

Noa Suzanna Morag

### Uri-Nissan Gnessin

After a few long years of being drawn mostly to literature that was written in the present and about the present, a streak that had brought me to writing my first novel *User Experience*, I was introduced to a diseased writer that grew up in a Jewish Shtetel in Pochev, Russia, and to my undeniable surprise: I fell in love.

Uri-Nissan Gnessin was a Jewish Yeshiva boy in the Yeshiva of Pochev. One could say that his journey towards becoming a writer unfolded through his close friendship with another student in the same Yeshiva: Joseph-Haim Brenner, who later became one of the most important writers, critics, and publicists in Hebrew literature history. People usually discover Gnessin through the eyes of his friend, Brenner, who loved him deeply. Young Brenner came to Pochev to study at the Yeshiva and met Gnessin, what followed was a beautiful friendship evolving. In a way, their friendship grew stronger as they grew older; in 1906, they produced a literary magazine that had few readers but saved Hebrew literature from completely vanishing from the world at a time when Hebrew readership was scarce. Back in the Yeshiva, they studied Gemara together (a partnership that in Jewish tradition is considered a high kind of friendship) and gradually became best friends who admired each other's intellect and literary mastery, sometimes to the level of jealousy. Unlike Brenner, the realist who thought that literature's goal is to change the world for the better, Gnessin, who was the melancholic wallflower of their group, believed in art for the sake of art and wrote solely about his inner conflicts. Both, avant-garde writers about their psychological worlds; their lifes journeys met the criteria of a social phenomenon called 'The Torn-Out'.

The 'Torn-Out' were young Jewish people in the late 19th century and early 20th century, who grew interested in the Jewish enlightenment and the secular world. They abandoned their homes, the legacy of their old ancestors, and tried – unsuccessfully – to assimilate into the new and foreign world they had fallen into. They were thus left in a constant state of being in-between, never finding a home, neither emotional nor geographical. This generation had produced a line of Hebrew writers who all told the stories of characters that were caught in a constant dilemma between old and new, subjected to a general feeling of detachment and helplessness. This liminal state of being was what generated Gnessin's unique expressionism: a turbulent but refined style that portrayed an emotional state of a continuum.

Gnessin was one of the writers who heralded Hebrew modernism and was the first one to write 'stream of consciousness', a narration method that is very dear to me. He crafted his lyrical prose primarily to express his internal experience; his monologues and lyrical renditions of moods and landscapes do exude that subjective plenitude. His prose is intricately allusive, his syntax expressively tortuous, expressing a protagonist that is so decentered and inundated by the world that it only exists in the text as a type of vibration.

One of Gnessin's unique attributes as a writer is the way he treated the Hebrew language; he wrote in a time when Hebrew wasn't a spoken language. He couldn't draw upon a tradition of fluently spoken Hebrew in choosing an idiom for his characters' internal experiences. At the time he knew Russian, Biblical

Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish. He put together a creative mix of all of those and even invented neologisms. All the above converged into a highly convoluted prose style, that later created a whole lineage of Hebrew writers who followed and developed it (e.g., S. Yizhar, Shabtai).

My connection to Gnessin's literature is very special to me: as a secular person from a highly secular area of Israel, his writings gave me a new sense of attachment to Jewish scriptures and history. I was also fascinated by his experience of being a constant vagabond, away from his family and landscapes, as I am deeply connected to my country and never really left my hometown. His writing changed my writing; after years of being interested in social issues, technology, economy, and the estrangement from emotion that characterizes our time, Gnessin directed my gaze to a new way of depicting an emotion and took me on a whole new journey of telling stories.

I looked for translations and found this quote that I believe encapsulates Gnessin's style and the themes he usually writes about.

From the Novella אצל – translated by Reuven and Judith Ben-Yosef

”ומשום שהללו כבר לא היו פה והחצר היתה ריקנית וקריאתו של התרנגול חרדה ממרחקים והיתה כה נואשה והחדרים הגדולים והמכובדים שבבית היו דלתותיהם פתוחות לרווחה והדממה היתה רבוצה בהם, והגמרא נשארה פתוחה באולם הגדול בסוגיית 'פי פרשה' החמורה ואבא מרוגז במקצת מחכה לו אצלה, שיכנס, ומשום שטילי, אותה ריבה חיה תמיד ואדמונית תמיד וצוהלה תמיד היתה יושבת בבוקר מכונסה באותה פינה שבקרונם הרתום של אבא ואמא והיתה חיבורה קצת ושפתיה היו מתנפחות והיתה רוגזת, כשפנו אליה ושאלוה דבר – משום כל אלה ביחד היתה השממה שבלב גדולה מאוד וחונקה מאד ואותו קילוח חם, שהיה קולח בחזה מתחת לכפו מאז הבוקר, היה זורם רק באותו מקום אחד ונקב נקב, כאילו תחבו והיו משלשלים לשם במתינות אכזרייה מקדח דק שבדק.”

“And since the guests had departed and the yard was empty and the call of the rooster trembled in the distance and was so desperate, and the large swept-up rooms in the house had their doors wide open, an silence reigned in them, and the Gemara was left open in the large hall at the difficult issue of “Pi Parasha”, and a slightly irritated Father was waiting there for him to come in, and because Tilly, that wench who was always lively and always rosy-cheeked and always happy, had been sitting that morning gathered into the corner of Father and Mother's yoked wagon, and was a bit pale, and her lips pouted, and would get mad when anyone turned to ask her anything – because of all these thing together, the desolation in the heart was very great and very stifling, and that hot trickle that had been filtering through his chest under the palm of his hand since morning flowed in that one place alone and gnawed and gnawed, as if someone had inserted there and was now turning with cruel composure a very thin drill.”