Music, Nature, and Subconscious
In Uri Nissan Gnessin and Shiga Naoya

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1. Introduction

It is an indisputable fact that nature has a strong influence on art. But capturing nature is not merely about representing sceneries of plants and greens, but often, particularly in literature, nature becomes a way to capture certain aspects of human psychology. This paper will discuss the way writers use inter-artistic representations of nature in their works to bring out a certain truth about human subconscious[1] and its relation to the world. More specifically, it will examine two inter-artistic moments from the novel *An'ya kōro* (*A Dark Night's Passing*) by the Japanese writer Shiga Naoya and the novella *'Etsel* (*Beside*) by the Hebrew author Uri Nissan Gnessin. In these works, the two authors bring together music and nature as a way to demonstrate how art and nature help us give meaning to the world and ultimately find some morsel of truth about ourselves and the human condition. First, I will analyse a short scene from Shiga's novel to explain the techniques used by the author to bring together music and nature to reveal a certain psychological truth about his protagonist. Then, I will examine how Gnessin employed similar techniques throughout his novella to trace the psychological struggles of his protagonist and show how both authors try to make sense of the world through their combination of music and nature.

2. Shiga Naoya

Shiga Naoya is one of Japan's best loved novelists. Noted for the psychological astuteness of his work, he is often called "the god of the novel". *An'ya kōro*, Shiga's autobiographically inspired

[1] In this paper, the terms "subconscious", "unconscious", or the "unconscious mind" will be understood in the broadly Freudian sense of the part of the mind that controls the urges, desires, thoughts, and memories that are outside conscious awareness, as well as in the sense of Schopenhauer's "Will", the "blind striving, an obscure, inarticulate impulse, far from being susceptible of being directly known", which governs the motivation of people's actions [see: Fernand Vial, Mary Rose Barral, and Dan T. Valahu, *The Unconscious in Philosophy, and French and European Literature: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 25-6]. It is this latter sense in particular that is crucial for literature, where the unconscious as understood in this way is often used to explain character's actions and emotions, including in the two works discussed in this chapter.

novel, was his most ambitious work, which he wrote and published over the course of nearly two decades starting in 1921, finally concluding it with the publication of the last chapters in 1937. The story follows the aspiring novelist Tokitō Kensaku as he struggles to find happiness and meaning in his life in the shadow of a family secret. Although the novel focuses on Kensaku's psychology and interiority, nature plays an important role in shaping the story. Shiga, who was a lover of nature, incorporated many of his own experiences with it into the novel, including his stay at Mt. Daisan, which features in the climax of the novel as Kensaku finds a sense of peace in the shade of the mountain's trees only to be struck by a severe illness.

The scene that this paper will focus on, however, comes earlier in the novel as part of its darkest moment. At this point in the story, following a severe crisis, Kensaku had moved to Kyoto to start a new life. There, he meets a woman named Naoko whom he marries and starts a family with. Having grown up in unhappy circumstances, Kensaku looks forward to becoming a father and gaining his own familial bliss. However, soon after his birth, Kensaku and Naoko's son, Naonori, becomes dangerously ill and dies. The scene in question comes in the middle of the sequence that describes the baby' illness. As Naonori's condition worsen, Kensaku is faced with two different superstitious incidents. The first is Naoko's mother request that they replant a certain willow tree in their garden, and the second, which is triggered by this incident, is Kensaku's recollection of a concert he attended the evening after Naonori's birth in which Schubert's lied "Erlkönig" was performed. Although Kensaku believes himself not to be superstitious, as he is facing his ill child, he cannot help but ascribe Naonori's condition to these two seemingly separate incidents. But why is that? And what is the point of inserting these scenes here?

For Kensaku, his house with its garden represents the attainment of a perfect familial life that he has been yearning for. Yet, this seemingly perfect life is not infallible, as in his subconscious, Kensaku cannot help but worry that something will go wrong. That worry manifests as superstition. The first superstition involves the willow tree, which is planted in the northeast of the garden. For Naoko's mother, this implies that the tree is an omen of bad luck. She calls it an "Onimon no yanagi", "the willow of the demon gate", and she begs Kensaku to have it replanted somewhere else. Kensaku initially refuses her request, as he claims he does not want to take part in his mother-in-law's superstition, but eventually caves in. The willow is moved, and the harmony of the garden is, presumably, restored.

Despite his claim of not wishing to take part in superstitious behaviour, the incident with the willow causes Kensaku to recollect the concert, which he claims bothers him more than the tree and shows that his own subconscious fears drive him to take similar actions as his mother-in-law. The concert in question took place on the day of Naonori's birth, and although not much information is given about it, its highlight appeared to have been a rendition of Schubert's "Erlkönig" by a young contralto. Although all of Kensaku's friends are impressed by the song, Kensaku finds it to be cheap and overdramatic, lacking in, as he says, "the true mission of music".[2] Not only that, Kensaku feels a sense of dread about having heard the song so soon after he himself had become a father, and on his way home, he secretly drops the program of the concert as a kind of an act of exorcism. Kensaku's negative reaction to the lied, his dread, and his superstitious behaviour thus is an almost involuntary reaction to the music he just heard.

Schubert's famous song is a setting of a poem by Goethe that depicts a father riding with his son on a stormy night. During the ride, the boy keeps saying that he is being spoken to by an evil entity called the erlking who is trying to tempt him away. The father attempts to calm his son, only to find him dead when they arrive home. Originally written for a Singspiel, Goethe's poem, and Schubert's lied, can be understood as a dramatization of a supernatural explanation for an immense tragedy. The death of a young child is something so tragic that it cannot be fully rationalized or explained away. As such, finding a supernatural explanation for it such as the figure of the mythical erlking, who himself can be understood as an extension of the forces of nature, can be a way for making sense of something that is essentially inexplicable. That is, just as nature is beyond the full rational grasp of our mind, so is this tragedy that seems to be a result of these natural forces. Yet, for Kensaku, such ideas appear to ring hollow, as he finds both the poem and its setting to be lacking in artistic merit. Instead of bringing up in him any sense of artistic appreciation or a sincere emotional reaction, the lied brings out all of his subconscious fears that the happiness he had finally won will be disrupted by death and misfortune. But instead of facing his fears, Kensaku sublimates them through his superstitious behaviour.

In this scene, then, Shiga sets up a fascinating correlation between nature, music, and his protagonist's psyche. As he is faced with his son's illness, Kensaku is unable to process the fact that the child might die. Instead, in his psychological distress he hangs onto seemingly tangential matters of nature and art such as the tree in his garden or a song that he heard, if not to help avoid

[2] Shiga Naoya, *Shiga naoya shū* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1971), 383. The translation to English is my own.

the coming tragedy, then at least to find some kind of explanation for it. But just like the mythical erlking in Schubert's song, these are nothing more than a superstitious scapegoat that Kensaku uses to escape from the impact of what is happening. This is in contrast with a scene at the very end of the book when a physically weakened Kensaku has a moment of enlightenment while climbing a mountain, and feels his fear of death disappearing as he becomes one with the nature around him.

3. Uri Nisan Gnessin

This complex intersection of nature, its depiction in art, death, and human psychology is also a theme in Uri Nisan Gnessin's novella *'Etsel*. Gnessin, like Shiga, is one of Hebrew literature's most beloved and revered writers, though unlike Shiga, his premature death meant that he did not leave many works behind. This novella, which was published posthumously, was his longest and most mature work, bringing into focus many of the themes that he had dealt with in his earlier writings, including the place of the Jews in a modernizing Europe as depicted through the figure of the *talush* (the rootless one).

The novella, taking place in a small town in the Pale of Settlement, tells the story of Ephraim, a failed writer who lives his life in a state of detachment. His attitude impacts the people around him, including his past lovers Dina and Zina, who are hurt by Ephraim's inability to commit, as well as the young girl Ruchama who develops a youthful crush on him. Ephraim, Dina, Zina, and many of the other characters appear to exist in a state of *tlishut*, rootlessness, disconnected from their Jewish history and culture, yet also not being fully part of European culture as they find themselves stuck in a tiny provincial town. Ephraim's detachment makes him unable to commit to life, yet he is also unable to put an end to it, as he aborts a suicide attempt and identifies death as his "greatest enemy", and instead decides to live "beside life" (*'etsel hachayim*).[3] Ephtaim's resolve is shaken when Dina suddenly dies, but after rejecting Ruchama's attempt to confess her feelings to him, the novella ends with his reaffirmation of his resolve.

Throughout the novella, nature and music play an important role. Indeed, nature is an inseparable part of the story, as it opens and closes with descriptions of the woods surrounding the town, while numerous descriptions of trees, fields, and birds suffuses the narrative. Nature and

[3] Uri Nissan Gnessin, *'Etsel ve sipurim 'acherim* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, Sifriyat Po'alim, 2011), 271.

music first come together in an important scene in the first half of the novella in which Zina visits the home of Ruchama and her older sister, Vera. Their living room, which is that of a typical bourgeoise household, contains a piano that soon catches the attention of Zina, who declares herself a lover of music despite not being able to play. The scene, however, quickly descends into disharmony, as Vera teases Ruchama about abandoning her playing after hearing the more talented Dina performing, which embarrasses and angers the young girl. To patch over the situation, Zina encourages Vera to play. The music, as well as its connection to the scenery she sees outside the window, inspires Zina, who shares her emotions with Ruchama, creating a bond between the two, and bringing the three women together, patching over the discord and returning them to a state of harmony and calm.

The piece played by Vera in this scene can be identified as a suite called *Waldszenen* (*Forest Scenes*) composed by the German Romantic composer Robert Schumann between 1848 and 1849. It was the time when the piano was quickly becoming a household item, so the piece was intended to be played by amateurs in domestic situations such as depicted by Gnessin, and is thus made of relatively simple and short movements. As its title suggests, each movement in the piece depicts different forest scenes and includes titles such as "Hunting Song" and "Friendly Landscape". The connection between this piece and the various woods that appear in *'Etsel* appears to be a deliberate choice by Gnessin, who creates a parallel between the nature traversed by Ephraim and Schumann's musical forest. Yet, despite the seeming simplicity and the beautiful harmony the music inspired in Zina, Ruchama, and Vera, Schumann's forest is much more sinister than it first appears to be. Schumann's suite may have been partially inspired by the poem cycle *Waldbilden* by the Austrian poet Friedrich Hebbel, and Schumann's original score included a quote from the poem "Evil Place" before the movement titled "Haunted Spot" (notice the similarity in titles). The quote is as follows:

Die Blumen, so hoch sie Waschen,	[The Flowers, grown so tall,
Sind blass hier, wie der Tod,	Are here pale as death,
Nur eine in der Mitte	Only one in their midst
Steht da im dunkeln Roth	Stands there in deep red.
Die hat es nicht von der Sonne:	This hue comes not from the sun:
Nie traf sie deren Glut,	Never has it by warm glow been hit,
Sie hat es von der Erde,	This comes from the earth,

Und die trank Menschenblut! For it drank human blood!][4]

This quote gives a rather disturbing image to the forest of the suite, painting it as a place where death took place. In Hebbel's original poem, the death is that of the poet's brother, whom the poet then avenges by trampling the vampiric red flower. While in Schumann's music this does not come through, the association between the forest as the place of death could also be connected in Gnessin's novella to Ephraim's suicide attempt, which occurs in the wood.

This sense of eeriness is further enhanced in Schumann's suite in the movement titled "Bird as Prophet". This movement, with its broken arpeggios, dissonances, and lack of resolution, is rather enigmatic. What is this prophetic bird? And what is its message? If we go back to Hebbel's poems once more, we find that after trampling the flower, the poet is mocked by a nearby bird for the futility of his action, implying that trampling the flower achieved nothing since death is conclusive and cannot be overcome. As such, if we take this bird to be Schumann's prophetic one, its message can be understood as a reminder of death and its finality. And when we return to Gnessin's novella, we find it full of birds and their calls, including a loud bird call that happens during Ephraim's suicide attempt, and in fact stops him from pulling the trigger. That is, the bird becomes a reminder for Ephraim of the reality of death, bringing up his fear of this "greatest enemy" of his, and leading to Ephraim's renewal of his resolve to live beside life instead of committing to either life or death.

The connection between music and nature, then, becomes a kind of through line that runs throughout Gnessin's novella, acting as a subconscious reminder to Ephraim, and to the reader, of his fears and what he needs to overcome in order to be able to live life fully (which he unfortunately rejects). This is made even clearer by the inclusion of another musical motif by Gnessin towards the end of the novella. This motif, which is simply named "Dina's Death Melody" in the narrative, is an unidentified theme played by Dina on the piano several times during the last chapter. There are several theories about the identity of this melody. Literary scholar Dan Miron argues that it is Chopin's *Marche funabre*,[5] though I argue that this piece does not match the description of Dina's melody. I tend to believe that it is meant to be a melody composed by Dina herself. The melody is described as having a dream-like quality, and that Dina would play it on many continuous nights,

[4] Friedrich Hebbel, *Friedrich Hebbel's sämmtliche Werke*, *siebenter Band* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1867), 139-40. The English translation is mine.
[5] Dan Miron, *Madu'a Gnessin? Shlosha 'iyunim* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2014), 91.

"those large and dark nights, in whose silence the harsh secret of life is whispered," and on those nights, listening to Dina play, Ephraim's "voice, whenever he made a sound, would quiver with the splitting cry of the cramped soul".[6]

After Dina's death, Ephraim finds himself outside her house, and is shocked to hear the melody coming from inside. Entering the house, he finds Ruchama seated at Dina's piano, playing the piece, having seemingly inherited it from Dina. When Ruchama sees Ephraim, she is described as looking like a "shot bird", thus bringing the two musical themes together: the prophetic bird and the death melody, both speaking to Ephraim's subconscious fear. Hence, Ephraim's rejection of Ruchama, which follows his discovery of her, is not merely his rejection of the young girl's love, but once again a rejection of life and death, and of the possibility of escaping his detached state of "beside". By doing so, Ephraim continues to ignore the message that the nature all around him embodies – that death is an inseparable part of life, and that we must accept this truth. The novella then concludes with another bird's call, feebly attempting to spread its prophecy to no avail.

4. Conclusion

Through this brief exploration of Gnessin and Shiga's works, I found that the two writers merged together nature, music, as well as musical representations of nature to create a cohesive psychological throughline in their stories. In many ways, the nature in the two works examined here, *An'ya kōro* and *'Etsel*, is just that – Kensaku's garden is just one part of his new family home, while the woods around Ephraim's town is a common part of the area's landscape. Yet, by pairing this nature with music, these landscapes and gardens are infused with added meaning that reflects the subconscious of the stories' protagonists. Though Kensaku tries to dismiss his mother-in-law's superstitious worry about the willow in his garden, the incident with the tree makes him recall his encounter with Schubert's "Erlkönig" and the fear that the lied brought out of the subconscious mind. And the multiple parallels created between Schumann's *Waldszenen* and the woods in Gnessin's novella, as well as Ephraim's encounters with "Dina's Death Melody", forces Gnessin's protagonist to grapple with his own fears regarding life and death. However, in both cases the protagonists reject the music and all the meaning it carries. Instead of owning up to his worries as a new father, Kensaku resorts to superstitious behaviours himself, dropping his crumpled concert

[6] Gnessin, *'Etsel ve sipurim 'acherim*, 272.

program on the street. As for Ephraim, he continues to reject the people around him, and the prophetic calls of the birds, and sticks steadfastly to his resolve to live beside life.

In this rejection, Kensaku and Ephraim reveal themselves to be entirely human both in how they relate to the world around them, and how it is only through music, and more generally, art, that they can face the truth about themselves. Hence, in marrying nature and music in their works in this way, Shiga and Gnessin reconfirm the power that music has over us, and how it can impact our psyche in powerful ways. Ultimately, their works also show that our relationship to nature is often mediated through art. It is through art that we give nature meaning and it is through using that meaning that we can make sense of ourselves.