**Uri Nissan Gnessin (1879-1913)**

Uri Nissan Gnessin is a Russian Jewish author, who is recognized as one of the founders of Modern Hebrew literature. He was born in Starodub, a small town in the Ukraine, as a son of a Hasidic rabbi. Attracted to the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment movement), Gnessin immersed himself in the study of foreign languages, as well as other secular subjects, and was especially influenced by Russian literature. At the age of fourteen he began to publish short stories, novellas, poems, literary criticism, and translations in various leading Hebrew periodicals. His first collection of short stories, *Tsilele Ha’ḥayim* (*The Shadows of Life*) was published in 1904 in Warsaw, where he also co-founded the Hebrew publishing house *Nisyonot* (*Attempts*) in 1906. In 1907 Gnessin co-edited with Yosef Haim Brenner the acclaimed Hebrew periodical *Ha’Meorer* (*The Awakener*) in London. He then moved to Palestine, but returned to Russia shortly after. At the age of thirty four Gnessin died of a heart attack in Warsaw.



---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Gnessin left behind a small but remarkable body of work. His most central works include four novellas, entitled “*Hatsidah*” (Sideways, 1905), “*Benotayim*” (Meantime, 1906) “*Be-terem*” (Before, 1909), and “*Etsel*” (At, 1913), all share similar themes, protagonists and style. The main theme in these novellas, as indicated also in their titles, is uprootedness. At their core stand young intellectual Jewish men, torn between the physical and the spiritual elements of the self, in a search of meaningful life. These protagonists closely resemble Gnessin himself, as well as the archetype of the young Eastern European Jew at *Fin de siècle*, who is conflicted between the two worlds of Jewish provincial communities and urban secular society, yet belongs in neither one. Unlike the delicate protagonists of his novellas, in his two prominent short stories, “*Ba-ganim*” (In the Gardens, 1910) and “*Ketatah*” (A Quarrel, 1913), Gnessin portrays simple and crude people. The detachment from Jewish roots appears in his work also stylistically. Gnessin was the first to introduce into Hebrew literature several modernist European literary techniques, first and foremost stream-of-consciousness and interior monologues, as well as the projection of the protagonists’ inner world onto impressionistic descriptions of nature and their surroundings. His writing influenced many Modern Hebrew authors, including David Vogel, Leah Goldberg and S. Yizhar.

**List of works**

Gnessin, Uri Nisan. *The Complete Works of U.N. Gnessin* [3 volumes], (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1946). [in Hebrew]

Gnessin, Uri Nisan. *Beside & Other Stories*, with an introduction by Rachel Albeck-Gidron (New Milford & London: Toby Press, 2005).

**References and further readings**

Balaban, A. (1989) ‘Gnessin Revisited’, *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 9 (2): 177-83.

Even-Zohar, I. (1990) ‘Gnessin's Dialogue and Its Russian Models’, *Poetics Today* 11 (1): 131-53.

Steinhart, D. (1991) ‘Is Anybody There? The Subjectivism of Uri-Nissan Gnessin’, *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 11 (2): 131-51.

Paratextual Material

<http://benyehuda.org/gnessin/>

Written by Naama Harel