

The Jewish December 1910; or, The Parting of Ways of Eretz Yisraeli Prose and Hebrew Modernism

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ABSTRACT: The date in the article's title hints at Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that in this month "the human character had changed," a change that, according to Woolf, altered the forms of literary representation of subjective experience and marked the rise of twentieth-century modernist literature. Interestingly, in this month or in the month preceding it, the prominent Hebrew writer Y. H. Brenner published his Hebrew novella *Nerves*. I argue that in the Jewish Hebrew context December 1910 marked precisely the decline of the early Hebrew modernist turn, parallel to the establishment of a new literary center for Hebrew literature in Eretz Yisrael. I first shed light on the story's complex treatment of the figure of "nerves" and argue that through this figure Brenner's story articulates the irresolvable tension between two forms of life as two forms of representation. I then contextualize the tensions inherent to the historical and poetic figure of nerves within the wider discussion of the process of decline of Hebrew modernist poetics at the very moment in which the language performed its national "return" to its native soil.

INTRODUCTION

THE DATE MENTIONED IN THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE is borrowed from a non-Jewish context: an essay by Virginia Woolf in which she argued that in December 1910 human nature changed.¹ She chose that as the opening statement of her discussion of the birth of European modernism. The date itself did not mark any particular event for Woolf but rather served as a way of playing with the hypothetical possibility of pinning the birth of

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, vol. 3 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 422.

modernism—and, along with it, the birth of new forms of modern subjectivity—to a specific historical moment. The present article plays with a different hypothetical possibility: namely, that Woolf's argument, and especially her historical milestone, are not less accurate, and perhaps even more so, in the context of Jewish-Hebrew literature (which she herself knew nothing about) than in that of English literature. Indeed, Hebrew literature also experienced the beginning of the twentieth century as a time of daring, experimental artistic outburst, which rebelled against the mimetic conventions of realistic representation and unraveled the unities of plot, time, and space in order to introduce different kinds of spaces and times into literature—experiential and conceptual ones rather than historical-realistic ones. All this happened, one should note, even before Hebrew literature was exposed to the models that European literatures developed for such representation. Woolf's reading of the hands of the historical clock of style in December 1910 is, therefore, just as significant for Hebrew literature. However, Woolf's statement applies to the latter with one principal difference: as far as Hebrew modernism is concerned, the date does not mark a moment of birth but rather, as the present article claims, a moment of ending and a parting of ways. December 1910 denotes the apogee of a short-lived tradition and, along with it, the end of the first Hebrew modernism, parallel to the establishment of a new literary center for Hebrew literature in Eretz Yisrael. It is this course of events that is discussed in the present article.

December 1910 is significant to this discussion because it was then (or, at the very earliest, October or November of that year) that Y. H. Brenner published his Hebrew novella *Nerves*.² While the story was published in Lvov, it was written that same year in Palestine, and it tells of two men who, like the author, have recently immigrated to Palestine. The two spend a summer evening walking about on the outskirts of a Hebrew colony and conversing with each other. One of them shares with his friend, the first-person narrator, the story of his modern-day pilgrimage to the Land of Israel, which took place a year and a half earlier. As both of these characters remain anonymous throughout the whole story, I will designate them simply as “protagonist” and “narrator.” The protagonist describes how he traveled from his native Ukraine to New York, where he worked for eight years sewing buttons in a textile factory; how he traveled on from there, through London, Antwerp, Berlin, Vienna, Trieste, Alexandria, and Cairo, to Palestine. He recounts his voyage by sea and the hardships which befell him and the family he joined. Finally, he recalls the moment he got off the ship at the bay of Haifa, facing the beautiful landscape of the Land of Israel, feeling a true sense of transcendence. In the last scene of this novella, the protagonist, struck with fever or perhaps a “nervous attack,” is lying in his bed, in the second-floor room of a colony complex, while down in the yard everyone goes about their business: “talked, yawned, drank coffee and ate pickled herring just as they always had done.”³ This is how the story ends.

Throughout the one hundred and ten years since its publication, various readings and interpretations of *Nerves* have been offered. The present article is not a reinterpretation of the

² I was unable to pinpoint the precise date on which the *Shalekhet* anthology was published (Gershon Shofman, ed., *Shalekhet: Me'asef sifrut* [Falling leaves: A literary anthology] [Lvov: Revivim, 1910]). In any case, it is clear that the story was published in December or slightly earlier, because Brenner reacts to the contents of the anthology in letters written to his friends in December, as soon as he came into possession of the anthology. See his letter of December 9, 1910, to Beilin: Menachem Poznanski, ed., *Igrot Y. H. Brenner* [The letters of Y. H. Brenner] (Tel Aviv: “Davar,” 1940), 484. The excerpts in the present article are taken from Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Nerves*, in *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels*, ed. Alan Lelchuk and Gershon Shaked (London: Toby Press, 2005), 33–68. Translations from other works are mine unless otherwise indicated.

³ Brenner, *Nerves*, 66.

complete story and does not discuss it in its entirety; rather, it explores a single key figure in it—the “nerves”—as a unique prism for discussion of the literary moment of December 1910 and of Brenner’s literary generation.

Several important junctures in the chronicle of this generation coincide with the story of the protagonists of *Nerves*, as I have briefly outlined it. Aside from Brenner, this generation includes such canonical authors as Uri Nissan Gnessin, S. Y. Agnon, Gershon Shofman, Dvora Baron, Hersh Dovid Nomberg, and Jacob Steinberg, all of whom were born in the late 1870s or 1880s. Those born inside the borders of the Russian Empire (as most of them were) were born into the 1881–82 pogroms, in a time of political and social-cultural upheavals that also entailed limitations and increasing pressures on the Jewish Pale of Settlement, alongside secularization, rapid modernization, and the great migration. This entire generation began moving to Russia’s cities and, from there, beyond the confines of the empire—all of them traveling far and wide. The members of this generation were the heroes of an intermediary period: the paths of the world of old-school Jewish education, such as that of Mendele (S. Y. Abramowitch) and Ahad Ha’am (Asher Zvi Ginsberg), were already barred to them, given the reality of the nineteenth century, which led to the disintegration of traditional Jewish lifestyles. On the other hand, despite their profound affinity with Russian or European literature, Brenner and his contemporaries remained utterly anonymous—they remained provincial Jews who spent their entire lives writing in Jewish languages.⁴ They began writing prose in Hebrew during those years of turmoil and while wandering between different cities and continents—and it was then that their own unique literary style, the first Hebrew modernism, began to emerge.

Several of these authors had already arrived in Palestine during the first two decades of the twentieth century. For some, Palestine was merely a waystation; for others, it was a final destination. For the Zionist movement their immigration was part of the historical endeavor to establish a national center in the Land of Israel for a literature which was then—unlike any other canonical national literature—without a center. The Hebrew authors of Brenner’s generation who had already witnessed the establishment of the literary center in Palestine in the first decade of the twentieth century knew that the national migration of Hebrew literature would have an all-encompassing and comprehensive impact on its forms, style, and themes. They were preoccupied with the question of what price their work would have to pay and, especially, of what would become of their literary language, which had been born and shaped during the time of their actual—as well as spiritual, political, and artistic—wanderings. The resonating perplexity of Brenner, Agnon, and Gnessin, the first Hebrew modernists, about the fate of literature in the age of a great national revolution has, for a long time, been mostly absent (as will be shown in the concluding discussion) from the canonical historiography of modern Hebrew literature.

The tracing of the Jewish December 1910 is designed to recall things forgotten and discuss the decline/marginalization of the first Hebrew modernism through the very act of establishing a literary center in Eretz Yisrael. I will begin with *Nerves*—both the story and the figure—as an important gateway for discussing the foundations and the essence of this literary period. In the second part of the article, I will connect this exploration of the meaning of “nerves” to that broader chronicle of a literary period which came to its zenith and its end, as mentioned, in December 1910.

⁴ For another discussion of the attributes of the 1880s generation in the history of classical Hebrew literature, see Olga Litvak, “Boswell ha-yehudi ve-hamts’at Sholem Aleichem” [The Jewish Boswell and the invention of Sholem Aleichem], *Ot 7* (Fall 2017): 129–54; Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo’adam: Li-dyokna shel ha-republika ha-sifrutit ha-ivrit be-reshit ha-me’a ha-esrim* [When loners come together: A portrait of Hebrew literature at the turn of the twentieth century] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1987), 41–45.

EXPOSED NERVES, QUIVERING TREETOPS, AND LINGUISTIC MIGRATIONS

The opening scene of *Nerves* takes place on the outskirts of a Hebrew colony, where the two Jewish immigrants to Palestine are walking about and conversing. They begin their conversation by describing the primeval landscape in the peaceful twilight, which is disturbed by the protagonist's unintelligible reference to the trees and their "treetops." Following are the first paragraphs of the story, quoted with certain omissions (indicated by bracketed ellipsis points):

A perfume-like smell, which came from the low clumps of acacia trees, or "mimosas," as some liked to call them, scented the air of the small Jewish colony in southern Palestine. [...]

"Those trees..." Though he broke the silence abruptly, the low pitch of his voice, ironic and serious at once, softened the suddenness of it.

"Eh?"

"I was saying... those trees... do you see the tops of them? If I were writing a travel journal, or a 'Letter From Palestine' of the kind that's in fashion nowadays, I'm sure I'd begin: 'Our Jewish colonies: a fleeting yet irrepressible smile quivers through their still too few tree-tops.'"

"Quivers?" I repeated the word, a favorite of his when playing the nature lover. Generally he hedged it with sarcasm, but now it was impossible to tell whether this was the case or not.

[...]

"But why do you keep coming back to the tops of them?"

"The tops, is it? Because they can see a long way. Perhaps they even see the great cities from here. [...] You know, the great cities, the ones beyond the sea..."

"What about them?"

"What about them? Millions of people made them. For centuries men built them, rebuilt them, accumulated treasures in them... so that... so that today they stand on solid ground. If you're born in them, you're somewhere. There's even a grandeur about them. Do you remember those monumental railway terminals? Those magnificent parks?"

[...]

A bird whose Hebrew name neither of us knew flew brilliantly by, flashing green against the blue sky, and disappeared.

[...]

"And do you know what else I wanted to say?" He was in a talkative mood. "Here, more than anywhere (do you think that on our way back we might rest for a while on that little hill?)... here of all places, where our ruin, the ruin of our people, is most obvious... here I've had some of the best days of my life... which... which at times I've actually thought was taking on direction, some meaning. If only they didn't blather so much back there about the sweet land of our fathers! I'm sure that's why new arrivals in this place are always so depressed... it's like waking from a dream. To this day—it's been a year and a half now—I can't get those first moments out of my mind: so this is what our promised land is like!"

After a moment's silence he went on: "Nerves? You say it's just nerves?" (In fact I had said nothing at all.) "Well, maybe you're right..."⁵

From the readers' designated position as a third party, they feel that large parts of the conversation they are witnessing are encrypted. Only the narrator and the protagonist can make sense of

⁵ Brenner, *Nerves*, 35–38.

the mystery in which their discourse about “treetops” is shrouded (“But why do you keep coming back to the tops of them?”); only they share in the knowledge pertaining to the loadedness of the word “quivers” (“‘Quivers?’ I repeated the word, a favorite of his when playing the nature lover”); and only they understand what all this has to do with “nerves” (“After a moment’s silence he went on: ‘Nerves? You say it’s just nerves?’”). Addressing these opening paragraphs of *Nerves*, Ariel Hirschfeld has suggested that their ambivalence essentially touches on the frail connection between the Hebrew words and the new, local landscape of the Land of Israel (the presence of the same word in both Hebrew and another language, once as Hebrew *shita* [acacia] and once as “mimosa,” in quotes, and the abrasive placement of a loanword, פרפום [perfume], at the very beginning of the story are two examples of this strangeness).⁶

Hence *Nerves* is presented in its very first paragraphs as a story about national migration and at the same time as a story of the migration of language and style. In other words, Hebrew is also an immigrant in this story. Hebrew rolls off the tongues of the rootless, sailing toward the national homeland in order to become—at least, as the protagonist suggests, it is expected to become—a “local” Hebrew which talks about a smile that quivers through the treetops. But clearly the opening paragraphs of *Nerves* capture a moment that is still undecided, the liminal state in which the signifiers themselves are still in the process of semantic migration, their meaning still in transit. The nostalgic melancholy of the one gazing out into the distance, the foreign flavor of the local landscape, the heightened metapoetic awareness, along with the mystery enveloping it and that irritable, frantic way of talking, all these elements come together to create the unique atmosphere of this story. The emotional loadedness is interwoven with an ominous feeling; the preoccupation with words—above all, the words “tops” and “nerves”—holds, for some reason, a fateful meaning. It is the fate of nerves, as a way of being, of experiencing, and of writing, that is at hand here. But why should nerves, of all things, metaphorically carry the entire burden of the Jewish modern tumult?



The narrated voyage begins and ends with a nervous breakdown. The protagonist recounts the tragic event which motivated him to sail to Palestine. In London, he tells his friend, he met an acquaintance who was waiting for his family to join him from Russia. When this acquaintance heard that his family was not allowed to cross the border to travel to England and he finally realized that he would not be reunited with them, he committed suicide in his small room in the London Jewish ghetto. This suicide was the cause of the protagonist’s first breakdown, which led him to flee London. In the course of the protagonist’s voyage, the same “weak nerves” become the reason for his decision to support a family of seven women (a mother, her sister, and five of her daughters) whom he mistook for the family of his London acquaintance. As a typical Jewish wretched hero, he is incapable of consummating adult erotic relationships with women. He joins the family as an “uncle” rather than a substitute father, exhibiting greater affection toward the eleven-year-old daughter than to the mother or her sister. Ultimately, the journey that was the

⁶ Ariel Hirschfeld, “Retet tsamrot ‘etsim ve-dagim meluhim: Al ha-milim ve-ha-dvarim be-‘Atzabim’ le-Y. H. Brenner” [The vibration of treetops and salted fish: On “words and things” in “Nerves” by Y. H. Brenner], in *Sifrut ve-hevra ba-tarbut ha-ivrit ha-hadasha: Ma’amarim mugashim le-Gershon Shaked* [Between literature and society: Studies of contemporary Hebrew culture presented to Gershon Shaked], ed. Yehudit Bar-El, Yigal Schwartz, and Tamar Hess (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad and Keter, 2000), 71–81. For the present discussion, see 71–72.

result of a nervous attack implicitly ends in the same way: as mentioned, the final scene of the story describes the protagonist succumbing to an unspecified illness.

Interestingly, however, weak nerves are characteristic not only of the mental reality described in this story but also of the unclear, ecstatic, and aesthetic experience of national return. Toward the end of the narrated conversation, when describing his arrival at the bay of Haifa, the protagonist associates the power exerted by the beauty of the Land of Israel with a unique state of nervous irritation:

“Listen, do you know what I’m going to tell you? Both of us hate all those empty words about beauty that are bandied around us day and night, both of us know that they are meaningless and sometimes even tempt us to deny the existence of beauty altogether. Say what you will, though, I wouldn’t know what else to call it . . . it was beautiful then. The great sea was ravishing, and the bay in Haifa doubly so. You see, I really did believe in beauty then . . . in the beauty of nature . . . of the cosmos . . . of something even higher than that.”⁷

Immediately afterward, however, our protagonist adds these doubtful words: “But of course that too was only nerves.”⁸

The protagonist cannot tell whether it was redemptive beauty or merely a case of nerves. It seems impossible to determine whether the strange journey to the Land of Israel expresses his search for personal and national redemption or rather some disruption of the neuro-emotional mechanism that activates his sentimentalism, his moral character, and his intensified aesthetic sensitivity. This protagonist might think that he is experiencing ecstasy the moment he sets foot on the native soil of the ancient people of Israel, but in fact—as he ironically implies—these are only the shivers caused by the neurotic disease of the modern nomadic Jew. Thus, it is through the figure of “nerves” that Brenner’s story articulates the complex relationship between historical *collective fate* and the seemingly unrelated phenomenon of beauty, or the essence of *artistic experience*.



Brenner was not the only one preoccupied with the question of nerves in his time. As soon as the new clinical category of neurological disease—“neurasthenia”—emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, it caused a debate spanning at least three decades. From the German medical literature of the 1880s (mainly under the influence of neurologist George Bard’s 1884 book *Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion*) it spread all over Europe. These years marked a growing interest in neurological disorders in medical literature and an increase in the number of patients diagnosed with neurological illness. From the medical terrain, neurasthenia was imported to the sphere of the cultural discourse on modernity, stirring an ongoing debate in the writings of the most influential thinkers of the time, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Werner Zombart, Georg Simmel, Max Nordau, August Bebel, and others.⁹

Medical literature suggested that neurasthenia was caused by an overloaded nervous system at a time in human history when energy increasingly tended to be directed away from the muscles

⁷ Brenner, *Nerves*, 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For further discussion on the fin de siècle concept of nervous disease, see Joachim Radkau, “Die wilhelminische Ära als nervöses Zeitalter, oder: Die Nerven als Netz zwischen Tempo und Körpergeschichte” [The Wilhelmine era as a nervous age, or: The nerves as a network between temporal history and history of the body], *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 20, no. 2 (April–June 1994): 211–41.

and toward the nerves: people perform less manual labor, but their consciousness is overwhelmed with external stimuli and their ability to experience things is diminished. Alongside the capacity for experience, men's vital erotic potency is also damaged.¹⁰ Through the erotic reference, the ideal of the healthy experience associates itself with penetration, the beholding and grasp of the desirable object—all of which the neurotic subject is deprived of, of course. What this subject experiences is only the constant deferral of realization of the desire for the object, be it a woman, a national place, or a linguistic signified.

As a clinical category, neurasthenia had a relatively short career. Its remarkable popularity rapidly declined during World War I, after which it was largely abandoned in favor of other major historical mental disorders.¹¹ But “nerves” was still a great success as an overarching figure of modernity in the early twentieth-century cultural sphere, and it was particularly illuminating in its relation to other chief actors of Western culture, mainly artists and Jews. Paradoxically, “nervous state” represented both an inability to experience or numbed sensations and, at the same time, excessive stimulation. Much like the nervous patient, the Jew was an emblem of the man whose sensation for beauty, love of nature, and feeling of the sublime had deteriorated, while at the same time being the agent of style and art, as embodied in Europe's great modernist Jewish writers (Franz Kafka, Osip Mandelstam, Walter Benjamin, to name only a few).¹² “Nerves” and Jews became close relatives, and not coincidentally, neurosis ultimately became a Jewish disease in the European discourse of the period.¹³ Such was the cultural-historical climate that gave rise to Brenner's neurotic Jewish protagonists, to his story *Nerves*, and to his original “nervous” poetics.

The Zionist revolution was designed to cure the Jewish wretched nerves by altering the national character. The modern Jewish revolution, wrote Benjamin Harshav, was founded on a triple negation: “not here; not like now; not as we are.”¹⁴ As a Zionist thinker Brenner, too, had an active role in this historical endeavor.¹⁵ But the repeating question in his story “was it only nerves?” voices the fundamental doubts concerning this ideal of rejuvenation together with the feeling of fundamental loss that saturated the revolutionary hour. The essential doubt expressed by Brenner's protagonist regarding the nature of beauty, on the threshold of the promised land, conceals the moment of the rift between two forms of life as two forms of representation. As he sets his foot on the soil of the promised land something tells the protagonist that he had reached his ultimate destination, that beauty is there: “I really did believe in beauty then.” But the second

¹⁰ Ibid., 221.

¹¹ Ibid., 219–20.

¹² This conception of the paradoxes of Jewishness and modernity draws, to a large extent, on Yuri Slezkine's canonical 2004 book, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). See esp. 73–85.

¹³ In his canonical book, *Entartung* (Degeneration), published in Germany in 1892, Max Nordau established the explicit association between neurasthenia, Jews, and modern art. See especially the first English edition, published in 1898 (London: William Heinemann), 24–25. In the same vein as Nordau, I. L. Peretz wrote a paper on Hebrew literature that was titled “Maḥalat ha-nefesh be-sofrim” (Mental illness in writers), discussing the nervous disease attributed to both Jewish character and Hebrew literature. See Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Maga'im shel dekadens: Bialik, Berdichevsky, Brenner* [A touch of decadence: Bialik, Berdichevsky, Brenner] (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 1997), 27.

¹⁴ See Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 17.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Brenner's canonical 1914 essay, “Self-Criticism,” where he preached for the establishment of worker settlements as the sole cure for Jewish rootlessness. See the translated and edited English version in Arthur Herzberg, ed., *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 307–12.

voice in him contradicts, it “was only nerves,” that is, *fata morgana*, a mere hallucination, or, in other words, an image, not the thing.

If December 1910 juxtaposes two forms of representation as two ways of modern Jewish existence, then the first promises political deliverance through the possession of the object, while the second involves an aesthetic existence that is marked by “nerves.” As Hanna Soker-Schwager brilliantly wrote, the meaning of “nerves” as an artistic form lies in this story in the perception of the sublime as unrepresentable; “the voyage to Eretz Israel in ‘Nerves’ is covered with a fine utopian dream haze: it comes in the form of a Kantian sublime, a ‘negative pleasure,’ a hidden yearning articulated through lack and absence.”¹⁶

The erotic subplot of the story touches upon the same tension between realization on the one hand and representation as its substitution on the other. In the same ecstatic moment of arrival at the promised land, on Haifa bay, Brenner’s protagonist experiences an inappropriate desire toward one of the daughters of the family he annexed, the eleven-year-old girl. The protagonist confesses that if his desire to take her in his arms and kiss her “a thousand times” had not been so powerful, he would have gone ahead and done it. “But my blood was on fire . . . and so I slaked my thirst by patting the cheek of her nine-year-old sister instead.”¹⁷ Interestingly, just like the revelation of the sublime beauty, the erotic passion arises in the liminal space and time; perhaps one’s very arrival at the yearned-for shore also constitutes a desire for a forbidden object. But the protagonist avoids realization of his erotic passion by resorting to displacement and indirect representation: he moves his hand away and pats the cheek of her younger, nine-year-old sister. The problem posed by sexual desire here is essentially intertwined with the problem of mimesis. The urge to caress the eleven-year-old girl stems from the attempt to represent, through physical contact, the wish to merge with the object. The younger sister plays the role of a second-order representation, a representation of her older sister. In a bold, unsettling, and surprising manner, this brief description in *Nerves* reveals an inherent pattern of essential avoidance that is characteristic of Brenner’s text—prohibiting the representation of the desired object to the same extent as the object itself. The enigmatic deliberation between “mimosa” and “acacia” (*shita*) in the opening passages is somehow analogous to this moment in which the protagonist moves his hand away from the eleven-year-old’s cheek. It is a deliberation between consummation and nonconsummation, between perception and a faded, distant, evaporating representation, reminiscent of the long-sightedness of the treetops. In other words, it is an aesthetic-political deliberation.

Finally, the essence of “nerves” as a figure of distant, indirect representation, perhaps a modern reincarnation of an ancient Jewish ban on mimesis, illuminates the mysterious treetops with which I opened. In his early stories such as “The Othello Case” (1904) and “A Meal before the Fast” (1905), Brenner’s closest friend, Uri Nissan Gnessin, wrote often of such trees and treetops, of quivering vibrations, nervous sensations, and gazes opening to the horizon. In his novella *Before* (1910) he describes a protagonist gazing at a landscape image on a postcard sent to him from afar and thinking of “dreams that were and are not [...] hovering still and clinging to the tops, blurred with the same bluish vapor that is rising up in the horizon.”¹⁸ This time we

¹⁶ Hanna Soker-Schwager, “Brenner and the ‘Nerves’ Genre: Between the Oedipal Narrative, the Jewish Joke, and the National Sublime,” *Prooftexts* 31, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2011): 83.

¹⁷ Brenner, *Nerves*, 57.

¹⁸ Uri Nissan Gnessin, *Kol kitvey Uri Nissan Gnessin* [Collected works of Uri Nissan Gnessin] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1982), 218–19.

recognize how the treetops in Brenner's opening scene, rooted in the Land of Israel, look to other treetops in the landscape of literature; the place they long for is a literary place, the place sketched by Gnessin before him.

Art, wrote Theodor Adorno, is defined by its relation to what it is not. Only by virtue of its separation from empirical reality "does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence."¹⁹ In Brenner's story, art arises with the movement that separates literary space from historical life. There, in the artistic sphere. Nature appears in art as the nervous vibration of objective reality, as noted by Adorno;²⁰ Brenner's *Nerves* is about this same vibration. This was the essential concept of floating, nervous reality as an artistic reality that was inseparable from the "nervous Jewish revolution" of the early twentieth century.

Ultimately, the elegy of the novella *Nerves*, expressed in the gaze of the farseeing treetops, is also an elegy to the abandoned Jewish literary sphere of the Hebrew language. Brenner's 1910 story captures the critical moment at which this literary turn came to its end, at the very moment in which the Hebrew language performed its national "return" to its native soil.

THE DECLINE OF EARLY HEBREW MODERNISM A CENTURY LATER

The Hebrew experimental modernist language did not survive beyond the second decade of the twentieth century, not even in Brenner's own writing, as he increasingly dedicated himself as an author to the Zionist workers movement. Dan Miron has already pointed out that during the 1930s those closest to being the literary heirs of Brenner and Gnessin chose either to return to Europe (as in David Vogel's case) or to give up modernist fiction in favor essayistic writing (as in Eliezer Steinman's case).²¹

Indeed, Hebrew authors who settled in Palestine during the early years of the twentieth century experienced this moment as one of artistic and existential choice. Three years before the eponymous December 1910, Uri Nissan Gnessin came to Palestine and settled in Petah Tikva. During his stay there he did not write a single work, and one year later, in 1908, he went back to Warsaw. The letters he sent from Palestine to his parents make no mention of everyday hardships, but he speaks of Jewish spiritual impoverishment, writing that "the Jewish soul is in the diaspora, not here."²²

The same year that Gnessin left Palestine, S. Y. Agnon arrived in Jaffa from Galicia. While he indeed wrote his first stories there—"Forsaken Wives" (1908) and "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" (1913)—he, too, left Jaffa only a few years later. Decades later, in a memoir he dedicated to Brenner, Agnon recounted that the reason for traveling away from the Land of Israel was books; he had no German books to read there.²³ He said that he set out on a quest for books and writing. In the novel *Only Yesterday*, written throughout the 1930s and describing the

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 1997), 3–4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 274–75.

²¹ Dan Miron, "Ha-modernism be-siporet ha-proza ha-ivrit 'ad kom ha-mdina" [Modernism in pre-statehood Hebrew prose], in *New Jewish Time: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age—an Encyclopedic View*, vol. 3, *Literatures and Arts*, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel et al. (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 154–66. For the abovementioned discussion, see 163.

²² See Y. H. Brenner, ed., *Hatsida: Qovets zikaron le-U. N. Gnessin* [Sideways: An anthology commemorating U. N. Gnessin] (Jerusalem: Dfus Ahdut, 1914), 58.

²³ S. Y. Agnon, "Yosef Hayim Brenner be-ḥayav u-ve-moto" [Yosef Hayim Brenner in life and in death], in *Me-atzmi el 'atzmi* [From myself to myself] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1966), 136.

time of the second aliyah, Agnon provided a literary form to the profound sense that the act of artistic creation was frowned upon in the Land of Israel. *Only Yesterday* tells of Yitzhak Kumar, an unsophisticated housepainter who immigrates to Palestine. While residing in Jerusalem, he dooms himself to a tragic fate by picking up a paintbrush and writing the words “mad dog” on a dog’s skin. The dog contracts rabies and bites Yitzhak, who dies a very painful death. Throughout the entire novel, Jerusalem is present as a dreadful being that kills its artists; the city silences the poetic Hebrew word because words come alive and become a reality. The crucial distance between words and things is abolished. God alone can use Hebrew to create, while human beings are cradled in their historical homeland, lulled into a terrible and seductive grave.

Brenner was the only one of those pioneers of modernism who never left: he remained in Palestine from his arrival in 1909 until he was murdered in 1921. Still, thoughts about the creative paralysis which stalks the person, the writer, in this new homeland and the need—inherent in language and the creative act—to sail far away haunt his protagonists and seal their fate. Brenner’s fragmentary essay-novel *From Here and There* (1911) narrates the inner monologue of a protagonist preoccupied with two deaths—an actual one and a metaphoric one. The first is the death of a poor hunchback Hebrew teacher who came to the Land of Israel because of his love/passion for the Hebrew language, but who was cast out by the new Yishuv. Because of that Jewish-Hebrew hump on his back, he became useless and unwanted in the historic homeland of his forefathers. The second, metaphoric death involves a friend of the narrator’s, a man with the unusual name of David Diasporin, who leaves Palestine—much like Brenner’s friend Gnessin—after living there for only a year. Much like Gnessin, Diasporin had hoped to become an artist in the new place; he dreamed of founding a traveling Yiddish theater, but the country spewed him out as well. The first chapter of the novel describes Diasporin’s departure on a ship to Europe. On board he writes letters to his close friends, offering his reflections and impressions—“for what else is he to do?”²⁴ Just like Diasporin’s letters, the entire field of artistic creation, including literature itself, is likened, in Brenner’s final novels, to the letters of an artist who sailed beyond the pale and whose bundle of notebooks had been lost overboard and then pulled out of the water, like some relic. Characters may stay or leave, but literature itself, the kind that was born under the sign of “nerves,” sails away.

The years that followed World War I and the Balfour Declaration marked a breach in the poetic history of Hebrew literature. These years, wrote the Zionist critic Dov Sadan during the 1950s, led Hebrew literature from what he saw as the “confined” world of modernism to the Land of Israel and to “reality.” This shift, said Sadan, reimbued literature with a “rock-like quality” that it direly needed, according to him.²⁵ In 1919 Brenner was invited by the leaders of the Zionist Yishuv to take part in the national literary project of creating a national literature of Israeli workers—and he heeded this call.²⁶ His acquiescence matched the zeitgeist and the gen-

²⁴ Y. H. Brenner, *Ktavim* [Collected writings], vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1978), 274–75.

²⁵ Dov Sadan, *Pirkey qria’a ve-nituah: Shi’urim be-sugiya; Mavo la-sifrut ba-dorot ha-ahronim* [Essays in reading and analysis: Lessons on a subject; Introduction to the literature of recent generations] (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1955), 106–9.

²⁶ Berl Katznelson asked Brenner to be the editor of the journal *Ha-adama*, published by the Ahdut Ha-avoda (Labor Unity) movement. After Brenner’s murder, he was proclaimed the chief author of the Hebrew workers movement in the Land of Israel. See, e.g., *Kitvei B. Katznelson* [The works of B. Katznelson], 12 vols. (Tel Aviv: Mifleget Poalei Eretz Israel, 1945–51), 2:288.

eral atmosphere of pioneering renewal; all that psychological groping and talking about one's mood—Brenner was told—can be left to (the European and modernist) Stiebel Publishing.²⁷

The Hebrew poet and critic Yaakov Fichman had described already in the 1930s the general atmosphere which caused Brenner's works, so dark and melancholic, to be forgotten in the days when everyone strived for more light.²⁸ After Brenner's murder, his works had to make room for the "Brenner myth," as the poet Avraham Solodar demanded in his letter to the writer Azar.²⁹ Michael Gluzman has demonstrated that Gnessin's texts went through a similar process within the Jewish Yishuv. The radical poetic innovations of Gnessin's prose, wrote Gluzman, were overlooked for decades because the poetic norms had changed. "Not only the themes of this [Gnessin's] exilic world turned foreign, but the language—which was once full and meaningful—has now become an incomprehensible hieroglyph, an empty and dead script."³⁰



Dan Miron wrote in the beginning of our century that modernist poetics was incongruent with the challenges of the fateful historical task. The tragedy of Hebrew rootlessness, wrote Miron, was obviated both "in the face of the terrors of war and the mass pogroms in Ukraine during the years of civil war [...] and in the face of the acclimation anguish of the Hebrew pioneer in Beitania and the Emek Yizre'el kibbutzim."³¹ Miron implicitly repeats the old arguments against modernism as "decadent" and "degenerate" formulated back in the beginning of the twentieth century. Miron himself did not at all condemn Hebrew modernism, but ultimately he justified the course of national literary history by implying that the modernist innovative style was rejected not because of some inherent bold, rebellious, and free element in it but rather because it was spoiled, self-centered, and bourgeois. Even the "tragedy of rootlessness," which indeed was the thematic core of the works of the three prominent Hebrew modernists, was apparently a personal matter, to be dealt with in the psychoanalyst's consulting room, rather than an existential drama responding to the gaping chasm of the historical existence into which one is thrown.³² Unlike

²⁷ See N. Avrahami, "On 'the Land,'" *Weekly Magazine of the Socialist Zionist Union of the Eretz-Israeli Workers (Kuntres Ahdut ha'avoda)* 17 (1920): 46.

²⁸ Yaakov Fichman, "Brenner ha-mesaper" [Brenner the writer], in *Yosef Hayim Brenner: Mivkhar maamarey bikoret* [Yosef Hayim Brenner: Collected critical essays on his work], ed. Yitzhak Bakun (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1973), 98.

²⁹ Anita Shapira, *Brenner: A Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 397.

³⁰ Michael Gluzman "Teudati ha-pirkus: Hearot ahadot al signono ha-meuhar shel Gnessin" [My vocation—the tremor: Several comments on Gnessin's late style], *Ot 5* (2015): 17. See also the discussion that follows from there addressing the poetic ways of the "deterritorialization of the language" in Gnessin's work. My reading of Gnessin here is in line with Gluzman's principal assertion that the artistic device of deterritorialization sheds light on Gnessin's choice to leave Palestine.

³¹ See Miron, "Ha-modernism be-siporet ha-proza ha-'ivrit 'ad kom ha-mdina," 164.

³² Unlike Miron's analysis, in Gershon Shaked's historical study on Hebrew modern fiction, for example, Brenner's generation did not even experience a tension between modernist language and a national revival movement. Shaked addressed Brenner, Gnessin, and Agnon as direct followers of the authors of the revival period and as the mediators between late nineteenth-century national romanticism and twentieth-century Eretz Yisraeli realism. See Gershon Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-'ivrit, 1880–1980* [Hebrew fiction, 1880–1980], vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad and Keter, 1977), 284, 365. On the margins of the canonical historiography there had also been alternative historical views of early twentieth-century Hebrew prose. As early as the 1920s, Shimon Halkin already undermined the image of "revival" commonly associated with this literary era, and Leah Goldberg similarly described the beginning of the century as the era of the "most lonely ones" in Hebrew literature. See Shimon Halkin, *Drakhim ve-tsidey drakhim ba-sifrut* [Main roads and side ways in literature]

Miron, I suggest that modernist Hebrew prose was not rendered redundant on its own merits; rather, it was branded as a useless endeavor by a national movement that insisted on mobilizing literature in support of its own goals.

Brenner, Gnessin, and Agnon were in no way overlooked by history. To the contrary—these three became the most canonical authors in modern Hebrew literature. But while they themselves were given a place of honor in the pantheon of Hebrew authors, their literary generation was a lost one. In a dialectic fashion, dominant figures of Zionist criticism rejected the Hebrew modernism of the early twentieth century, while at the same time establishing its authors as the fathers of national literature in the Land of Israel. These authors were admitted to the literary pantheon, but as individual “genius” writers, who were therefore timeless. In other words, they became national authors at the cost of being expropriated from their own age and generation, through the obfuscation of their profound affinity as partaking in the artistic experience of a historical period.

The “class of 1900,” these authors who grew up during the 1880s and came of age at the turn of the century, came specifically to Hebrew but found it in a time of perplexity and wandering. In Berdichevsky, whose essays and stories had been their bread and butter as youths, they read that new Hebrew must tear down the walls of the flowery Hebrew that had become ossified during the era of Jewish Enlightenment, that one must bring Hebrew to life as a language of speech and new creation, designed to help human beings understand themselves and their immediate human and natural environment. Nevertheless, the single decade separating Berdichevsky from Brenner, Gnessin, and Agnon opened a wide chasm. As Shimon Halkin wrote over half a century ago, for these authors, all the visions of revival (*tehiya*) were already saturated with uncertainty (*tehiya*).³³ Indeed, the works of Brenner and Gnessin dating back to the beginning of that decade are written with a sense of the essential uselessness of Hebrew literature, a sense of being the “last ones” to write in this dead language—a feeling that was unique to this generation and that paradoxically served to nourish and enliven their work and its singular style.

Hence, these authors came to Hebrew with a sense of fragmentation, loneliness, and the senselessness of writing and came to worship this Hebrew not despite but because of this muteness. Hillel Zeitlin wrote beautifully about Gnessin, who saw Hebrew as sacred not because he conceived of it as a “living language” but, quite the contrary, “because it belonged in the very very distant past, because it was like this gorgeous princess, locked away in her castle of ice, way up there.” Gnessin once told Zeitlin that “when one contemplates death, one must write in Hebrew.”³⁴ These metaphorical figures of literature reveal the notion of writing as an action that is beyond all sense, that is pointless, that offers neither a cure for social disintegration nor a counterforce to the disintegrating and annihilating power of time. This is equally true of Agnon’s Hebrew, which is not a “practical” Hebrew but a colorful ornament, whose myriad convoluting paths lead, again and again, to realms of death and domains of existence that transcend actuality and sense.

(Jerusalem: Academon, 1969), 49–52; Lea Goldberg, *Ha-omets le-khulin* [The courage for the mundane] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1976), 80.

³³ See Shimon Halkin, *Muskamot ve-mashberim be-sifrutenu: 12 sihot al ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-hadasha* [Conventions and crises in our literature: 12 conversations on new Hebrew literature] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1980), 93–103.

³⁴ Quoted in Brenner, *Hatsida*, 43–44.

In conclusion, the Hebrew modernism of the early twentieth century gave form to a fundamentally distant mode of writing. It was hostile to the notion of realism, let alone the socialist, “rock-hard,” down-to-earth realism that Dov Sadan insisted on. Critics such as Hannan Hever and Ariel Hirschfeld who had recognized the fundamental moment of distance in Brenner’s poetics spoke of its utopian core. The mode of anticipation and the rhetoric of “not-yet,” wrote Hever, carry a national function by fashioning a future-oriented temporality.³⁵ Indeed, also in the opening scene of *Nerves* the eyes of the narrator look ahead at the beautiful landscape of Eretz Yisrael, but the treetops are looking back—the desired object anticipates them *from the past*. Such is the dizzy, unstable *mise-en-scène* of the language of Hebrew modernism. As far as this poetic language is, like the treetops, nostalgic, it represents the yearning for what had never been; as far as it is *avant-garde*, it is *avant-garde* in Roy Greenwald’s sense of the term: not a purposeful movement toward a desired future but a “setting forth from a past in which it has no place to an uncertain and unknowable future.”³⁶

Brenner’s final novel, which was published in Warsaw in 1920, at the dawn of a new age of Eretz Yisraeli realism, still resonates with the desire of that other Hebrew to extricate itself and sail away. The novel ends with the hallucinations of an old man lying on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Scratching himself as Job once did, he looks at the shimmering mast of a ship. He takes comfort in remembering the waters of the mikveh of his childhood, and his mind sails on the waves of hallucination. “Soon we’ll be on our way, soon, soon we’ll be on our way,” he thinks.³⁷ These are the novel’s final words. Jewish fate delivers Brenner’s protagonists to the Land of Israel, but the mind and the language that sustain this mind keep looking beyond the sea, with the far-seeing eyes of the treetops. A

³⁵ Hannan Hever, *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le’om* [The story and the nation] (Tel Aviv: Resling Publications, 2007), 47–60; Hirschfeld, “Retet tsamrot ‘etsim ve-dagim meluḥim.”

³⁶ Roy Greenwald, “Pogrom and Avant-Garde: Peretz Markish’s *Di kupe*,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 16, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2010): 65.

³⁷ Y. H. Brenner, *Breakdown and Bereavement: A Novel*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 310.