Harold Schimmel's Diasporic Poetry: Hebrew Literature as World Literature

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In 1983, Israeli American poet Harold Schimmel published a Hebrew long poem entitled: *'Afra de-Ar'a: Uri Nisan Gnesin be-Erets-Yisra'el (1907-1908)*. This narrative poem, which Schimmel never included in any of his collections, focuses on the famed Hebrew modernist Uri Nissan Gnessin's short-lived stay in Palestine, after which he returned to Europe. Initially, Schimmel had planned to write a scholarly essay on Gnessin, but ultimately, he synthesized the variegated materials he had gathered into a long poem, which he described as "an essay in short lines." Despite its status as an apocryphal text in Schimmel's oeuvre, this article proposes to read *'Afra de-Ar'a* as a hermeneutical key for understanding his diasporic poetics. Schimmel does not implicate himself in this narrative poem, written as a fabric of quotations from Gnessin's oeuvre and from texts Gnessin must have read. Yet Gnessin enables Schimmel to think anew about his own relationship with the Hebrew language. While Schimmel never reveals his motivation for writing this poem, it is read as a self-reflection on his own immigration to Israel and on his choice of Hebrew over his mother tongue.

1. In Exile, At Home

In 1983, Harold Schimmel published the book-length long poem "'Afra de-Ar'a": Uri Nisan Gnesin be-Erets-Yisra'el (1907-1908)" ("Dust of the Land: Uri Nissan Gnessin in the Land of Israel (1907-1908") (Schimmel 1983a: 192-213). This narrative poem, which Schimmel never included in any of his collections, focuses on the famed Hebrew modernist Uri Nissan Gnessin's short-lived stay in Palestine, after which he returned to his Eastern European hometown of Pochep, Russia. Initially, Schimmel had planned to write a scholarly essay on Gnessin, but ultimately, he synthesized the variegated materials he had gathered into a long poem which he described as "an essay in short lines."[1] In his own words: "I wrote the essay but then realized that it wasn't an essay, it was dressed up as an essay. And when I worked on it, I found a five-words-per-line rhythm. There were so many foreign names that required niqqud [Hebrew diacritical marks], and Menaḥem Perry, Editor of Siman Qri'ah, was generous enough to print it with such breadth" (Yeshurun 2016: 97-8). Schimmel describes "'Afra de-Ar'a" as a text that became a poem only by happenstance, a characterization that was reiterated by his decision to not publish it neither as a book nor within a volume of poetry. As a result, this book-length poem was consigned to obscurity, even among Schimmel's most avid readers. Nevertheless, "'Afra de-Ar'a" marks Schimmel's shift from the short lyric poem to the modernist long poem, which is intertwined with the theme of his immigration to Israel.

His first collection of poetry, *First Poems* (Schimmel 1962), is comprised of short lyric poems in English, a structure that was retained in his first Hebrew collection, *ha-Shirim* (*The Poems*, 1968), which was a Hebrew adaptation of his English debut. This is also true of his second Hebrew collection, *Shirei Malon Tsiyyon* (*Songs of the Zion Hotel*, 1974a). Starting from his next book, *Ar'a 1-8* (1979), Schimmel fully dedicated himself to the format of a "long poem" that constituted one part of a larger poetic project, spanning multiple volumes.[2] Indeed, the word '*ar'a*' (meaning 'land' in Aramaic) is not only the title of the 1979 book, but also the name of the decades-long poetic project that includes *Ar'a 1-8* (*Land 1-8*), *Lowell* (1986), *Sefer Midrash Tadshe: Ar'a 12* (*The Midrash 'Sprout Vegetation!': Land 12*, 1993), and *Nokhei'aḥ* (*Present,* 1995). As the title "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" suggests, this long poem about Gnessin should be read as part of the "*Ar'a* Project," although it was never published in book form. As Shaḥar Bram notes, the piecemeal *Ar'a* cycle explores the "physical, spiritual, and linguistic" implications of the "exile/homeland dyad" (Bram 2005: 51).[3] This description is equally relevant to "'*Afra de-Ar'a*," despite its status as an apocryphal text in Schimmel's oeuvre.

Schimmel was born in New Jersey in 1935 to a father who had emigrated from Galicia as a young man. Noting his father's desire to assimilate into American culture, Schimmel said: "My father loved New York in a way that only an immigrant can love a city" (Yeshurun 2016: 88). Unlike his father, who turned his back on the Yiddish language and culture and his diasporic past, Schimmel was always interested in the tension between belonging and not-belonging, often describing the advantageous perspective of the latter. For instance, he described his love of American poetry in terms of its distance from the English literary tradition: "In college what pulled me to [American poetry] is the fact that it isn't English poetry. […] Walt Whitman and Emily Dickenson threw out tradition and they were a bit strange and somewhat wild in regard to what a poem should be, and it was a powerful expression of locality" (Yeshurun 2016: 92).

Schimmel's fascination with hyphenated identities and in-between-ness came to light long before he left the United States. As a freshman at Cornell University, he wanted to write a paper on exiled intellectuals, and, to that end, he was advised to meet with Vladimir Nabokov, who taught at Cornell at the time. After a few conversations with the Soviet émigré writer, in which he was struck by Nabokov's attention to detail in his work as a translator, Schimmel was invited to speak with him again. He had just published a short story in the students' literary magazine, *The Cornell Writer*, and, to his surprise, Nabokov had read the story and wanted to discuss it with him (Singer and Singer 2014):

> I went up to his tiny office, which I was already familiar with, and Nabokov spoke to me about my story. […] There was a description of a table with a blue and white Wedgewood sugar bowl and an ant climbing on a sugar cube. He focused on that passage and said that

> it showed that "you shall be a writer," that I am serious about writing. It was a very precious compliment. He also said: "There is one thing you should distance yourself from immediately – 'stream of consciousness.' Only Joyce could do it and even he only managed it some of the time. You should get rid of it immediately, write what you have to say, describe it without all the nebulous clouds passing through your head."

After his first visit to Israel in 1954, Schimmel contemplated leaving Cornell and settling down in a *kibbutz*. Upon hearing of his plans, Nabokov met with Schimmel again and told him: "I think it is a misreading of Rimbaud" (Singer and Singer 2014), a reference to the French poet's decision to leave France to settle in Africa. Following that conversation, Schimmel abandoned his plans and joined the U.S. Army, serving in Europe between 1957 and 1958, after which he started his doctoral studies in English literature at Boston University. Having published in *The Cornell Writer* during the 1950s, he published his first volume of poetry, *First Poems*, in 1962 and was viewed as a promising new voice in American poetry. A year later, Schimmel immigrated to Jerusalem to become a Hebrew poet (Jacobs 2018: 172).

Schimmel expressed his fascination with not-belonging and otherness in two dramatic poetic moves – he abandoned English for Hebrew and turned his back on the short, lyrical poetry that had characterized his first book, in favor of long, modernistic poetry. These shifts locked him into a paradoxical position. The move to Israel had distanced him from his homeland and mother tongue, but the transition to the long poem in its American form – in the tradition of Ezra Pound, Charles Olson and Louis Zukofsky – re-tethered him to his literary roots. Nonetheless, his poetic position marginalized him within Hebrew poetry, which was estranged from such Anglo-American poetic tradition. Against the backdrop of the Zionist trope of homecoming, Schimmel retained an ambivalence towards belonging, which positioned him in line with other American émigrés such as Gertrude Stein, who famously wrote: "That is why writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really. The second one is romantic, it is separate from themselves, it is not real, but it is really there" (Stein 1970: 2). Stein, like Paul Celan (Antschel) and Edmund Jabès, expressed a markedly Jewish position, viewing the source of their creativity in their sense of homelessness. Quite paradoxically, Schimmel embodies a similar position while living in Jerusalem through his dedication to Anglo-American modernism in Hebrew.

2. Schimmel's Gnessin

Schimmel's "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" may seem like an epideictic poem, a tribute to Hebrew modernism's great aesthete, Uri Nissan Gnessin, who died in Warsaw in 1913 at the young age of 33. While the poem attests to Schimmel's close affinity to Gnessin as a Hebrew writer, it is the latter's

ideological struggles with Zionism that are at the heart of the poem. By directing his gaze to an oft-forgotten chapter in Gnessin's life, his immigration to the Land of Israel in October 1907 and his return to Europe in May 1908, Schimmel rewrites Gnessin's failed attempt to settle in the Holy Land as an embodiment of an a-nationalist poetic stance. Written in 1983, at the height of the First Lebanon War, during which Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied Beirut, Schimmel's long poem celebrates Gnessin's diasporism, his self-declared weakness and the deterritorialization of Hebrew, as made clear by the poem's opening (1983a: 192):[4]

מַפּוֹת צְרִיכִים שְׁתַּיִם כְּמוֹ תְּפִלִּין
שֶׁל רֹאשׁ וּתְפִלִּין שֶׁמְּנֻגָּד הַלֵּב –
אַחַת הִיא הַמְּשֻׁלָּשׁ הַמְּשֻׁנֶּה שֶׁנּוֹצַר
בֵּין יָפוֹ פ״ת וְירוּשָׁלַיִם הַשְּׁנָיָה
כְּכוֹכָב חָרוּט בַּנֶּפֶשׁ (מִי שׁוֹמֵעַ
הַמִּלָּה וְאֵינוֹ מַרְגִּישׁ רֶטֶט כָּל-תְּנוּעוֹת
הַגּוּף וְרִגְשׁוֹתָיו?) קְרָא: פּוֹצֶ׳פּ: אוֹ
פּאָטשעפּ קְרִיצ׳וֹב סְטַארוֹדוּב הוֹמֶל סוּרַאז׳
בּוֹבְּרוּיסְק צֶ׳רְנִיגוֹב קאָנאָטאָפּ קִיוֹב ״חָצוֹא
וָשׁוֹב״ קִיוֹב (דֶּרֶךְ הַדְּנִיפֶּר) הוֹמֶל
לְפּוֹצֶ׳פּ-עַל-נְהַר-סוּדוֹסְט הַקַּוִּים עַל הַמַּפָּה חַיִּים
פַּסֵּי הָרַכֶּבֶת כְּמוֹ בְּסִפּוּרֵי צֶ׳כוֹב

One needs two maps like head-
tefillin and close-to-heart-tefillin –
One is that strange triangle
Between Jaffa, Petah Tikvah and Jerusalem The other
Like a star etched in the soul (who can hear
The word and not feel all the body's tremors
And its feeling?) Say: Pochep or
Počep Krychaw Starodub Gomel Surazh
Babruysk Chernihiv Konotop Kiev "back
And forth" Kiev (through the Dnieper) Gomel
To Pochep-upon-Sudost The lines on the map live
The train tracks like in Chekov stories

The poem's opening line, "One needs two maps," embeds a Jewish diasporism in the dual placements of the tefillin's *batim* (houses) on one's head and arm. Despite the title's explicit reference to Gnessin's time in the Land of Israel, the poem names a series of provincial towns in the Russian Empire, which Gnessin roamed at the turn of the century as an aspiring Hebrew writer. Schimmel quotes Gnessin's own words, describing his sojourns in Eastern Europe as an incessant "back and forth" movement. Thus, from the very beginning of the long poem, Schimmel presents territorial fragmentation and split existence as the true core of Jewish identity. Schimmel explains (Yeshurun 2016: 97-8):

> I was fascinated by all the stories about writers who came here, realized that this is not their place, went back and kept writing [Hebrew] literature away from the Land of Israel.

> […] I wanted to decipher Gnessin. Who is this man who writes in a language that isn't his own, the language of a few books and journals he had read […]? And then he comes here, and people speak this language, but to him it sounds strained and strange. He doesn't like it, so he doubles down on his Yiddish and his 'Russian-ness'.

While he was writing his long poem on Gnessin, Schimmel published a short essay on Gnessin's style. While the poem focuses on Gnessin's rejection of the attempt to localize and territorialize Hebrew, the essay celebrates his experimental exploration of form, which places him, according to Schimmel, at the forefront of international literary modernism: "We can surely say that Gnessin's place is right alongside Hamsun, Joyce, Svevo, Babel and Pavese. And if Gnessin does not have his own entry in the Britannica yet, it is only a matter of time and a lack of translation" (Schimmel 1983b: 22). Here, Schimmel echoes Leah Goldberg's description of Gnessin:

> There was a time in European literature: Very few seemed to have permission to speak. In every corner of the Earth, stories were told, and songs were sung about their neglect and anxieties, about their longing for a unified world that did not exist, about their loss. And he, that gentlest of Hebrew writers, is not at fault that his voice did not join (due to the foreignness of his tongue) the big world's chorus of individuals (Goldberg 1976: 80).

In her discussion of Gnessin as an international modernist, albeit a marginal one, Goldberg overlooks his failed immigration to the Land of Israel, which could have, at least potentially, redeemed his uprooted existence. Schimmel's poetic-cum-critical intervention attempts to recover the forgotten chapter in Gnessin's biography, which allows him to rethink the concepts of home and belonging.

Born to an Orthodox family in the Russian Empire, Gnessin's exposure to post-Enlightenment ideals – modernization and secularization – typifies the collective biography of Hebrew writers of the period. With few exceptions, this *bildung* directed Hebrew writers toward Zionism, choosing Palestine over Eastern Europe and Hebrew over Yiddish. For example, when Yosef Ḥaim Brenner, (Gnessin's closest friend when they had studied Judaica together as young *yeshiva bokhers* in Pochep) settled in Palestine in 1908, shortly after Gnessin's return to Europe, Brenner almost single-handedly turned the *Yishuv* (the Jewish Settlement) into the center of Hebrew literary production. By way of contrast, Gnessin remained an outsider even after settling in Petah Tikva. He rejected the fundamental credos of the Second *ʻAliyah* (1904-1914): the use of Hebrew as a vernacular language, the Sephardic (non-European, eastern) pronunciation, and the war on Yiddish. The dislike was mutual, as Nurit Govrin noted, for the local press was completely disinterested in Gnessin's arrival in Palestine, his work there, or his eventual return to Europe (2015: 302). In his fiction, Gnessin abstained from any reference to his time in the Land of Israel,

but a letter to his father revealed his perception of the *Yishuv*. Upon learning that his father had been offered the position as head of the Hebron Yeshiva, he wrote (1946: 143-4):

> I have sent you a postcard, in which I wrote about the Land of Israel, which, in my mind, is not a purpose in and of itself; […] If you decide to travel here and settle, I would strongly object, for this is no refuge for a Jew who does not merchandise his Jewishness. The Jewish soul is in the diaspora and not here […]. I know that these words will sadden you, but this sadness is nothing compared to the great despair you would see before your eyes were you here.

Although Schimmel's long poem is studded with quotations from Gnessin's writing, displaying an intimate familiarity with his entire *oeuvre*, Schimmel chooses to omit this particularly explicit rejection of Zionism. This momentous omission is a brilliant replication of Gnessin's own withdrawal from political engagement, which Schimmel views as the heart of his writing about the Land of Israel. Moreover, Schimmel recognizes that, for Gnessin, Palestine cannot be anything but a site of lack (Schimmel 1983a: 202):

אֶרֶץ-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵצֶל
גנסין אֶפְשָׁר לְתָאֳרָהּ רַק בְּדֶרֶךְ
הֶחְסֵר כִּי זֶה מָה שֶׁהוּא
רָאָה וּמַה שֶׁהוּא הִרְגִּישׁ אֶלָּא שֶׁ
תְּמוּנַת-"הַיֵּשׁ" לֹא-מְקַבְּלִים אַף-פַּעַם דֶּרֶךְ הָ"אֵין":
אֵין דְּמְדּוּמִים אֵין מַרְכְּבוֹת טְרַאם
אֵין מַטְרוֹנִיתוֹת אֵין טִיּוּל צוֹהֵל
בְּדוּגִית אֵין חוֹפֵי הַדְּנֶיֶפֶר הַשּׁוֹמְמִים
אֵין צְחוֹקָם הַגַּס שֶׁל אֲגֵדוֹת
הָאִכָּרִים אֵין קִיּוֹב הַהוֹמְיָה הַמְצַלְצֶלֶת
הָרָצָה הַמְקַשְׁקֶשֶׁת אֵין שְׁדוֹת-מוֹלֶדֶת כַּרְסָנִיִּים
אֵין הֲנָאָה שֶׁבְּקְרִירַת רוּחַ אֵין
כָּל אוֹתָם הַסּוֹדוֹת שֶׁל הַיְלָדִים
הַגְּדוֹלִים אֵין סוּרַאז' אֵין קוֹנוֹטוֹפּ
אֵין חאפט א קוק אויף דער
גויה...

The Land of Israel, for
Gnessin, can be described only by way of
Omission for that is what he
Saw and what he felt but
The 'presence' is never attainable through the 'absence':
No twilight No tramcars
No matrons No jubilant sailing
In a boat No vacant Dnieper beaches
No coarse laughter of
farmers No bustling, humming Kiev
Running and babbling No lavish fields of the homeland
No pleasure of cool winds No
Secrets kept by the big

Kids No Surazh No Konotop
No khoft a kook oyf der
Goye…

The Land of Israel is negated precisely for what it does not have: the lush Ukrainian landscape, Yiddish, trams, non-Jewish Russian girls. But Gnessin's perception of the Land of Israel as a site of negation counters the Zionist negation of exilic life. As Benjamin Harshav expounds, the modern Jewish revolution was characterized by a triple negation: "It was as if all these new forms of physical and cultural dislocation said, in various ways, in different combinations, and to different degrees: We want to be NOT HERE, NOT LIKE NOW, NOT AS WE WERE" (1990: 130). Although Gnessin seemed to have fulfilled this triple negation by his emigration to Palestine, Schimmel highlights his own negation of these negations.

If Gnessin found Petah Tikva displeasing, it was not due to its provincialism. As Natasha Gordinsky (2019) shows, Gnessin was deeply interested in the provincial towns of the Russian Empire, as well as in the concept of "provincialism" itself, which was given a favorable meaning in his stories. Gnessin rejected Petah Tikva not because of its marginality, but precisely because it strove to become a center. Against this backdrop, Schimmel's fascination with Gnessin's nomadic stance becomes clear, for he, too, had come from a major cultural center, New York, to Israel, a provincial site on the map of international modernism.[5] In this sense, "'*Afra de-A'ra*" is not simply a poem about Gnessin; it is rather a text in which Schimmel ventriloquizes Gnessin's voice in order to explore his own positionality between center and margin, local and international, belonging and unbelonging.

3. An Epistolary Poem?

When Schimmel describes "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" as "an essay in short lines," he is accounting for the poem's genesis, having been initially planned as an essay, as well as for the erudition required for its writing; this long poem displays an unmatched familiarity with Gnessin's *oeuvre*, as well as with the history of its reception. He gives special attention to Gnessin's letters, which are quoted, contextualized, and interpreted throughout the poem. While some of the letters were clearly written in Hebrew, others were written in Russian and were translated into Hebrew by the editors of the 1946 edition of *The Complete Works of U. N. Gnessin* (Gnessin 1946). The contents of these letters enabled Schimmel to capture Gnessin's voice and to integrate it into the poem's "lyric 'now'" (Giusti 2017). As Gnessin's voice reverberates in Schimmel's poetic text, one cannot but think about its range and the differences between Gnessin's letters and literary texts. Schimmel's own voice becomes subsidiary, and the poem becomes a *midrash* (study) on Gnessin's stay in the

Land of Israel. For example, Schimmel quotes from the following letter that Gnessin wrote to Yulia Tokorov, his friend from Antwerp (Brenner 1913-1914: 58):

> To: Yulia Tokorov
>
> Emek Shoshanim, Tevet 1907
>
> The sorrow is great, Yulia. What was I thinking about? And why? These sinful temptations. There, in the faraway twilight land, my heart's beams were glittering, but that long passed. You, I reckon, were asleep then, now – some became shadows, and some are still dying… Yulia, Yulia! Give Gulia a kiss for me and do not reply.
>
> Uri Nissan.

Schimmel speculates that this text was not a letter, but a postcard which may not have been sent at all. In "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" it appears thus (1983a: 200-1):

הַ"מִּכְתָּב" לְיוּלְיָה טוֹקוֹרוֹב מִסּוֹף
שְׁנַת 1907 כָּתוּב עִבְרִית וְכַנִּרְאֶה
מְקוֹרוֹ מֵאוֹתוֹ "הוֹטֶל נַחְמָן" שֶׁבְּפֶתַח-תִּקְוָה
לְפִי אָרְכּוֹ וְתָכְנוֹ גְּלוּיָה-פְּתוּחָה הִיא
אוֹ שֶׁגִּנֶּסִין הִכְנִיסוֹ לַמַּעֲטָפָה כְּדֵי
שֶׁלֹּא-יִרְאֶה-אוֹתוֹ-רִאשׁוֹן ר' יַעֲקֹב טוֹקוֹרוֹב חֲבֵר אָבִיו
"עֵמֶק שׁוֹשַׁנִּים" הוּא עִבּוּד נוֹסָף ל"פֶּתַח תִּקְוָה"
גַּם שָׁם בָּאָרֶץ הַחַמָּה הַיָּפָה
"רַבָּה הַתּוּגָה" הַמִּכְתָּב כֻּלּוֹ הֶלֶךְ-נֶפֶשׁ
תְּחִלָּתוֹ בְּמַצַּב רוּחוֹ הַזָּר וּמוּזָר
וְלֹא בְּרָצוֹן כָּלְשֶׁהוּ לְהַעֲבִיר בְּשׁוֹרוֹת –
הַתּוֹכֶן גַּעְגּוּעִים בְּמִקּוֹר הָאוֹר הַגָּדוֹל
אוֹרוֹת-לְבָבוֹ דּוֹהִים הֵם כִּבְרֹב מִכְתָּבָיו
וְדוֹמֶה בָּזֶה לְסִפּוּרָיו הַכָּתוּב מַעֲבִיר
הַצֶּבַע שֶׁבַּקּוֹל הַחַי הִסּוּסִים שִׁבְרֵי-מִשְׁפָּטִים
הַתְּחָלוֹת מְקֻטָּעוֹת חֲזָרוֹת מוּסִיקָלִיּוֹת כְּאֶצְבַּע
שׁוֹהָה עַל תָּו מִינוֹרִי שְׁאֵלוֹת
וּפְנִיּוֹת לְעַצְמוֹ שֶׁאֵין-לָהֶן-תְּשׁוּבוֹת אֶפְשָׁר לְהָבִין
[…]
יוֹתֵר מִתְקַבֵּל-עַל-הַדַּעַת שֶׁיֵּשׁ לָנוּ עִנְיָן עִם
גְּלוּיָה-פְּתוּחָה שֶׁגִּנֶּסִין כָּתַב וְלֹא שָׁלַח:

The 'letter' to Yulia Tokorov at the end
Of שגנסין is written in Hebrew and it appears
To be from the same 'Nachman Hotel' in Petah Tikva
According to its length and content it is a postcard
Unless Gnessin put in in an envelope so that
Rev Yaakov Tokorov, his father's friend, would not see it first
'Emek Shoshanim' is another name for 'Petah Tikva'
Also in the hot beautiful land
'The sorrow is great' The letter is all mood
Its opening is in a strange state of mind
And is not concerned with conveying news –
The content is longing In the great source of light
His heart's beams dimmed As in most of his letters

Like in his stories What is written conveys
The cringe of the living voice The hesitations of half-sentences
Interrupted beginnings Musical repetitions like a finger
Lingering on a minor note And self-addressed
questions which have no answers
[…]
It seems more likely that we are dealing with
A postcard that Gnessin wrote but never sent:

The question of whether this letter was sent or not foregrounds the subject of address and, consequently, of referentiality. The suggestion that it was never sent is intertwined with the assertion that the letter is "all mood," having no concrete content, much like his stories. This critical perception was first suggested by David Frischmann in a eulogy, in which he described Gnessin's stories as "hardly having any content" (1913:2). By seeing the letter as employing the same rhetoric, Schimmel essentially reads it as anti-referential, stating that Gnessin does not describe the local landscape and "is not concerned with conveying news," but rather gives voice to a certain "mood" or "longing," expressed by half-sentences, interrupted beginnings, musical repetitions, and unanswered questions. Schimmel's focus on the semiotic aspect of language – that is, on its non-semantic parts – highlights the affinity between Gnessin's ideological impasse and the narrative dead end, so typical of his stories. Even the letter's concluding words: "Do not reply!" also bolster the non-dialogic nature of Gnessin's discourse, which remains a soliloquy. In yet another letter (written to Celia Dropkin), mentioned in Schimmel's long poem, Gnessin writes (Perry 2017: 393-4):

> [Jerusalem, May 1908]
> Jerusalem – my homeland is lovely!
> Oh, Celia, how lovely is my "homeland." When I climbed up today to the 'head' of the Russian Church it seemed that I was seeing Surazh. And later, when a gust of wind passed me by and teased me: 'How you wasted your youth!' I realized at once that I had two paths before me: Either cast myself down, into this abyss, or to climb, post haste, down the narrow stairs and write at once letters to all my [female] friends. And I chose the latter. And I chose well. Very well. Because I have never eaten in my life a roast such as the one I later had for lunch. And the landlady's daughter, the long-legged Jemima, whose teeth are long and dull, was *besonders mild* [especially mild] today. I chose well. And how do you fare? Now, it seems, the month of May – what will become of the boat you meant to rock with rage? *Wo ist die Katze und Wo das Wasser?* [Where is the cat and where the water?] Celia, Celia, I remember now. You once wrote to me: 'I thought to myself that I could live.' Be well.

Here, Gnessin's problematization of the concept of "homeland" is fully displayed. From the tower of the Russian Church in Jerusalem, he sees the Ukrainian village of Surazh, superimposing the

diasporic landscape of his childhood onto the Judean Desert. The nomadic Gnessin is aware of his inability to feel at home, either in Pochep or in the Land of Israel, and consequently places the word "homeland" in quotation marks. Schimmel dwells on this matter through the rendition in his poem of the letter to Celia Dropkin (1983a: 193-4):

[...] וְאוֹרִי נִיסָן
עוֹלֶה לְעֻצָּם "רֹאשׁ" טוּר-מַלְכָּא וְנִדְמֶה
נִדְמֶה-לוֹ כְּאִלּוּ עֵינָיו רוֹאוֹת אֶת
סוּרַאז'
[...]
"Jerusalem – נָאֶה הִיא אֶרֶץ-מוֹלַדְתִּי" מַתְחִיל
אֶת מִכְתָּבוֹ מִמַּאי 1908 וּמִיָּד
צָץ הַכְּנֶגֶד וְגֶנְסִין כְּגוֹגוֹל בְּמִכְתָּבוֹ
מִיָּד מְתָאֵר דֶּרֶךְ מֶרְכָּאוֹת: "הוֹ
צִלָּה כַּמָּה נָאֶה הִיא אֶרֶץ
אֶרֶץ 'מוֹלַדְתִּי'" מוֹלַדְתּוֹ הַיְחִידָה נִמְצֵאת בְּפֶרֶק
רְבִיעִי שֶׁל "בְּטֶרֶם" [...]
כְּדַאי
לְצַטֵּט הֶלְאָה מֵאוֹתוֹ מִכְתָּב לַמְרוֹת
שֶׁהוּא אֵינוֹ אֶלָּא תַּרְגּוּם-עִבְרִי שֶׁל
פּוֹזַנְסְקִי לִרוּסִית שֶׁל גְּנֶסִין: "כְּשֶׁעָלִיתִי
הַיּוֹם לְעֻצָּם 'רֹאשׁ' טוּר-מַלְכָּא נִדְמָה
לִי, כִּי עֵינַי רוֹאוֹת
אֶת סוּרַאז'. וּכְשֶׁאַחַרַי זֶה חָלַף-עָבַר
רוּחַ-סַעַר וְתָקַע-צָחַק לִי: אֵיכָה כִּלִּיתָ
אֶת יְמֵי הָעֲלוּמִים שֶׁלְּךָ!" וְכוּ'

[…] And Uri Nissan
Climbed up to the 'head' of the Russian Church and it seemed
Seemed to him as if his eyes were seeing
Surazh […]
His letter from May 1908 opens with
"Jerusalem – my homeland is lovely," and the counter
Emerges straightway and Gnessin as Gogol in his letter
Immediately uses quotation marks: "Oh,
Celia how lovely is my
'homeland'" His only homeland can be found in the fourth
Chapter of "The Time Before" […]
It's best to
Keep quoting from that letter, though
It is no more than Poznansky's
Hebrew translation of Gnessin's Russian: "When I climbed up
today to the 'head' of the Russian Church
it seemed that I was seeing
Surazh. And later, when a gust of wind
passed me by and teased me: "How you wasted
your youth!" and so on.

By describing the fourth chapter of Gnessin's "The Time Before" ("*Be-Terem*") as the writer's only homeland, Schimmel attributes ethical meaning to Gnessin's nomadic nature. In "Our Homeland, the Text," George Steiner views the exilic condition as a quintessentially Jewish quality; for him (1985: 21):

> […] Nationalism is a sort of madness, a virulent infection edging the species towards mutual massacre. […] The man or woman at home in the text is, by definition, a conscientious objector: to the vulgar mystique of the flag and the anthem, to the sleep of reason which proclaims 'my country, right or wrong', to the pathos and eloquence of collective mendacities on which the nation-state […] builds its power and aggressions.

Both Schimmel's long poem and Steiner's seminal essay were written in the first half of the 1980s, against the backdrop of the Likud's rise to power in Israel and the consequent invasion of Lebanon. It would no doubt be anachronistic to view Gnessin as a "conscientious objector" to Israel's use of military power which, in 1907, was nothing but a figment of the imagination. But Gnessin's intuitive recoil from fulfilling the dream of *Shivat Tsiyon* (the return to Zion) and his oppositional stance vis-à-vis the reterritorialization of Hebrew language and culture rendered him an early symbolic 'dissident' who resisted the alluring temptations of Zionism.

4. Poetry as Historiography

By recounting the story of Gnessin's 'failed' immigration, "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" attempts to uncover the diasporic undercurrent of Hebrew modernism. Hebrew modernism emerged in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, and most of its proponents eventually emigrated to the Land of Israel. While international modernism has often been associated with exile, displacement, and expatriation,– the case of Hebrew modernism presents not only the relocation of individuals but the transfer of an entire literary system from Europe to Palestine. Schimmel's focus on Gnessin's departure from the Land of Israel defamiliarizes the teleological narrative of homecoming, underscoring "writers who came here, realized that this is not their place, went back and kept writing [Hebrew] literature away from the Land of Israel" (Yeshurun 2016: 97-8). Gnessin's unsuccessful immigration did not attract critical attention, partly because a vast majority of the Second *'Aliyah* immigrants could not handle the harsh conditions and returned to Europe. The more resounding departure of a Hebrew author was that of David Fogel, who returned to Europe in 1931, after a year and a half in Tel Aviv. When Fogel (a.k.a. Vogel) arrived in 1929, the *Yishuv* was significantly more established and the literary sphere more variegated, and so his rejection of Zionism reverberated widely in the literary milieu, triggering anger and disappointment. It is, thus, not coincidental that Schimmel also wove Fogel's encounter with the Land of Israel and Fogel's desire to write his poem on Gnessin in a deterritorialized Hebrew.

Fogel was born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Satanov (today Western Ukraine) in 1891. Like many aspiring Jewish writers, he wandered between the centers of Jewish intelligentsia in Vilna and Lvov before moving to Vienna in 1912. In the years following World War I he moved to Paris, to which he returned after his short stay in Palestine. The quintessential wandering Jew, Fogel was arrested three times for extended periods solely because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. During WWI he was arrested in Vienna as a citizen of enemy Russia; when he was offered residency in Austria after the war, he moved to France where he was arrested twice, first as a citizen of enemy Austria and then, following the Nazi occupation, as a Jew, and was eventually sent to Auschwitz, where he died in 1944.

This utter otherness, which came to characterize Fogel's life, found a parallel in his unique position within Hebrew modernism. As Robert Alter noted (1993:4):

> Fogel's attachment to Hebrew was neither sentimental nor nationalist, and it is something of a puzzle as to why this profoundly isolated, neurasthenic, desperately unhappy young man […] should have chosen to record his most intimate thoughts in a language he had almost no occasion to speak, whose revival as a vernacular was being undertaken elsewhere.

As Alter's description indicates, Fogel's choice was seen as an anomaly, but it was precisely his passion for Hebrew, as a non-vernacular, that made Fogel an important figure in Schimmel's search for a deterritorialized tradition. Fogel appears several times in "'*Afra de-Ar'a*." For example, (1983a: 195):

פֶּלֶא עַד-כַּמָּה שֶׁאֹּא נִכְנַס
צֵל שֶׁל הֵד שֶׁל שְׁקִשׁוּק
אַוְרִירִי שֶׁל נוֹף אֶרֶצְיִשְׂרְאֵלִי לְתוֹךְ
כְּתִיבָתָם שֶׁל כְּגוֹן גְּנֶסִין (1908)
וּפוֹגֶל (1929) אֵלּוּ שֶׁבָּאוּ וְלֹא
נִשְׁאֲרוּ וְכַמָּה צָרְבוּ לְפוֹגֶל (אֶפְשָׁר
לְתָאֵר) הַ"תִּקּוּנִים" שֶׁל הָעוֹרְכִים-הַמְּקוֹמִיִּים הַ"דּוֹבְרִים"
לְשְׂפָתוֹ: שְׂפַת-עֵבֶר שֶׁל נֵכָר

It is astonishing how
Not even a shadow of an echo of a rustle of
Erets-Israeli air trickles into
The writing of the likes of Gnessin (1908)
and Fogel (1929) those who came
and did not stay and one can imagine
how Fogel was stung by local editors' 'corrections', the native
'speakers' of his language: the Hebrew of exile.

Schimmel's poetic-cum-critical intervention, which focuses on "those who came / and did not stay," prefigures the revisionist, critical historiography that emerged in the 1990s, which examined the ideological tendentiousness of Hebrew literary historiography.[6] Schimmel pays considerable attention to Fogel's Hebrew novella *Nokhaḥ ha-Yam* (*Facing the Sea*), which was written after he left Palestine in 1931 (1983a: 195-6):

[...] וְכָךְ גַּם
נוֹצַר אוֹתוֹ פֶּרַח מְאֻחָר (1932)
פַּרְיְזָאִי שֶׁל פּוֹגֶל "נֹכַח הַיָּם"
עִם נוֹף הָרִיוְיֶרָה הַצָּרְפָתִית גִּלְגּוּלָהּ
הֲכִי-מַרְחִיק-לֶכֶת שֶׁל הַפְּרוֹזָה הָעִבְרִית – בָּהּ
הַשָּׂפָה הִיא אֶמְצָעִי-לְבָטוּי כְּהַצְבָּעַת-אֶצְבַּע וְתוּ-לֹא
וְהָעִבְרִית הַמְּדֻבֶּרֶת עַל דַּפֵּי הַסִּפּוּר
הִיא כְּלָל לֹא עִבְרִית אֶלָּא
שָׂפָה זָרָה סִפּוּר עִבְרִי בְּלִי
עִבְרִית וּבְלִי עִבְרִים! "אִם-כֵּן מוּטָב
לְהַשְׁלִיךְ רָסָן הַלָּשׁוֹן הַזָּרָה"

[…] And thus
Fogel's *Facing the Sea* came to be,
That late-blooming Parisian flower (1932)
With its French riviera landscape the most far-reaching
Transformation of Hebrew prose – in which
Language is no more than a pointing index finger
And the Hebrew spoken in the story
Is not Hebrew at all, but
A foreign language A Hebrew story without
Hebrew and without Hebrews! "If so, we must cast
Off the foreign tongue!"

Schimmel employs a poetics of citation throughout "'*Afra de-Ar'a*," and accordingly, he weaves into his reflection on *Facing the Sea* an unidentified quotation: "If so, we must cast off the foreign tongue!" These words are drawn from a part of the novella, in which Gina, the female protagonist, speaks to Werner Kraft, a German judge who is also vacationing on the French Riviera. Upon learning that she is from Vienna, Kraft suggests that they speak in German, offering to "cast off the foreign tongue." This quote provides a glimpse of the multilingual vortex behind the Hebrew text of *Facing the Sea*, in which the language of representation differs from the language of the represented. Kraft and Gina speak to one another in French until Kraft realizes that they are both from Vienna. But while Kraft refers to French as the "foreign language," the true foreign language is Hebrew, the language of representation, which none of the characters speaks. What Gnessin and Fogel have in common, in Schimmel's view, is a rejection of the vernacularizing processes that transpired in turn-of-the-century Palestine, especially regarding the use of the Sephardic pronunciation that became the symbol of linguistic naturalization.

Schimmel's poem does not only draw an analogy between the two diasporic writers but welds them together, to the point at which it becomes difficult to understand whether he is referring to one or the other, as if they form a shared subjectivity. For example, in a part of the poem in which Schimmel mentions Gnessin's departure from London to the Land of Israel, he then immediately turns to Fogel (1983a: 208; emphasis and omission in curly brackets in original):

[...] אֶת הַסִּבּוֹת הָעִקָּרִיּוֹת לְבוֹאוֹ אֶפְשָׁר
לִלְמֹד מִמִּכְתָּב מְאֻחָר יוֹתֵר מִכְּתָבוֹ
שֶׁל דָּוִד פּוֹגֶל מִוִּינָה (21.5.23):
לְאֶרֶץ-יִשְׂרָאֵל רוֹצֶה אָנֹכִי לַעֲלוֹת
לֹא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁיֵּשׁ לִי שָׁם
אֵיזוֹ פֶּרְסְפֶּקְטִיבָה מְיֻחֶדֶת וְלֹא מִפְּנֵי –
מֻכְרָח אֲנִי לְהוֹדוֹת – שֶׁתָּקְפוּ עָלַי
הַגַּעְגּוּעִים. הִנְנִי רָצוּץ כָּל-כָּךְ בְּגוּפִי
וּבְנַפְשִׁי עַד שֶׁאֵין בִּי מָקוֹם כְּלָל
לְמוֹתָרוֹת כָּאֵלֶּה. בְּדַעְתִּי לַעֲלוֹת, מִפְּנֵי
שֶׁמֻּכְרָח אָנֹכִי לָצֵאת מִמָּצוֹק זֶה
שֶׁבְּוִינָה. מִפְּנֵי שֶׁמֻּכְרָח-אֲנִי לָנוּחַ קְצָת.
{...} אֵין לִי שׂוּם פֶּרְסְפֶּקְטִיבָה מְיֻחֶדֶת
אָבוֹא לְשָׁם וְאֶרְאֶה {...} אֶפְשָׁר תִּהְיֶה-לִי
תַּקָּנָה בְּאֶרֶץ-יִשְׂרָאֵל. נִרְאֶה.

[…] The main reasons for his [Gnessin's] arrival
Can be surmised from a later letter David Fogel's
Letter from Vienna (21 May 1923):
I want to make *'aliyah* to the Land of Israel
Not because it offers me
A special prospect, nor –
I must admit – because I
Long for it. My body and
Soul are so broken that I cannot
Afford such luxuries. I plan to make *'aliyah*, for
I must escape this distress in Vienna, for
I must rest a little.
{…} It will offer me no special prospect
I will come and see {…} Perhaps I shall find
my remedy in the Land of Israel. We shall see.

In Schimmel's view, their desire to escape and their inability not to escape form the basis of Gnessin and Fogel's shared subjectivity. The word "escape" appears in their self-depictions, as well as in their closest friends' accounts. Asher Beylin's memoir, which focuses on Brenner and Gnessin's time in London, portrays Gnessin's emigration to Palestine as an escape (2006: 91). Similarly, Fogel writes in his diary about his wish to escape from Vienna to "the end of the Earth," to "Argentina, America or the Land of Israel" (Kronfeld 1996: 162-3). To what extent can we think

of Schimmel as part of that shared subjectivity, as someone who fled New York and used the verb "escape" to describe his shift from the lyric poem to the long poem?

5. Poetry as a Synthetic Language

In an 1850 posthumous essay, Edgar Allan Poe contended that the long poem "does not exist," maintaining that the phrase itself "is simply a flat contradiction in terms. […] That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length" (1996: 1431). Poe's assertion foreshadows the historical process that Mark Jeffreys terms the "lyricization of poetry" (1995: 200), wherein lyric poetry became synonymous with poetry at large, leading to the demise of various poetic genres such as the epic, the ballad, and the idyl (Jackson 2005: 6-10). Although the modernist long poem was an attempt to ward off the equivalence of poetry and the lyric – especially the gargantuan poetic projects of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky[7] – it seems that history has sided with Poe, who prophetically declared that "If, at any time, any very long poem *were* popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again" (1996: 1432).

The long poem's lack of popularity never bothered Schimmel, whose turn from the well-wrought lyric poem to the modernist long poem represents not only his discord with this historical process but also with the ideas of New Criticism (art-for-art's sake and close reading) that dominated the American critical scene when he was a student at Cornell. Cleanth Brook's influential study *The Well-Wrought Urn* encapsulates the era's critical idiom, which underscores the poem's organic unity and linguistic density.[8] By way of contrast, Schimmel's fascination with the long poem stemmed from his interest in open-ended poetic forms, as he retrospectively observed (Yeshurun 2016: 92; my translation):

> I was influenced by this idea of the long poem, which is an escape from a poem in the newspaper, whose quatrains are limited to its little square. Even if it's good, the poem cannot be larger than what the page allows it to be. If poetry nourishes you, it's like taking a vitamin, but it has no breadth. […] Long poems fascinated me; that someone like Pound would work on a poem and keep it going and rolling and get stuck and come back, because things would build up along the way, enriching the poem…

The disjointed structure of the American long poem was not only antithetical to New Criticisim's reading practices but also to the norms of modern Hebrew poetry, whose idea of the long poem derived from the Russian literary tradition.[9] In the 1970s, Schimmel recognized a new tendency of Israeli poets, such as Aharon Shabtai, Avot Yeshurun, Amir Gilboa, and Yehuda Amichai, who began to veer away from the well-wrought poem and towards more open-ended forms (1974b: 31):

> I think we finally got over the concept of a 'poem' in our literature; we have become so tired of poem after poem after another poem, manufacturing 'poems.' The Hebrew poem has been trapped in its Platonic ideal: this entity with an opening line, quatrains, proper repetitions and an ending – packaged and ready for distribution in our literary magazines. And all of the numerous attempts to move on from the 'poem' to the poet's speech were to no avail.

This critical observation, written in 1974, may be entangled with Schimmel's growing interest in the long poem, a form that would flourish in his writing from the late 1970s onward. What attracted Schimmel to the long poem was its "digestive capacity," in Bram's apt words (2005: 43), which implies an ever-expanding temporality.

Unlike the short lyric poem which underscores the moment of utterance (what Jonathan Culler terms "the lyric 'now'"; Giusti 2017), the long poem, "a poem containing history" in Ezra Pound's dictum, is entangled in a long duration. The long poem's temporality integrates different events and time periods, underlining its own historicity. For example, Pound's first canto in his long poem *The Cantos* uses intertextuality to illustrate the long poem's historicity, highlighting the textual layers comprising the multilayered text as a palimpsest by alluding to Odysseus's descent to Hades in Chapter 11 of the *Odyssey* (Davenport 1968: 179). Pound, however, does not turn to the Ancient Greek text, but rather to its 1537 Latin translation by Andreas Divus: "Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer." As such, Pound translates Divus' Latin translation of Homer's Greek into English, a translation which, as James Knapp notes, is imbued with Old English characteristics (Knapp 1979: 137). The poem, thus, reflects on its own historicity by highlighting the shift from Greek to Latin and then from Latin to English, mixing Odysseus' mythic time, Divus' Renaissance Venice, and Pound's modernist sensibility into the canto's poetic space.

Schimmel, whose affinity to Pound is well-documented, chose the long poem because it lets historicity and temporality shape its poetic form, breaching the boundaries of the 'little square' generally allotted to poems in newspapers, in order to create a modular, seemingly formless, poetic structure. The *Ar'a* cycle was written over two decades, a duration conducive to constant self-reflection and revision, of both the poetic forms and of the self. An example in point is Schimmel's 1986 book-length poem *Lowell* which pays homage to the American poet, Robert Lowell, who taught Schimmel at Boston University. Schimmel reflects on the poetic self he fashioned over decades in his previous books, revising – in fact, explicitly rewriting – his self-portrayal. In his introduction to *Lowell*, which attracted the attention of both Bram and Adriana X. Jacobs in their respective book chapters about him (Bram 2005: 75; Jacobs 2018: 188),

Schimmel reflects on the relationship between the form of the long poem and the ever-changing self-fashioning of the writing subject (1986: i):

> With the publication of this poem, I am setting straight my dishonesty; everything I wrote in Hebrew was only about Israel until now. Not as if I was born into Hebrew or in Israel, but as if there was no past before Hebrew and before Israel. If there is an entry in the Encyclopedia Hebraica for Boston or New York, now I have one as well. I, who wrote [about Uri Nissan Gnessin]: "One needs two maps," am providing myself another map. Thus, Lowell, here, reads aloud his Mandelstam translations in my Hebrew with an American accent.

While *Lowell* is an homage to a revered American poet, whom he knew personally, Schimmel is attracted to Lowell as a poet-translator, whose translations are part and parcel of his poetic project, as Jacobs aptly argues (2018: 182). Writing *Lowell* allowed Schimmel to present the multilayered nature of his own poetic language, founded on a double translation – a Hebrew translation of the English translation of Osip Mandelstam's Russian poetry. While Schimmel attempted to foreground his American roots, he also attested to the fact that even his mother tongue was always imbued with other languages. If "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" underscores Gnessin's Ashkenazi pronunciation, which was rendered 'foreign' during Second-*'Aliyah* Palestine, Schimmel points in *Lowell* to his American accent in Hebrew, turning 'foreignness,' linguistic transfer and multilingualism, into the basic tenets of his poetry, and perhaps of poetry at large.

When Schimmel describes his previous writing as implying that there was no "past before Hebrew" ("' avar lifnei ha-'Ivrit"), he uses the common root ע-ב-ר ['a/v/r] to underscore that the word 'Hebrew' – 'Ivrit (עברית) includes the word for the 'past' – 'avar (עָבָר). In so doing, he may also be thinking about the Hebrew word for 'ferry' – ma'aboret (מעבורת) and to the figure of the poet who 'transfers' – ma'avir (מעביר) words from one bank of the river to the other, that is, from one language to another.[10] In Hebrew, these four words all share a common root ['a/v/r], letting Schimmel weave together his poetic themes through wordplay: poetic passage, linguistic transfer, national identity, and exilic conditions. His figure of Lowell would not read his own poetry, but rather his translations of Mandelstam, thus emblematizing poetic translation as a series of displacements and amalgamations which turn the poem itself into a site of refraction.

What is only implied through wordplay in *Lowell* is made explicit in Schimmel's introduction to his translation of Avot Yeshurun's *ha-Shever ha-Suri Afriqani* (*The Syrian-African Rift*, 1974). Schimmel writes (1980: ix-xxi):

> This tenterhook hold on words (for every poet is his own historical dictionary) often results in a non-'spoken language'. The lingua franca of the poet is the product of a

> multiple vision […]. Hugh MacDiarmid's "synthetic" dialect is perhaps a parable for the dialects of the poets of all languages.

MacDiarmid's "synthetic" dialect has its analogies in the history of modern Hebrew, which could turn into a literary language only through the invention of a synthetic vernacular. S. Y. Abramovich revolutionized Hebrew in the late 19th century by creating his *nusakh* (version), a newly formed fusion of biblical and post-biblical Hebrew. S. Y. Agnon integrated mishnaic and midrashic Hebrew with the devout language of 18th-century Jewish Orthodoxy. Both Abramovich's and Agnon's "synthetic" languages are cornerstones of modern Hebrew literature and their "artificiality" enabled linguistic and artistic breakthroughs. Thus, Schimmel's invocation of MacDiarmid's "synthetic" dialect tacitly points to synthetic moments in Hebrew literary history, on which his own poetry relies. In fact, the history of the Hebrew language is a testament to its dialectical relationship with its ever-changing, neighboring languages: Canaanite languages in biblical times; Aramaic and Babylonian during the exile in Babylon; Greek and Persian during the Hellenistic period; Spanish and Arabic in Medieval Spain; and so on.

6. Coda: The Long Poem as a 'Library'

In 1900, Gnessin's closest friend, Yosef Ḥaim Brenner, chastised him for what he perceived as a lack of national commitment. He could not fathom Gnessin's embracing "art for art's sake" and thus exhorted: "Can we truly turn our backs to the present, even for a moment? Are you aware of the state of our youths? Are you aware that we are the last of the Mohicans? Do you know that the world is sick? Do you know that despair crushes the soul? Have you eyes?! Uri Nissan!!!" (Brenner 1955: 222; my translation). Despite Brenner's passionate rhetoric, Gnessin remained loyal to his a-nationalist aesthetics. Unlike Brenner, who established a literary journal named *ha-Me'orer* (*The Arouser*; 1906-1907), Gnessin (who found the name distasteful, due to its revolutionary undertones) wanted to establish a publishing house that would translate world literature into Hebrew. Gnessin's project, *Nisyonot* ('Attempts') Publishing House, was also short-lived (1906-1907), but its first publication was its founder's own Hebrew translation of Anton Chekov's Russian stories.

Schimmel's "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" may be read as a symbolic fleshing-out of Gnessin's dream, for it can be read as a 'library' of world literature, written in Hebrew. Indeed, Schimmel's entire oeuvre may be read as a 'library,' as the title of his 1999 volume, *ha-Sifriyyah* (*The Library*), suggests. As such, "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" is inhabited by many books to which Schimmel refers, thus creating a chaotic textual space in which allusions "are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion," to use Umberto Eco's famous words (1985: 11). The reunion is multifaceted, bringing together both Gnessin's and Schimmel's textual backgrounds. Some references are obscure, not

clearly attributed to their sources, and some are almost bibliographical in nature. Their coexistence can only be attributed to the shared subjectivity of both writers.

Along with quotations from Gnessin's works and letters, there are numerous references to Russian literature, the textual body with which Gnessin was most familiar: Chekov's "The Story of an Unknown Man," Gogol's *Dead Souls* and his letters from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, Ivan Turgenev, Isaac Babel, and Boris Pasternak. This poetic 'library' also includes Hebrew and Yiddish authors and texts with which Gnessin was intimately familiar, such as Hebrew and Yiddish poets - Ḥaim Naḥman Bialik, David Frischmann, R. Binyomin, Zalman Shneour (Shneur Zalkind), Jacob (*Yakov*) Fichman, Yehoash, and Ba'al Maḥshoves (Israel Isidor Elyashiv); Yiddish writers - Hersh Dovid Nomberg, David Pinski, and Shalom Asch; and Hebrew publisher Shim'on Biḥovsky. References to Western European writers, such as Guy de Maupassant, Paul Verlaine, James Joyce, and Henrik Ibsen, are also present.

Perhaps what underscores the chaotic nature of *The Library* is its speculative anachronism, shifting repeatedly, back and forth between texts that Gnessin certainly read, texts that Gnessin wrote, even texts that Schimmel reckons Gnessin would have read, had he not died in 1913, and texts that are pertinent to Schimmel's own upbringing in New York. Among the anachronistic texts is David Fogel's *Before the Dark Gate* (1923), whose diasporic Hebrew Schimmel speculates would have been to Gnessin's liking, and his novella *Facing the Sea* (1932), which epitomizes a deterritorialized Hebrew. Among the texts Gnessin would have likely read had he been alive, some of which were written by his close friends, are Celia Dropkin's memoirs, in which the Yiddish poet describes her tormented relationship with Gnessin, and Asher Beylin's *Brenner in London*, which beautifully recounts the dramatic falling-out between Brenner and Gnessin during their stay in London in 1906. Similarly, Schimmel mentions Shmuel Yosef Agnon's 1945 opus magnum *Only Yesterday*, whose plot concerns the Second *'Aliyah*, during which Gnessin arrived in the Land of Israel. Most surprising are references to texts that are clearly drawn from Schimmel's own upbringing, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's letters from Malta, John Keats's letters to his sister, the 1963 British film "Tom Jones" and even Bob Dylan's song "Oh, Sister" from his 1976 album, *Desire*.

If Schimmel was indeed interested in writing a long poem in dialogue with world literature, his choice to almost entirely avoid foreign languages may seem somewhat perplexing. Schimmel's polyglottic background – he is equally at home in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English – could produce a multilingual Hebrew text in the tradition of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Moreover, the 1980s witnessed the linguistic return of the repressed, as Israeli writers, in the wake of identity politics' rise to prominence, inserted foreign words and expressions into their Hebrew texts. While

Schimmel's own text can be read against the backdrop of the linguistic return of the repressed, his choice was different. Instead of allowing the suppressed languages of his forefathers to enter the text, he chose to write in Gnessin's dialect which presupposes a multilingual existence.[11] In "'*Afra de-Ar'a*" Schimmel constructs a hypertextual 'library' through a variegated web of quotations, spanning both his and Gnessin's literary influences, lives, and imagined afterlife. Thus, this Hebrew poem weaves a diasporic tradition in which both Schimmel and Gnessin, in shared poetic subjectivity, are implicated.

Notes

1 This description appears in *Siman Qri'ah*'s table-of-contents. That same year, Schimmel also published a short essay on Gnessin's style. See Schimmel 1983b.

2 According to Bram, Schimmel saw this kind of poetic project as "the unequivocal expression of poetry at large" and as an experiment in "collection and accumulation" (Bram 2005: 42-4).

3 For a later discussion of Schimmel's diasporism in *The Library*, see Bram 2014. Of particular interest is his discussion of Schimmel's juxtaposition of Pound's *Canti Pisani* and Dennis Silk's *The Punished Land*, reflecting Schimmel's interest in these poets' exploration of "themes of exile and new homeland" (Bram 2014: 309).

4 The English translations of all the poems are by Jonatan Tadmor and are printed with his permission.

5 For a discussion of the Talmudic lens through which Gnessin understood nomadic detachment see Bassan 2021: 228-33.

6 See Kronfeld 1996; Hever 2002.

7 Louis Zukofsky, for example, wrote his long poem "*A*" starting in 1927 and up until his death in 1978.

8 For example, in his discussion of Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears," Brooks argues that despite the lyric's seemingly spontaneous, impassioned speech, it nevertheless coheres into a "total structure" (Brooks 1949: 159-60).

9 At the beginning of the 20th century, canonical poets such as Ḥ. N. Bialik, Avraham Shlonsky and Natan Alterman, all of whom had emigrated to the Land of Israel from the Russian Empire, wrote long poems in adherence to the structure of the Russian long poem, the *poema.* However, Schimmel notes that the American long poems that fascinated him are distinct from European *poemas*, adding: "I don't think there is such a thing as a *poema*, I don't even know what a *poema* is" (Yeshurun 2016: 92).

10 See Shaḥar's discussion of these linguistic intersections in Paul Celan's poetry (Shaḥar 2019: 35-6).

11 As part of Schimmel's "poetics of translation," in Jacobs's words, he pays particular attention to Gnessin's Hebrew translations of works such as *Daphnis and Chloe* and Chekhov's story "Mire" (http://benyehuda.org).

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