

Gnessin Revisited

Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Metaforot usmalim beyetsiratro shel U. N. Gnessin* [*Metaphors and Symbols in U. N. Gnessin's Stories*]. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1987, 285 pp.

U. N. Gnessin—*Mehqarim uteudot* [*Studies and Documents*]. Edited by Dan Miron and Dan Laor. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1986, 434 pp.

The fiction of U. N. Gnessin is a unique phenomenon in modern Hebrew literature. Born in 1879, Gnessin was engaged only ten years in writing before his untimely death in 1913. The fruits of this decade were one book of short stories, three novellas, several poems and translations. His last novella, *Esel*, considered by many critics to be his best work, was published after his death. In this short creative period Gnessin established a specific experiential world and molded a distinctive style that was a forerunner of the stream of consciousness technique. His deviation from the mainstream of Hebrew fiction brought about scathing criticism from some major critics of the time, among them Gnessin's former close friend, Y. H. Brenner. Yet, with the establishment of the center of Hebrew literature in Palestine in the 1910s and the 1920s, Gnessin came to be acknowledged as a pivotal figure in modern Hebrew fiction who was ahead of his generation by many years.

The innovativeness of Gnessin's prose might be best illustrated against the background of Brenner's work. Brenner, the most eloquent and respected critic of the time, vehemently championed "committed literature," literature that addresses actual societal issues. Indeed, his own short stories and novels reflect the prominent concerns of the Jewish society during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the precarious existence of the Jews in the Diaspora, on the one hand, and the frustrating attempts to realize the Zionist dream in Palestine, on the other. The same themes are prevalent in the works of other contemporary Jewish writers, such as D. Baron, Y. Steinberg and G. Shofman. Their protagonists are anchored in Jewish existence, and their narratives are steeped in actual political and societal issues. Needless to say, the very fate of the Jewish people was at stake at the turn of the century, and Brenner and his

contemporaries depicted the conflict-laden situation of the Jews in the Diaspora as well as in Palestine. In contrast, in the second part of his career, which yielded the four novellas that are the pinnacle of his work, Gnessin totally severed his protagonists from a specific Jewish context. His focus on the inner workings of his characters was achieved at the expense of a developed plot and the examination of societal and political topics. His narratives depict the characters' inner worlds, their dreams and yearnings, their desperate attempts to realize their plans and their subsequent withdrawal into deceptive illusions and hallucinations. This emphasis is inextricably connected to Gnessin's unique style. In order to delineate his protagonists' inner life, with its minute shifts and changes, he developed a style that is typified by long, intricate cadences, with complex syntax and dense metaphoric language, which interweave internal and external impressions. With its emphasis on the sounds of the words, this style was a far cry from the norms of the realistic style of Gnessin's contemporaries. His unmistakable themes and style made him a cultural hero after his death. Thus, whereas Brenner became a symbol for many writers who have espoused committed literature, Gnessin turned into a model for writers who wanted to extricate themselves from the arena of immediate societal issues and pursue "art for art's sake." The writers of the literary magazines *Ketavim* and *Turim*, who carried the message of modernism in Hebrew literature during the 1920s and 1930s, made Gnessin their pivotal figure.¹ Later on, in the 1940s and the 1950s, major Israeli novelists, such as S. Yizhar and A. Kahana-Carmon, followed his footsteps.

Gnessin's highly complicated language as well as his lack of concern for urgent societal themes made his prose less popular than Brenner's. Yet, the intricate style and the sophisticated structures of his stories made them writers' and scholars' stories. After his death he was praised by prominent writers and critics as one of the best Hebrew novelists of his generation.² Reviews and studies of his work continued to be published, and his stories, especially his four novellas, were not forgotten even though it took more than thirty years after his death before the first edition of his collected works was published by Sifriat Poalim (1946). The critics of the 1960s were intrigued by Gnessin's complexity and in the last decade his prose has attracted renewed attention. Fresh attempts to interpret his main novellas were undertaken, and in 1982 a scholarly edition of his work was published.³ In recent years several books have been dedicated to his fiction after many years during which Brandwein's *Meshorer hashkif'ah* (1964) was the only comprehensive survey of his work.⁴

Early in his career as a critic, Fishel Lachover was highly impressed by Gnessin's talents, and after Gnessin's death he undertook to publish his collected works. The first volume (Warsaw, 1914) consisted of Gnessin's four major novellas *Haisida*, *Beinatayim*, *Beterem* and *Eisel* (the rest of the planned volumes were not published because of the outbreak of the First World War). In his introduction to this volume Lachover mentioned the fact that the stories tended to repeat themselves, yet emphasized that each one of them represents different facets of the protagonist's soul. Furthermore, he argued that the stories do not simply recount the same plot but rather evolve thematically and experientially from each other. Lachover's distinctions had little influence on his contemporaries. Most of the critics adopted the attitude that the four

novellas are but different chapters of the same long poem and, defining his prose as poetic prose, they neglected altogether its thematic aspects. Typical of this attitude was David Frischmann, who wrote that one has to read Gnessin's stories like poems and thus not look for their content.⁵ Exactly half a century had passed before Lachover's ideas were substantiated and developed in Dan Miron's series of articles in *Alpshav* (vol. 9, 10, 11, 15-16, 1963-66). Miron took pains to delineate the structural elements of Gnessin's stories in contrast to previous critics who had emphasized Gnessin's vagueness and formlessness. Moreover, unlike the previous scholars who have illuminated the impressionistic aspects of the stories while ignoring their themes, Miron brought to the fore their thematic and ideological dimensions. Examining the structure of *Haisida*, for example, Miron argues that the symmetrical structure of the story's three chapters and the series of analogies that connect its subplots attest to great architectonic capability. Furthermore, whereas previous critics found in *Haisida* only delicate emotions and refined lyrical impressions, Miron unearths beneath the impressionistic disguise a story whose main concern is a comprehensive inquiry into a process of deterioration and degeneration. The same analysis of intellectual and ethical issues as well as meticulous architectonic structures Miron finds in *Beinatayim* and *Beterem*. By scrutinizing the thematic aspects of the novellas Miron saw distinction of subject of each where others had seen repetition. These articles, with some later discussions of Gnessin's work, were included in Miron's *Kivun orot* [*Back to Focus*] (1979). Miron follows Lachover's lead not only in his interpretation of Gnessin's stories but also in his commitment to elaborating Gnessin's literary legacy. Along with his articles, Miron edited the scholarly edition of Gnessin's collected works (in collaboration with Israel Zmora) and *U. N. Gnessin: Studies and Documents* (in collaboration with Dan Laor). Hamutal Bar-Yosef's book, *Metaphors and Symbols in U. N. Gnessin's Stories*, is based on her doctoral dissertation, instructed by Miron.

U. N. Gnessin: Studies and Documents elaborates on some of the more common areas of Gnessin's research, interpretations and examinations of his style, yet it breaks new ground as well. Dan Laor studies the affinity between the book reviews written by the young Gnessin and his subsequent stories. In 1900 Gnessin was invited by Nahum Sokolow to Warsaw to work with him on the editorial board of *Haisefirah*, and under Sokolow's encouragement he wrote several reviews. Laor argues that reading these reviews might be highly important in order to understand Gnessin's aesthetic concepts at the time when he started his career as a novelist. Gnessin's first review surveyed E. Goldin's novel, *Demon yehudi* [*A Jewish Demon*]. Interestingly, Gnessin, who was traditionally portrayed as a writer aloof from societal and moral issues, emphasizes in his first review the literature's didactic function. The writer, in his opinion, has to portray his own generation not only by identifying with his contemporaries but also by depicting the protagonist of his time who comprehends all the specific features of his generation. Another aspect of Gnessin's espousal of realistic fiction is reflected in his mocking of the fantastic plot of *A Jewish Demon*. The same concept of literature as an imitation of reality and a reflection of the writer's generation is revealed in the rest of Gnessin's reviews. Gnessin was

often described as a poet who is devoted to the depiction of his own subjective world. Yet, his idea of the protagonist who merges all the features of his generation suggests, according to Laor, that he did not try to convey in his stories only his own torn soul, but tried to be the mouthpiece of his time. Laor underlines the important role the psychology of the main characters plays in Gnessin's articles and the deep interest he displays in literary techniques. He concludes that Gnessin's reviews may be interpreted as an early formulation of some of the premises that are maintained in his own fiction.

S. Werses's article on Gnessin's translations exposes yet another side of his work. Werses examines Gnessin's translation of the prologue of J. Wassermann's *Die Juden von Zirndorf* [*The Jews of Zirndorf*], that was published in Hebrew as an independent story, entitled *Bimei Shabbetai Zevi* [*In the Days of Sabbetai Zevi*]. He finds in the translation a constant tension between Gnessin's attempt to be loyal to the original text as well as to his own stylistic preferences. Gnessin tends to elaborate and expand the ecstatic scenes that accompanied Shabbetai Zevi and his messianic movement. Werses finds the same tendency in Gnessin's translation of moments of vacillation and stress. Gnessin did not hesitate to add metaphors to the original work or to replace original similes and images with his own. Known for his rich use of color as a means of characterizing the mood of his protagonists, Gnessin "colorized" his translations as well. The elements of sound that he found in the original were also enhanced in the translation, in accord with his own style.

Dan Miron's detailed article surveys the functions of the allusions in Gnessin's prose in yet another attempt to substantiate his argument that Gnessin carefully structured his stories and did not deal with his subjective experiences only. Miron's erudition in traditional and modern Hebrew sources as well as in European literature exposes a new facet of Gnessin stories. After an elaborate theoretical introduction which deals with the different components of the literary context—allusion, citation, parody and reference—Miron surveys the functions of allusion in Gnessin's stories. Gnessin frequently used allusion to traditional Jewish sources as well as to European literatures, a device that reached its peak in his mature novellas, *Beterem* and *Eisel*. Many allusions to the Bible and the Talmud reverse the meanings of the original sentences. Thus, *baheret levana* is a sign of a skin disease in the Bible, whereas Gnessin frequently uses this expression in descriptions of enchanting springtime landscapes. The original context of the expression continues to reverberate in the new context and makes it ambiguous: the sky in the spring is clear and beautiful, yet ailing as well. The allusions to European literature implicitly convey the narrator's attitude towards the protagonist and typify the main characters. An allusion to Homer in *Beterem* creates an amusing contradiction between Eumaeus, the faithful swineherd, who wakes up for his work at sunrise, and the laziness of Uriel, whose sinking into beds, armchairs and pillows is repeatedly described throughout the story. Most intriguing are the allusions to recent Hebrew texts, notably Bialik's poems. Miron aptly proves that Gnessin's texts maintain a tacit dialogue with Bialik's themes, usually parodying them.

Another method of referring to a literary text frequently used by Gnessin is the citation. Many of his characters cite prevalent songs and Zionist poems as well as verses from Homer, Schiller and popular Russian poets. The citation

usually plays the role of a double agent in the stories. On the one hand, it expresses the protagonist's excitement and arousal, yet on the other, it implies that this mood is forced and artificial. Later in the article Miron discusses examples in which the allusion shifts from the local texture to the structure, constituting a parody, a scene based on a literary analogy and a "literary net" that is developed throughout the story. The series of analogies Miron exposes in *Beterem* (analogies to Homer's *Iliad*, to *Macbeth* and to *The Brother Karamazov*) reveals unexpected meanings in the novella. In the final chapter Miron ties his previous findings to the nature of Gnessin's protagonists and to the main themes of the stories. Many of Gnessin's protagonists are writers, and not surprisingly, the significance of literature and its relation to reality become major subjects. Miron concludes his brilliant article by arguing that no one before Gnessin or after him has given the literary context such a pivotal status. No one has used it with as much intensity as Gnessin to underline the place of the narrative in the different literary traditions and to deal with the topic of the value and meaning of literature. The article (actually, almost a book in itself) is a major contribution to the research of the Gnessin phenomenon.

The documents included in the book contain the only remaining issue of the literary newsletter of the Potchep Yeshiva written by Gnessin and Brenner. A spellbinding document is Celia Levin-Dropkin's memories of Gnessin. Gnessin's stories are replete with romantic, dreaming female characters who are incorrigibly in love with the male protagonist. Celia Levin-Dropkin's memoirs give the reader a rare opportunity to follow one of these women from her own perspective and not from the point of view of the male writer. Celia was in love with Gnessin, and subsequently she served as a model for Tzili in *Eisel*. Moreover, a poem she wrote and sent to Gnessin was included by Gnessin in this story, and for years was considered to be his best poem.⁶ The depiction of her love is an exemplary description of romantic love which prefers the prospect of love to its materialization. On her last meeting with Gnessin she was already married and about to join her husband in the States; Gnessin's body was already nearly lifeless because of his heart condition.

Hamutal Bar-Yosef's book is yet another answer to the critics who have dismissed Gnessin's stories as vague poetic narratives. The novelty of her work lies in examining Gnessin's metaphors not for their poetic qualities, but for their contribution to the narrative aspects of the stories. She describes the metaphors in relation to the characterization of the protagonists and the development of the plot as well to the themes and the structures of the stories. Unlike the general tendency to label Gnessin's style as vague, Bar-Yosef claims that the metaphorical passages appear at specific points when the protagonist is carried away by the inner flow of his soul and when he experiences yearnings, longings and illusions. Yet when he confronts traumatic encounters with reality, the vague metaphorical language disappears altogether, and reality is portrayed in black and white with clear and sharp contours.

In order to demarcate Gnessin's unique use of metaphor, Bar-Yosef examines his stories against the background of five typical stories written around the turn of the century. The metaphors in narratives of Abramovitch,

Bialik, Feirberg and Berdyczewski and in Bialik's poems reveal that Hebrew writers of the time had different norms for metaphorical language in poetry and prose. In prose, the dominant norm for metaphors was a concrete noun (the subject of the metaphor is the protagonist's body, his house, his food and so forth) as part of the realistic mode of these writers and their attempt to concretize the protagonist's material world. In poetry, on the other hand, the norm was metaphors with an abstract or symbolic noun, such as "redemption," "despair," "poetry," "light," etc. Gnessin's style is, in this sense, typically poetic. One finds in his stories a conspicuous tendency towards metaphors whose subjects are abstract nouns ("dreams," "existence," "truth," etc.). Moreover, even when the subject of the metaphor is an external phenomenon, usually this is a vague phenomenon, not entirely semantically or visually defined. The author's main argument is that Gnessin was not interested at all in depicting clear-cut, concrete images. His metaphorical language was designed to represent a vague inner and external reality.

Bar-Yosef emphasizes the same feature in Gnessin's elaborated metaphors. In contrast to scholars who criticized the vagueness of these metaphors, she argues that their development is not arbitrary or whimsical. The internality of the elaborated metaphorical descriptions is achieved by the mental-psychological picture, and strengthened by inner, implicit relationships between the two parts of the metaphor as well as by elements of sound. One of Bar-Yosef's main contributions is to point out that these metaphors do not characterize Gnessin's style in general but rather appear in a very specific context: when the mind of a sensitive intellectual protagonist is carried away by romantic hallucinations. This kind of mental vagueness, which typifies all of Gnessin's characters, is not their only mental alternative. They also experience moments of disillusionment and lucidity. In these moments the images are sharp and clear, and the metaphors accompanying them are accurate and highly palpable.

A special kind of metaphor used by Gnessin is the "sliding metaphor," in which a noun is modified by two adjectives, the second of which is metaphorical. Typical sliding metaphors are expressions such as "long, yellow days," "a dark, celebrating abyss." Bar-Yosef convincingly claims that the sliding metaphor is a mirror of Gnessin's worldview. Gnessin rejects the possibility of an abrupt change brought about by sudden dramatic action. For him reality is built up out of pointed contradictions formed through the accumulation of nuances. Like Chekhov, Gnessin tries to illuminate the gradual inner change that grows unnoticed until it accumulates a power that surprises the protagonist himself. The sliding metaphor, which creates a gradual distance between the two adjectives, succinctly represents that process.

The same criterion of functionality serves the author in her discussions of Gnessin's synesthesia, oxymorons and similes. The synesthesia in his stories does not depict, as in Bialik's poems, moments of reuniting with nature, but rather moments of dangerous hallucinations in which the protagonist totally severs himself from reality. The oxymorons, on the other hand, appear mainly when the protagonist feels the threatening proximity of an unpleasant truth and he is forced to confront the true nature of his life. The similes also hint to a specific state of mind. In contrast to the acute bluntness of the oxymorons,

which accompany traumatic moments of disillusionment, the similes in Gnessin's stories typify states of reconciliation with reality by way of humor or resignation.

The last chapter of the book deals with symbolic leitmotifs. Starting with a theoretical description of this textual phenomenon, Bar-Yosef then surveys the different kinds of leitmotifs used by Gnessin and illuminates their connection to the plot, the characterization of the protagonists and the themes of the stories. Although some of these leitmotifs were already dealt with by Gnessin's scholars, several were never before described. Her discovery that some leitmotifs are established by sound alone while others use metaphorical clichés in order to undermine these very clichés unearths a whole new level of meaning in the stories.

Bar-Yosef's book scrupulously examines Gnessin's figurative language, and its main arguments are well substantiated by statistical tables. Despite the many early discussions of Gnessin's style, Bar-Yosef's reveals unexpected aspects of his metaphorical language. She persuasively proves that the figurative language in Gnessin's stories is not limited to expressing personal experiences but rather contributes to the characterization of the protagonists and the development of the plot and theme. There are times, however, when Bar-Yosef's claim that Gnessin's vague metaphorical language is designed to represent a vague inner and external reality seems to be begging the question.

In the last page of her book, Bar-Yosef mentions that her research has a theoretical goal of examining the different functions of figurative language in modern prose and poetry. Indeed, this interesting issue is far from being exhausted. In order to pursue this line of research the author could have compared Gnessin's stories to his own poems. Some other major Hebrew writers of his generation wrote prolifically both fiction and poetry, notably J. Steinberg (and during the 1920s and the 1930s, D. Vogel). A comparison of the metaphorical language in the fiction and poetry of these writers, by using the distinctions suggested by Bar-Yosef, might bring her theoretical concerns one step forward.

AVRAHAM BALABAN

Department of Near Eastern Studies
The University of Michigan

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive survey of the different responses to Gnessin's fiction see Lily Rattok's introduction to *Uri Nisan Gnessin—Mivhar ma'arei biqoret 'al yetsirato [Uri Nisan Gnessin—A Selection of Critical Essays on his Literary Prose]* (Tel Aviv, 1977), pp. 7-35.
2. See, for example, the essays included in *Hatsida: qovets zikaron lell. N. Gnessin* (Jerusalem, 1914). The book was edited by Brenner, who also contributed an article in which he changed his harsh criticism of Gnessin's work.
3. *Kol kivei Uri Nisan Gnessin [Uri Nisan Gnessin's Collected Works]*, ed. Dan Miron & Israel Zmora (Tel Aviv, 1982). The third volume of the collected works, which include Gnessin's letters, is still to be published.
4. To the books mentioned in the title of this article one may add Tsvi Luz's book, *Eisel Gnessin—peirush isamud lasipur Eisel [A Close Reading of Eisel]* (Tel Aviv, 1983). The major