

A LITTLE CROWN¹
by Yisroel Shtern
Translated by Mindle Crystel Gross (2006)

Moishe Gross² took this and, as is his custom, wrote an article in which he, as is his custom, once again went over that which, as is his custom, he had gone over already.

There he tells a story about an entire Pleiad³ which delivers communal generational poetry, and about the spiritual alienation of Jewish literature, and so forth, and so on.

Quite a nice story, albeit short, it is nevertheless a bit too long, because all these things have long been known, and because the Pleiad is long gone (relative to our times), so that to present so many arguments is pointless. Precisely for this reason I said very little about it, but from the little that I did say, it was clear for anyone to see that I did not intend to defend anyone and that I, personally, have no evil inclination to become a *pleiadianer*.⁴

So I became very curious as to what any of this had to do with anything, and why Moishe Gross was relating this to me.

Until... until... until I eventually became aware of his meaning, realizing that all of this was insignificant to him, that his essential meaning was something else entirely. This difference was a pleasant surprise for me and I feel obliged to thank him.

¹ (all footnotes by Ed.) Referring to "Crowns to Adorn the Head of Jewish Criticism" (1926), Shtern's most famous essay. The present essay appeared in *Literarische Bleter*, 575 'ז, 1927, 29 יולי, 30 נומ' 4, in reply to Gross' commentary on *Kroinen, Ver iz shuldik: di literatur, tzi di kritik?* (*Lit. Bleter*, 3 issues - July 15, 22, and 29, 1927).

² Moishe Gross (his full name was Gross-Tzimerman) was from 1926 Vienna correspondent of the Warsaw daily *Haynt*. As well as reporting on Jewish and general matters in Vienna, Gross wrote about literature too. He survived the War and in 1966 gave a talk about his time with *Haynt* in Tel Aviv. A sympathetic account of Gross' journalism is given by Chaim Finkelstein, p.254 of *Haynt - a tsaytung bay yidn - see LINKS*. "His deep scholarship and subtle Galitsyaner folk-humour - quiet and good-natured - gave a unique charm to his writing". Shtern later became a regular columnist for *Haynt* as well.

³ Pleiad of brilliant writers, a French expression which Yiddish absorbed, but which is little used in English. We retain it here though, as it recurs throughout the essay.

⁴ Of course an ironical coinage of Shtern's own.

I had got ready for my critics a number of arguments, both impartial and objective. (Naturally, as far as it is possible to be objective about esthetic problems.) I had tried to perfect these in many different ways. However, I was missing one more argument, the best and the liveliest. Missing was the one who would come and say: “See, little brother, I busy myself with criticism sometimes, and I say to you that you are entirely correct.”

So I waited until God decided that I had waited long enough, and Moishe Gross appeared.

And this is what he said: “No more! Finished!! Let this be brought to a conclusion... let it end! Put away your rabbinical discussions, so to speak. Down with Peretz! Why are you so enthralled with this Peretz? What wonders do you find in him?”

Before anything else, you look to Peretz. You are seeking for a great personality in Yiddish literature. You write articles - where is Peretz? You arrange discussions - has our literature strayed further from Peretz? You agonize, you are desperate to know: what would I.L. Peretz say today?

Oh, fools, empty-heads, cattle in the form of men! Why are you so taken with Peretz? After all, who is he? I.L. Peretz is, after all, in sum total no more than an idler, a preacher and orator, a *shlimazl*, a mere columnist – just a minor member of the Pleiad.

Gentlemen, I warn you with all that is good, you should give up being overjoyed with Peretz, or else...”

And this, more or less, is how M. Gross created a tumult.

People began to consider, and became astounded and amazed. Someone is threatening – who knows what he can do?

At which point, Moshe Gross removed his large eyeglasses, wiped them carefully, and smiling broadly as young Viennese men do, said:

“*Nu, mayne Herren!* How do you like this little joke I just played out? – What? You still don’t understand my intention? Well, now, look:

If I, a person who has the honor of being called Moishe Gross, if my behaviour towards the mightiest of Yiddish classical writers is so all-encompassing and so thought-constitutive - oh, my reflections... if my assessment of Peretz is so

finely honed and to the point, oh...then is Shtern not correct that such people deserve to wear a crown?

Only then did the audience grasp the real meaning of what Gross was about. They caught their breath, then slowly calmed down, read the articles a second time and decided:

Yes, Moshe Gross is quite right. Shtern is quite right as well.

And because Moshe Gross, you afforded me a pleasant surprise - I find myself obliged to openly express my heartfelt thanks to you.

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