

# “The Times We Live In”: Uri Nissan Gnessin’s Discovery of Contemporaneity and Hebrew Modernism

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**ABSTRACT:** This article addresses Uri Nissan Gnessin’s modernist poetics through the notion of the contemporary. Examination of a selection of his early texts—a letter, a literary review, and the short story “Jenya”—written between 1900 and 1902 reveals his perception of Eastern European Jewish modernity as heterochronous and polytopic.

**I**T WOULD HARDLY BE POSSIBLE TO IMAGINE the emergence of Hebrew modernism without the literary writings of Uri Nissan Gnessin. A polyglot and autodidact, Gnessin was born in 1879 in Starodub. He studied at the yeshiva of Pochep, where his father served as its rabbi. Despite the relatively modest scope of his literary corpus, his unique voice has intrigued readers, writers, and literary critics since the publication of his breakthrough novella *Sideways* in 1905. His enigmatic, multilayered Hebrew prose was steeped in intertextual dialogue with modern Russian, Yiddish, French, and German literature—languages he had intimate knowledge of as a translator. Gnessin used the Hebrew language to explore the psychological and intellectual worlds of the young Jewish women and men living in the provincial towns of Tsarist Russia.

This article offers a reading of Gnessin that reassess his literature through the concept of “contemporaneity.” I suggest focusing on his peripheral texts (and not the later, canonical writings) whose forms are essential for the constitution of modernist literature in general: the letter, the literary review, and the short story. In the first three parts of the article, I analyze Gnessin’s exploration of contemporaneity through his readings of and writings on modern Hebrew literature. What becomes clear is that from the very beginning of his literary career Gnessin viewed the present as heterochronous.<sup>1</sup> In the last part of the article I turn to the short story “Jenya” and argue that

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 42.

it is the first instance in which he represented his understanding of the contemporary in spatio-temporal terms. Thus, this Hebrew modernist short story becomes a site of negotiation, not only between the past and the present, but more importantly between different forms of the present.

### EXCHANGING LETTERS WITH CONTEMPORARIES

On July 27, 1900, a young Jewish man living in Warsaw sent a letter to an old friend in his hometown of Pochep in the Pale of Settlement. The letter was written by Uri Nissan Gnessin, who would soon become one of the most intriguing Hebrew modernist writers in Tsarist Russia. The letter was sent to Aaron Nevilov, who, according to the opening lines, hoped that Gnessin would describe his new life in the metropolis from “every possible angle.”<sup>2</sup>

Gnessin, however, found this expectation rather disturbing. In fact, despite being associated in Warsaw with the Hebrew movement “Ha-mahalakh ha-hadash,” the very literary movement that grounded its aesthetics in psychological representation, he not only denied such a possibility—to describe a life from every single perspective—but also regarded it as a transgression of personal boundaries: “For even if you were a psychologist, you would have had to scramble in all my letters without me knowing and collect compilation after compilation until at last you found there a whole picture” (17). Although he wrote the letter from Warsaw, a burgeoning center of Jewish literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, Gnessin refused to portray the experience of the metropolis; instead, he focused on a philosophical discussion of Berdyczewski’s cultural Zionism. Read today, it is tempting to grasp this letter as the perfect illustration of what it meant to experience modernity at the turn of the twentieth century in Eastern Europe as a young Hebrew writer—to dwell in a metropolis, to send letters in Hebrew to friends who remained back in the province, to contemplate the meaning of the self, to debate the pressing issues of cultural Zionism, and, of course, to read and discuss contemporary literature.

However, Terry Smith, one of the leading scholars of the contemporary, reminds us that the word “contemporary has always meant more than just the plain and passing present” and asserts instead its importance as a critical category.<sup>3</sup> How then should we approach Gnessin’s reflection on contemporaneity considering the concept’s philosophical implications? For being contemporary does not simply mean to live at the same time, which is an assumption that does not acknowledge the temporal regime that stands behind the term. Rather, it means, as Peter Osborne suggests, to experience time as the “coming together of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities or ‘times.’”<sup>4</sup> Gnessin’s conception of different temporalities can be seen for the first time in his letter to his close friend Aaron Nevilov in which, after shifting his attention from the representation of the urban experience, he begins to explore the aesthetic experience of contemporaneity through Hebrew fiction.

### GNESSIN’S READING OF MODERN HEBREW LITERATURE

The notion of the contemporary in modern literary studies has its philosophical foundation in Giorgio Agamben’s programmatic (and, some scholars would add, apodictic) article “What Is

<sup>2</sup> Uri Nissan Gnessin, *Kitvei Uri Nissan Gnessin* [Uri Nissan Gnessin’s works], ed. Azriel Uchmani (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1946), 17. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 702. For a summary of contemporaneity discourse, see Terry Smith, “Philosophy in the Artworld: Some Recent Theories of Contemporary Art,” *Philosophies* 4 (2019): 37, <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies4030037>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 17.

the Contemporary?" Contemporariness for Agamben is a paradoxical structure, clarifies Paolo de Asis: "those who are contemporary see and grasp their own time more clearly than others, by virtue of their very disjunction with it."<sup>5</sup> Already in 1900, in his letter to Nevilov, Gnessin detects and suggestively formulates his intuition that the Hebrew writers Mikha Yosef Berdyczewski and Mordekhai Ze'ev Feierberg had different relationships with the present. To put it differently, despite both of them being contemporaries, when viewed through the prism of Agamben's theory of the contemporary, according to Gnessin, Feierberg perceived his contemporaneity as heterochronous.

Gnessin did respond to at least one of his friend's demands—namely, he offers an interpretation of Berdyczewski's freshly published story "Mahanaim" (Two camps).<sup>6</sup> This tragic love story of a young man named Mikhael, who leaves Tsarist Russia to study at the University of Breslau, presents a protagonist torn between cultures. The story makes use of free indirect speech, which was an innovative style for Hebrew fiction, and it was immediately perceived by its young readers as a milestone. Unlike Nevilov, who found the style of the story "chaotic," Gnessin did not identify chaos in its style or structure. He pointed out instead that in the "soul of the protagonist there is an awful confusion" (18) that is precisely what makes the story so wonderful and magnetizing for the readers. In what follows, Gnessin elucidates Berdyczewski's famous notion of a "great rupture" in the souls of the young Hebrew-European men living at the turn of the twentieth century, which was caused "by the unresolved longing for the constitution of a 'national culture' together with a longing for belonging to the 'general culture' by means of the visual metaphor of a 'forever' bond that after all confines them to their origins—the antiquity and the incompatibility with the general development" (18).

Gnessin does not develop the notion of temporality any further in this early letter. Yet, the appearance of the concept of "antiquity" is very telling, for it enables us to trace Gnessin's experience of modernity. In his groundbreaking critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's characterization of Jews as "pioneers of modernity" in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the historian Dan Diner famously argued that Jews were "distinctive agents of lingering premodern patterns" and that "the history of Jewish integration into modernity was accompanied by ambiguity and conflict."<sup>7</sup> Gnessin's insightful description of the existential and cultural rupture goes hand in hand with Diner's depiction of Jewish existence as "impregnated with prevailing residues of premodernity in modernity."<sup>8</sup> Gnessin not only acknowledges the residues of premodernity in the modernity of the Pale of Settlement but also questions its very compatibility with the project of modernity that he refers to here and in his other writings as a "general development." Nevertheless, Gnessin does not call for the repudiation of the "ancient" element, pointing at this early stage only suggestively to the possibility of another way of relating to the past and, consequently, to the present.

<sup>5</sup> Paulo de Asis, "In the Midst of Multiple Hurricanes of Time," in *Futures of the Contemporary: Contemporaneity, Untimeliness, and Artistic Research*, ed. Paulo de Assis and Michael Schwab (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Gnessin's complex relationship to Berdyczewski's literary universe requires separate research, especially since despite Gnessin's fascination with his writings, one can identify in Gnessin's writings an articulated ambivalence toward Berdyczewski's ideological and aesthetical project. On Berdyczewski's early aesthetics, see Avner Holtzman, *El ha-kerav she-ba-lev: Berdyczewski shenot ha-tsmiha* [Toward the rupture of the soul: Berdyczewski's years of growth] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Dan Diner, "Between Empire and Nation State: Outline for a European History of the Jews, 1750–1950," in *Shatterzone of Empires*, ed. Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

Berdyczewski's Mikhael, who is already "outside the camp" (quotation marks in original), is tempted to think that "he will remain like that forever and ever" (18), asserts Gnessin.

While reflecting on Berdyczewski, Gnessin recalls a contemporary of Mikhael in Hebrew literature—namely, the first-person narrator of the late Mordechai Ze'ev Feierberg's short story "Lel aviv" (A spring night), which presents a lyrical meditation on its first-person narrator's perception of the world, and whose thoughts Gnessin remembers "without any effort": "I heard the dog bark *far down* the street. I—in *the middle* of the street."<sup>9</sup> He interprets the closing lines of the story as follows: "He longs for being beyond the street, but why doesn't he feel happy despite being in the middle of the street?" (18). Strikingly, Gnessin's interpretation of the protagonist's self-positioning foreshadows his first poetic attempt to represent the contemporary in his fiction. In Gnessin's first short story, "Jenya," the main protagonist reads Berdyczewski and Feierberg. But at this point Gnessin still has not clearly articulated the juxtaposition of Berdyczewski's relation to the past with that of Feierberg (to whom Gnessin felt a much stronger affinity); it still exists only on an intuitive level.

In her insightful article on Feierberg's aesthetics, Hamutal Bar-Yosef argued against the prevailing narrative in Hebrew literary historiography that places Feierberg—together with Berdyczewski—as adherents of German romanticism; instead, she contextualizes his writing in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Bar-Yosef asserts Feierberg's unique standpoint within Hebrew literature at the turn of the twentieth century, stressing his radical difference from Berdyczewski that lies in his relationship to the past, which he experienced as a "person who had decided to stay in his world and to fight for its existence."<sup>10</sup>

This contextualization of Feierberg sheds new light on Gnessin's reading of Feierberg's aesthetic situatedness as being inside the street and longing for the outside. Thus, read through Agamben's concept of the contemporary, Gnessin's spatial metaphor takes on new meaning: namely, that his perception of the temporality of the present should be understood as asynchronous. In other words, it is in Feierberg's fiction that Gnessin discovers a twofold relation to the present or, in Agamben's terms, a "singular relationship with [his] own time, [who] adheres to it, and at the same time, keeps a distance from it."<sup>11</sup> At the core of Agamben's concept is Nietzsche's notion of *Unzeitgemäß* (untimeliness), through which the German philosopher articulated his critique "of the then dominating historicist understanding of time and history."<sup>12</sup> Even though Agamben's Nietzschean understanding of the contemporary has aroused an ongoing critique among some scholars, it is highly relevant here precisely because of the intellectual impact that Nietzsche's thought had on the young Gnessin. Gnessin's first published text was a eulogy for Nietzsche, and his thought was doubtlessly influenced by the philosopher, particularly his critique of historicism and the "fever of history," as the next part of this article hopes to demonstrate. If, according to Jacob Lund's elaboration on Agamben's reading of Nietzsche, to be untimely is "to not coincide with the present time in the singular,"<sup>13</sup> Feierberg is untimely as a result of his

<sup>9</sup> Mordechai Ze'ev Feierberg, *Whither and Other Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 70.

<sup>10</sup> Hamutal Bar Yosef, "Eizeh min romantikan haya Feierberg?" [What kind of romantic was Feierberg?], *Bikoret u-farshanut* 23 (1988): 29.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," in *What Is Apparatus?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Lund, "Untimeliness in Contemporary Times," in de Assis and Schwab, *Futures of the Contemporary*, 148.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

insistence on the preservation of the past. Thus, Gnessin's reading of "Leil aviv" notably reveals his perception of Feierberg as a contemporary writer. Feierberg's dyssynchronicity with his own time, as well as his critical distance from it, is precisely what makes Feierberg's fiction contemporary for Gnessin.

### REFLECTING ON CONTEMPORANEITY

At the time of his correspondence with Nevilov, Gnessin had already published some poetry and criticism, but he had not yet started writing fiction. Part of his early published work includes his eulogy of Nietzsche. The pathos of the eulogy is atypical when compared with his later writings. Gnessin describes Nietzsche as a "scholar of the living generation."<sup>14</sup> This expression would have probably remained inconspicuous had it not reappeared a few months later in Gnessin's first literary review, which was published in two installments in *Ha-tsfira*. Written in December 1900, while he was still living in Warsaw, it discussed Ezra Goldin's novel *Demon ha-yehudi* (The Jewish demon). It offers, I argue, Gnessin's first philosophical elaboration of the question of the contemporary. If scholars of the contemporary across the humanities agree on one point, it is about Agamben's understanding of "dyschronia," in which time is an ontological and epistemological condition that allows not only for the investigation of relationships between the past and the present but more importantly for the investigation of "the gap between the present and the present, between different planes of the present."<sup>15</sup> In fact, Gnessin's phrase "living generation" is a linguistic manifestation of his growing philosophical and literary interest in the gap between present and present.

Gnessin's critique of Goldin's novel viewed it as a failed promise to create an archetype of "a young tragic Jewish" man, a critique that Dan Miron reads as representative of the "lost generation of the beginning of the century."<sup>16</sup> Goldin's attempt represents his generation of Hebrew writers, who followed the poetic model set by two of the most influential Russian novels of the first half of the nineteenth century—Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Times*. However, as we will see, Gnessin explicitly expressed his reservations regarding the ability of the "literature of the past, even of the "nearest past" (1:77), to represent the experience of the new generation, offering instead a meditation on the relation between past and present, while putting a strong emphasis on the presence of the present. In his detailed philological survey of the evolution of the concept of the "modern," Hans Robert Jaus reminds us that the original function of the Latin word *modernus* was "to designate the historical now of the present."<sup>17</sup> This is precisely what is at stake in Gnessin's text. Although he hopes to read a literary text on the existential dilemmas of a young Hebrew man of the "nowadays" (*dehaidana*), Gnessin finds "memories of the past" of the dubious protagonist. It is important, then, to define what Gnessin means by "nowadays," or the content of his temporality, while exploring how his contemporaneity differs from that of previous generations.

According to Gnessin, who explicitly raised the question "What is literature and what is its *raison d'être*?" (1:76), literature has both moral and didactic objectives. On the one hand, by asserting the mimetic function of literature to "be a mirror of life," Gnessin follows the norms

<sup>14</sup> Uri Nissan Gnessin, *Kol ktavav* [Collected works], ed. Dan Miron and Israel Zmora, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha-meuhad and Sifriyat Poalim, 1982), 2:104. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>15</sup> De Asis, "In the Midst of Multiple Hurricanes of Time," 19.

<sup>16</sup> Dan Miron, *Hahim be-apo shel ha-netsah: Yetsirato shel Uri Nissan Gnessin* [Posteriority hooked: The travail and achievement of Uri Nissan Gnessin] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1997), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Robert Jaus, "Modernity and Literary Tradition," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 361.

of the psychological realism of late eighteenth-century Russian literature, which had recently been introduced in Hebrew by his contemporary Isaiah Bershadski. On the other hand, Gnessin calls into question the usefulness of the literary models of the “recent past” for representing the present. Gnessin defines life in modernist terms as a “development” that can be judged, only later, by history. Therefore, according to Gnessin, the didactic function of contemporary literature is to show the “common reader” the present, leaving the study of the past to scholars “that will come after us to study this development” (1:81). Thus, writing “on ruins of the past” becomes a moral and aesthetic luxury of “peaceful times,” a luxury that cannot be afforded in times of political upheavals and transitions. “The period in which we live,” continues Gnessin, “is not one of the peaceful ones” (1:78). For Gnessin, therefore, the representation of the past runs counter to the task of contemporary Hebrew literature. Thus, the literary models of the near past were not suitable for Gnessin’s present not only because of the historical changes that Jewish society underwent in Tsarist Russia at the end of the nineteenth century but also because the perception of time, or what the cultural theorist Aleida Assmann has recently called a “time regime,” changed during this period of modernity.<sup>18</sup>

Gnessin’s understanding of the modernist time regime was molded mainly by two Western European writers: Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he read in German, and Charles Baudelaire, whose prose poems he would later translate from French into Hebrew.

By juxtaposing history with life, Gnessin echoes the Nietzschean critique of historicism elaborated in *On Use and Abuse of History and Life*. In his introduction to *Untimely Meditations*, David Breazeale asserts that Nietzsche strove to offer a new vantage point on the way we relate to the past, while emphasizing the “inescapable historicity of human existence and to affirm the creative capacity of human beings to overcome themselves and their past.”<sup>19</sup> This creative capacity, therefore, is strongly connected to the ability to live ahistorically.<sup>20</sup> In his rejection of the representation of the past Gnessin adopts the Nietzschean logic of the revolt against history. If the trajectory of the modernist time regime “consists of dramatizing and accelerating the break from the past,” as Aleida Assmann asserts, and “contrasts with that of premodern temporal ontologies, where it was chiefly a matter of continuities and connections between the past, the present, and the future,”<sup>21</sup> it is important to formulate Gnessin’s own untimeliness. In following Nietzsche, Gnessin does not call for a break from the past but rather offers an exploration of the present. De Man shows that despite the modern tendency to search for a utopian, new origin, Nietzsche acknowledged that it is impossible to “overcome history in the name of life or to forget the past in the name of modernity, because both are linked by a temporal chain that gives them a common destiny.”<sup>22</sup> Gnessin’s use of the Aramaic word *dehaidana* should be understood as a linguistic shibboleth, as a word that signifies his own contemporaneity and admits the existence of another time in his present. However, what is at stake for Gnessin is not a philosophical investigation of

<sup>18</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Is Time out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 9.

<sup>19</sup> David Breazeale, introduction to *Untimely Meditations*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. David Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xv.

<sup>20</sup> Compare this with De Man’s argument: “‘Life’ is conceived not just in biological but in temporal terms as the ability to *forget* whatever precedes a present situation.” Paul De Man, “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” *Daedalus* 99, no. 2 (1970): 387.

<sup>21</sup> Assmann, *Is Time out of Joint?*, 99.

<sup>22</sup> De Man, “Literary History,” 390.

the paradox of temporality but an aesthetic one: "Literature's *raison d'être* in such a period can be signified in one word—to live, to live with the living generation.... In one word: in it the whole living generation should be seen: with all its internal wars, with all its differences and contradictions, its hopes and despairs" (1:78). Yet the aesthetic task of literature—"to live with the living generation"—is necessarily ethical. In fact, one could easily interpret Gnessin's phrase as a creative adaptation of Charles Baudelaire's desire to represent modern life in art, for Baudelaire was "the first to bring together the notions of 'time' and 'the modern' in a systematic way."<sup>23</sup> Gnessin's insistence on the acute need for new aesthetic models follows Baudelaire's manifesto-like statement "The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due, not only to the beauty it can be clothed in, but also to its essential quality of being the present."<sup>24</sup>

For Baudelaire the problem of modernity was the problem of the present, which according to Corey McCall can be described as a search for the "meaningful present not in light of an idealized past or a promised future, but on its own terms."<sup>25</sup> Coming back to Gnessin's critique of Goldin's failed attempt to become a painter of modern life, we can simultaneously argue that it was a literary legitimation of the representation of the present. Moreover, by pointing to the necessity of seeking new literary models in Hebrew for the representation of the Jewish Eastern European experience of modernity, Gnessin reveals the contemporaneity of different temporalities in the present. His notion of *dehaidana* signals the caesura of time, and this formulation is in accordance with Agamben's assertion that "those who say 'my time' actually divide time—they inscribe into it a caesura and a discontinuity."<sup>26</sup> To live with the living generation, then, would require Hebrew writers to imagine the existential contradictions of their own time, when time itself becomes differentiated, plural, and heterochronous.

### STAGING OF THE CONTEMPORARY IN "JENYA"

The reevaluation of the temporal experience of modernity and its various representations in modernist art as well as their meaning for our contemporaneity has become a pressing issue among art theorists and art historians. This line of thinking has led Keith Moxey to ask: "Is the time of the metropolitan centers of political and economic power really no different from those on the periphery?"<sup>27</sup> Following Moxey's question we can then ask: Is the time of modernity in Warsaw different from that in the small towns in the Pale of Settlement?

It was in Hebrew modernist prose that Gnessin was able to raise the questions of untimelessness and multiple temporalities in an entirely new form, for they had to be fictionalized not only on a thematic level but as intrinsic components of a represented temporality. While reading Gnessin's first story, "Jenya," it is important to stress that the asynchronous temporalities that Gnessin became aware of in the early stages of his literary activities coincided with the "jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities"—to use Terry Smith's words.<sup>28</sup> In Gnessin's case the exploration of the spatial dimension of the temporal framework of

<sup>23</sup> Assmann, *Is Time out of Joint?*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1995), 391.

<sup>25</sup> Corey McCall, "The Art of Life: Foucault's Reading of Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life,'" *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2010): 150.

<sup>26</sup> Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," 44.

<sup>27</sup> Moxey, *Visual Time*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 702.

contemporaneity occurred once he started working on fiction. Already in his first story Gnessin sought to represent the social space of a provincial town in the Pale of Settlement as a locus of heterochronous temporality.

In recent years scholars of modernism have persistently criticized the monolithic, Western European narrative of modernism and its relation to modernity from different theoretical angles—mainly from postcolonial, feminist, and transnational perspectives.<sup>29</sup> As a result of these criticisms, scholars now investigate the various modernisms that emerged throughout Europe and the colonial world, focusing on the different responses to the experiences of modernities (plural) across the world. These recent developments in the study of modernism have led to an epistemological shift from questions of temporality to questions of spatiality. Andrew Thacker, one of the chief proponents of a critical approach known as the geographies of modernism, has suggested moving away from questions of temporality, which have been extensively researched, in favor of locating “modernism in spatial and geographic contexts.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, if thinking geographically about modernism means placing it in “particular locations in the world,” then it also means placing it in a particular experience of time and, more specifically, of the present.<sup>31</sup> Thus, my reading of “Jenya” suggests bringing together both spatial and temporal dimensions of the present. So, for example, in *Regional Modernisms*, Neal Alexander and James Moran assert that “to discover modernism in the major cities, then, is to locate only one, admittedly significant, aspect of a broader and more geographically diverse phenomenon.”<sup>32</sup> And, indeed, this critical approach proves to be highly valid for grasping the emergence of Hebrew modernism in Eastern Europe, especially in the case of Gnessin’s modernist fiction, particularly because his fiction not only evolved in the small towns of the Pale of Settlement (which is true of many Hebrew modernist texts) but explicitly sought to represent the experience of modernity within the provincial fold.

As I have argued elsewhere, Gnessin’s spatial modernist thinking developed within a movement sideways from Moscow—with Moscow functioning as a symbolic space of imperial-Russian culture.<sup>33</sup> The same, I argue, is valid for the parallel aesthetic movements originating in Odessa and Warsaw—the two centers of Jewish literary culture. Moreover, Gnessin’s spatial thinking enabled him to constitute his own version of modernism that sought to bring together the crucial role of young Jewish women in the experience of modernity and the notion of the provincial space. What becomes visible after juxtaposing various genres of Gnessin’s literary writings is that it was in his fiction and through it that he developed what Andrew Thacker has called the “polytopic quality of modernist writing.”<sup>34</sup> That is to say that from the epistemological point of view, Gnessin discovered in and by means of his prose writing not only the asynchronous temporalities of the

<sup>29</sup> For a summary of recent theoretical developments in modernist studies, see Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity of Modernism,” in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture*, ed. Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–17.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Thacker, *Moving through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Thacker, “Placing Modernism,” in *Moving Modernisms: Motion, Technology and Modernity*, ed. David Bradshaw et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.

<sup>32</sup> Neal Alexander and James Moran, eds., *Regional Modernisms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Natasha Gordinsky, “Ha-tsida mi-Moskva: Ktivato ha-provintsialit shel Uri Nissan Gnessin” [Sideways from Moscow: Uri Nissan Gnessin’s provincial writing], *Mehkarey Yerushalayim be-sifrut Ivrit* 30 (2019): 33–56.

<sup>34</sup> Thacker, *Moving through Modernity*, 7.



present but also its polytopic dimension in which "radically different spaces and geographic scales are brought into relation with one another."<sup>35</sup>

Gnessin started working on "Jenya" in February 1902 and had a first draft by April of that year.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the story was written in the immediate aftermath of the Fifth Zionist Congress, which was held in Basel in December 1901, and it reflected explicitly the famous cultural debate that took place there and that Gnessin could have closely followed by reading the Jewish press in various languages. In fact, as Shachar Pinsker argued, "Jenya" is "Gnessin's only attempt to write a text that also deals explicitly with contemporary social and political events in the Jewish sphere."<sup>37</sup> Clearly, the representation of the Zionist debates and of the political and cultural activities (both those that succeeded and those that failed) that emerged in the provincial towns is a major topic in Gnessin's first story. But what seems to be no less important is the fact that the story constructs the space of the provincial town as a social and therefore necessarily gendered space in which different experiences of modernity and various temporalities coincide. "Jenya" takes place in the provincial town of Gomel. Unlike his subsequent fiction, "Jenya" is the only story in which the representation of space is marginal—both different places in the town and the interior spaces of the home remain unnoticed. Nonetheless, Gnessin's fiction endeavored to represent the social spaces of provincial towns as a locus of contemporaneity. It is in "Jenya" that he began developing a gendered understanding of space and temporal experience.

In comparison to Gnessin's other stories, "Jenya" has received little attention. Most readings have primarily concentrated on the erotic plot: the emotional entanglement of Jenya with two friends—Lerner and Fridin. Pinsker's insightful reading of the story revealed the libidinal economy and the triangular desire that structure the story's narrative. Viewed from this theoretical vantage point, Jenya "is not just an object of masculine desire and a highly ambivalent embodiment of the national trope; she is also a magnet that pulls together the relations between the two male protagonists."<sup>38</sup>

Elissa Bemporad and Glenn Dynner have recently asserted that the exploration of the Jewish female experience of modernity is essential for understanding the emergence of Jewish modernity in Eastern Europe.<sup>39</sup> "Jenya" offers Gnessin's first reflection on how the Jewish female experience of contemporaneity differs from the Jewish male experience of it—an issue that was not addressed in his other writings that were discussed in the previous parts of this article. My reading of the story suggests resisting the instrumentalization of Jenya's character. This young, educated, and ambitious Jewish woman should be read, not as a minor character, but as a main protagonist. Focusing on the intellectual plot that unfolds in the encounter between Jenya and Fridin sheds new light on Jenya as one of the most intriguing characters of early twentieth-century Hebrew literature.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>36</sup> Menachem Perry, *Shev 'alai ve-hithamem: Ha-dialog ha-homo'eroti bein Brenner li-Gnesin* [Sit on my lap: The homoerotic dialogue between Brenner and Gnessin] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2017), 399; Uri Nissan Gnessin, "Jenya," reprinted in Gnessin, *Kol ktavav*, 1:7–46.

<sup>37</sup> Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 188.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Elissa Bemporad and Glenn Dynner, "Introduction: Jewish Women in Modern Eastern and East Central Europe," *Jewish History* 33 (2020): 1–6.

Israel Zmora and Dan Miron suggest that the title of the story teaches us about Jenya's "essence as a daughter of an assimilated family and as a person without roots in Jewish life."<sup>40</sup> And indeed, Gnessin chose a popular name within the milieu of Russian Jews for his first female protagonist. However, his seemingly simplistic choice becomes much more intriguing when we take into consideration three linguistic characteristics of this Russian name. In fact, Gnessin encrypts the story's title in a fascinating way with his newly gained understanding of contemporaneity. The name Jenya is derived from the ancient Greek word *eugénios*, which means "wellborn." Gnessin connects the word's etymology with Jenya's profession as a midwife. Also, the diminutive form of the Russian female name Eugenia, Jenya, is the diminutive form of the male version of the same name, Eugenyi. Therefore, judging only from the title, Gnessin's historical reader could not possibly have known whether the titular character was a man or a woman. It becomes clear only after reading the story that the title refers to the female protagonist Eugenia Pavlovna and that the diminutive form used by the narrator of the story in the title should be interpreted retrospectively as a sign of a certain level of intimacy.

In Russian-speaking cultures the transition from addressing a person with their full name and with the second-person plural pronoun, *vy* (you), to using the singular second-person pronoun is not merely a formality but an important ritual. This ritual, which represents a "signing" of a social pact between two people who agree upon a new level of intimacy, is presented in a crucial scene in Gnessin's story when Eugenia Pavlovna asks Fridin to "become friends" by giving him permission to call her by her first name and to refer to her in the second-person singular form.

This transformation from one level of intimacy to another occurs in the story during the reading sessions in which Fridin educates Jenya, at her request, in matters of Jewish history and culture both in Russian and in Hebrew. Fridin's lessons with Jenya, in which they read together and discuss Jewish history and modern Hebrew literature, in particular Berdyczewski and Feierberg, can be viewed as a form of "sentimental education" —to use Naomi Seidman's essential insight on the crucial role that European and Haskalah literature played in shaping the erotic sphere of young Eastern European Jewish men and women.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, because Gnessin imagines Jenya and Fridin as distinct cultural agents of modernity, he stages these reading scenes to portray the heterochronic and polytopic dimensions of modern contemporaneity.

Gnessin locates these different and necessarily gendered experiences of temporality in the social space of the provincial town, to which Jenya and Fridin relate differently. Andrew Thacker warns us against understanding modernity through Lefebvre's notion of "abstract space," introducing instead the concept of geographical scale.<sup>42</sup> The concept of scale does not lead to the establishment of a hierarchy of "spatial entities;" rather, it offers a spatial differentiation and a dynamic understanding of the relations between them.<sup>43</sup> Reading "Jenya" through the lens of regionalism enables us to discern the dynamic relationship between different spatial entities: Gomel and Odessa resist the dichotomy of provincial town versus thriving center of Jewish culture. To begin with, Jenya's and Fridin's spatial experiences are utterly different. For Jenya it is her hometown to which she returns after acquiring a profession in Odessa. Even though Jenya refers

<sup>40</sup> Gnessin, *Kol ktavav*, 1:550.

<sup>41</sup> Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot: Or How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Thacker, "Placing Modernism," 19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

to Odessa more than once as a locus of thriving Zionist culture, she does not long for it—neither does Fridin. Once their love-relationship fades and the local cultural Zionist activities start to fail, Jenya eventually leaves the town. Fridin's spatial perception of Gomel, to which he recently moved, does not change even with the failure of his professional and personal affairs—on the contrary, he remains attached to the town, emphasizing that, unlike for Jenya, its space did not become narrow for him.

Their different spatial attitudes should not be interpreted merely from a psychological viewpoint; instead, they should be understood as the clear outcome of social mobility. Gnessin, apparently, did not find it necessary to provide his contemporary readers with information that was obvious to them: in twentieth-century Tsarist Russia, a Jewish woman with a midwife's education would have been entitled to move freely across the empire and live in any city, even those beyond the borders of the Pale of Settlement. This was not the case for young Jewish men like Fridin without a formal education. His movement would have been restricted, and if he had wanted to live in a big town, he would have been limited to those within the Pale.

To conclude, these different spatial experiences of modernity are strongly related to the different intellectual paths taken by Fridin and Jenya. On the one hand, unlike her interlocutor, who closely follows the development of Hebrew literature, Jenya was excluded from learning the Hebrew language—as were the vast majority of Jewish girls in Tsarist Russia. On the other hand, unlike the autodidact Fridin, for whom it was almost impossible to get accepted into a gymnasium, Jenya obtained a formal education in a Russian gymnasium and was certainly well read in Russian literature. Therefore, Jenya's intellectual background and formal education enabled her to grasp the key developments in Eastern European Jewish history "through constant and theoretical work" (1:25) while reading the monumental work of Simon Dubnow given to her by Fridin. Jenya, who was keen to read Hebrew literature—albeit in Russian translation—found, independently of Fridin, Feierberg's story "Le'an" (Whither), which epitomizes the existential dilemmas of post-Haskalah literature.<sup>44</sup>

While staging the parallel acts of reading, in both Russian and Hebrew, by a young Jewish woman and a young Jewish man respectively, Gnessin molds Feierberg's story as a cultural site for the negotiation between different modes of experiencing Jewish modernity. Thus, according to Gnessin, to be contemporary means to explore the heterochronic and polytopic elements of his own time. Constituted within the multilingual and gendered space of the Pale of Settlement, "Jenya" embodies Gnessin's first modernist attempt to explore the gap between different experiences of the present in Hebrew fiction. A

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<sup>44</sup> Mordekhai Ze'ev Feierberg, "Le'an," *Ha-shiloah* 5 (1899): 141–48, 217–32, 311–20.