The Three Sisters), Gnessin creates in this scene an intimate choreography of joint reading that at the same time reveals once again his spatial sensitivity.²¹ In his book on the cultural history of home as an idea, Witold Rybczynski maintains that privacy and domesticity were “the two great discoveries of the Bourgeois Age.”²² The reading scene is staged within the private

¹⁹ Kol kitve Uri Nisan Gnesin, vol. 1, 142f.

²⁰ Gnessin, *Sideways*, 10f.

²¹ On Gnessin’s intertextual dialogue with Chekhov’s *Tri sestry*, see Gordinsky, *Ha-ẓidah mi-Moskvah*, 37–42.

²² Witold Rybczynski, *Home. A Short History of an Idea*, Harmondsworth 1986, 77.

sphere of home, in a room inhabited by comfortable furniture—the velvet red couch, the rocking chair, the candle lights lit during the dark autumn evening—all what makes the aesthetic experience even more pleasurable. Based on a pioneering work of the Italian art critic Mario Praz, dedicated to the philosophy of interior design, Rybczynski reflects on the intimacy created by a room and its furniture, a certain *Stimmung* (mood) that “is a characteristic of interiors that has less to do with functionality than with the way that the room conveys the character of its owner.”²³

The “pleasant house” in which the reading takes place, the drawing room with its red velvety couch create a *Stimmung* that conveys Rosa’s taste. At the same time, the description of the drawing room also mirrors Rosa’s aesthetic sensitivity, for on the second day, Rosa accompanies Hagzar to the library to choose a new novel together. What novels did they read and in what languages—in Yiddish or rather in Russian? The reader does not find out, but judging from the description of the library as a public one, the “absorbing novels” would have likely been in Russian.

The representation of this reading scene—or, for that matter, of the reading scenes, since the narrator outlines a shared practice spanning several weeks—provides a hermeneutic key to Gnessin’s understanding of the role of Jewish women in the creation of modern Jewish culture. Naomi Seidman, a feminist scholar of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, asserts that intergender reading was one of the fundamental practices that transformed religious literature into literary texts.²⁴ It seems, though, that Gnessin’s thick description of reading goes beyond the representation of what Seidman calls “heterosexual sentimental education.”²⁵ Unlike the various reading scenes described by Seidman in her book, which take place as a part of erotic courting and disclose the books being read, Gnessin withholds the titles his characters enjoy together—an omission that is not accidental.

Read through the Bakhtinian prism of dialogical thought, this reading scene has a paradigmatic element to it that not only exposes the inter-subjective learning process, but also the beginning of a process that only Hagzar undergoes, namely his recognition of Rosa and her sisters both in erotic terms and as interlocutors, thus enabling him to move sideways from the sexual objectification of the young women. Parush describes the common practice of joint reading and the discussion of Hebrew and European languages by young men and soon-to-be maskilim as a ritual that was one of the basic literary practices for the establishing of a

²³ Rybczynski, *Home*, 44.

²⁴ Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot. Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature*, Stanford, Calif., 2016, 35.

²⁵ Seidman, *The Marriage Plot*, 21–69.

Jewish community.²⁶ By imagining the reading scene with young women instead of men, Gnessin seeks therefore to expand the understanding of the reading community, albeit in Russian rather than Hebrew. Hagzar's entry into the feminine space is not self-evident, and it appears that, over the course of several evenings together, he recognizes the emotional and intellectual generosity of the sisters, who wish to conduct an ongoing dialogue with him. But the persona of Hagzar, who eventually fails to establish an intersubjective, intergendered space, should not be confused with Gnessin, his creator. For it is in this reading scene that Gnessin reveals his striking spatial awareness of the way in which women experienced modernity and its relation to interior space. Wendy Gan, a scholar of early twentieth-century British literature, argues that, in opposition to the usual modern paradigm of the urban experience of the flaneur or flaneuse, "new forms of interiors thus stand alongside the city in defining a woman's experience of modernity."²⁷ Gan reveals how the sensitivity of (mainly middle class) women to the condition of modernity manifested itself in a desire for spatial privacy. She elucidates that it is through their demand for privacy in their own homes, where they were previously defined by their domestic roles, that they could "claim a modern subjectivity."²⁸ Through this new spatial awareness that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, women started shaping their conception of privacy "as offering solitude but providing the option of being in community too."²⁹ It was often a drawing room and not the masculine connotated space of a study, argues Gan, which enabled women to reconfigure the domestic space and to become agents of modernity. The drawing room is the place where the sisters can demand privacy for themselves, while, at the same time, establishing an intellectual community through the practice of joint reading. Additionally, Gnessin's placing of the reading scene in the drawing room provides perhaps the most important explanation for Hagzar's perception of the house in which the three sisters dwell as "pleasant." Following the influential proposition of American historian John Lukacs about the function of the interior in the formation of society—"the interior furniture of houses appeared together with the interior furniture of minds"³⁰—the

²⁶ Parush, *The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature*, 261–264.

²⁷ Wendy Gan, *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing*, Basingstoke 2009, 2.

²⁸ Gan, *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing*, 10.

²⁹ Gan, *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing*, 21.

³⁰ John Lukacs, *The Bourgeois Interior. Why the Most Maligned Characteristic of the Modern Age May Yet Be Seen As Its Most Precious Asset*, in: *The American Scholar* 39 (1970), no. 4, 616–630, here 623.

recurrent adjective "yafe" (pleasant) could be interpreted as an aesthetic category, which refers not only to the interior of a house but to the very minds of the three young women, who are engaged in the aesthetic experience of reading. While the drawing room functions for Rosa, Manya, and Ida as the main site for their experience of modernity, the fictional "pleasant house" in Gnessin's first novella becomes a house of fiction—a house of modern Hebrew *belles lettres*.

Literature

Eyal Bassan, *Gnessin stail* [Gnessin's Style], Jerusalem 2021.

Sheila E. Jellen, *Intimations of Difference*. Dvora Baron in the Modern Hebrew Renaissance, Syracuse, N. Y., 2007.

Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale*. The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia, Berkeley, Calif./Los Angeles, Calif./London 2002.

Shachar M. Pinsker, *Literary Passports*. The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe, Stanford, Calif., 2011.

Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms*. Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century, Oxford/New York 2012.

Author

Natasha Gordinsky is a senior lecturer and chair of the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature of the University of Haifa. She holds a PhD in Hebrew literature from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is currently working on a book project on Uri Nissan Gnessin's provincial modernism. *Selected Publications*: *Disseminating Jewish Literatures*. Knowledge, Research, Curricula, Berlin/Boston, Mass., 2020 (ed. with Susanne Zepp et al.); "Ein elend-schönes Land." *Gattung und Gedächtnis in Lea Goldbergs hebräischer Literatur*, transl. by Rainer Wenzel, Göttingen 2019 (first publ.: *In Three Landscapes*. Leah Goldberg's Early Writings, Jerusalem 2016 [Heb.]); *Kanon und Diskurs. Über Literarisierung jüdischer Erfahrungswelten*, Göttingen 2009 (with Susanne Zepp).