

The Poetry of Samuel Menashe

Donald Davie

Samuel Menashe, a man in his forties, lives alone and frugally in New York City. His sole collection of poems, *The Many Named Beloved*, appeared in London in 1961 from a publisher, Gollancz, who normally published little or no poetry at all. Thus there was something freakish about Menashe's being published in the first place; and although he seems since 1961 to have accumulated as many poems again as the 80 in that collection, his poetry is so out of any current fashion that his chance of appealing to another publisher must be remote. By the same token, though poems of his have appeared in *Encounter*, *The New Yorker*, *Commonweal* and elsewhere, they aren't designed to make their impact on us as we flip the pages of a magazine. And *The Many Named Beloved* is familiar to so few readers that this poet who has been writing for a quarter of a century might as well never have written a line, so little is he known.

One trouble is that his poems are as far from being traditional as they are from being in the fashion, or in any of the several fashions that have come and gone, whether in British or American poetry, over the last 25 or for that matter 100 years. When Menashe himself is asked what tradition he thinks he is writing in, he is embarrassed and bewildered. Partly the question baffles him because the terms in which he thinks of his writing, and of writings by others, are not literary at all but as it were liturgical. And in the second place his linguistic situation is peculiar: his native tongue was Yiddish, though he was speaking English by the time he was 5, and French (a language which ever since has meant much to him) by the time he was 11. Since Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters, and Menashe never learned the Hebrew that was used by his parents, he has had no access to the literary tradition of Yiddish. And indeed his access to the tradition of English poetry seems to have been intermittent and imperfect, to say the least; for when Austin Clarke, reading some of Menashe's poems over the Irish radio, speculated that he had been influenced by Herbert, that name meant nothing to Menashe at all. On the other hand, though Menashe's attitude to poetry is thus un-literary, it is very insistently *linguistic*; his liturgical or devotional intent is directed to releasing the worshipful potentialities of *language*, most often of single words placed so as to draw out the full meanings locked in their etymologies—etymologies for which he has a very sure nose indeed, being aware through his Yiddish of the Germanic roots of many English words, and through his French of the Romance derivations and kinships in others. Accordingly he will say with politely suppressed impatience that, since English is the language he writes in, the tradition that he writes in or aspires to must be that of English. (The question of a distinctively American poetry is not one that he seems to have considered; and though in one or two poems he reminds me strik-

ingly of Emily Dickinson, I should be surprised if that attribution meant more to him than Austin Clarke's reference to George Herbert.)

In this, Menashe is being a little less than fair. He stands and utters his poems at a linguistic and cultural crossroads; and unless the reader knows down which of four roads the poet is facing (English, French, American, Jewish), he cannot be sure what expectations to bring to the poem nor even, sometimes, whether to trust his ears that he has heard aright. The truth is that Menashe faces two ways at once: his culture (not just his inherited culture, but the one that he lives by and within) is Jewish; his language is English. And here is the wryest paradox of his situation. For the expression or exploitation of Jewishness in English is, and has been for many years, a boom-industry in American writing, not least in Menashe's own city of New York. And yet, so far from helping him, that American-Jewish boom is the worst obstacle in his way. So long as *Portnoy's Complaint* stays in the best-seller lists, and the words "Jewish Momma" are good for a wink and a smirk at any cocktail-party, what hope is there of fair-minded consideration for poems in which the principal human relationship celebrated (with straightforward grief and devotion) is that of the Jewish poet with his dead mother? And the cleavage goes deeper; whereas the theme or the assumption of successful Jewish-American fiction is the alienation of the Jewish American in American life, Menashe sees no alienation beyond that of the original diaspora, and contrives to be thankful for it:

At the edge
Of a world
Beyond my eyes
Beautiful
I know Exile
Is always
Green with hope—
The river
We cannot cross
Flows forever¹

The sentiment may for all I know be a commonplace in some Jewish tradition; but the reader who comes to it from English, unless he realizes that a Jew is speaking, may well relate it quite irrelevantly to unfocussed yearnings for the unattainable, common in the English nineteenth century. Similarly, when Austin Clarke thought of Herbert, the poet of "The Temple," he had in mind a poem by Menashe called "Small Stones":

Small stones for the Temple
Are as the body's unseen bones—
In their shape is the seal
That only a true mason knows²

Unless we realize that a Jew is speaking of the Temple of Jerusalem (which was indeed Herbert's temple also, but altogether more allegorically) we shall miss the

conceit—which appears in other poems by Menashe—of how Jewishness is for a Jew like him sealed (stamped) in his physiognomy, in bone-structure. And yet in its reverent gravity the poem is indeed nearer to George Herbert than to the world of Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth.

The same conceit makes Menashe see a witty seriousness in an idiom like “follow your nose.” This happens for instance in, or somewhere behind, “Pirate’s Port and Voyage”:

Like a cliff
My brow hangs over
The cave of my eyes
My nose is the prow of a ship
I plunder the world³

And this in turn casts a specific cross-light on to “Voyage”:

Water opens without end
At the prow of a ship
Rising to descend
Away from it
Days become one
I am who I was⁴

—where a half-pun on “become” illustrates how the worshipfulness in a single word can be released from it, in forms so compressed as these. However, the most masterly poem along these lines is a recent one, “The Niche”:

The niche narrows
Hones one thin
Until his bones
Disclose him

For here the two chains of interwinding assonance (“niche, thin, *until*, his, him” spliced into “narrows, hones, bones, disclose”) only point up a surprising rhyme as it were in sense as well as sound; “disclose,” the one word in the poem whose first syllable chimes with the “his” sequence as its second does with the “bones,” has a meaning that is itself “disclosed” (unclosed, opened up) as the poem unfolds or flowers towards it. And of course it is all true; the meaning of a word is disclosed to us as we narrow it down. And yet of a word like “Jewishness,” and of the condition which that word denotes, it is true with a literalness which gives the truth a special intensity.

When I reviewed *The Many Named Beloved* in *The New Statesman*, I quoted two of the shortest poems in that book—first:

Pity us
By the sea
On the sands
So briefly

—and then:

The hollow of morning
Holds my soul still
As water in a jar.

And I commented:

Fragments? Images without the poems that would place them? At best a costive talent? Not at all. This is the imagination risking all on a single throw, hedging no bets, leaving no way open for retreat or recouping losses, a testcase for readers and a challenge for writers. Such confidence in the naked imaginative act, disdaining all aid from rhetoric, can only come from sustained meditation about what poetry is, as distinct from any and every extant poem. Which is not to say that no poems should be longer.

And I went on to say:

Menashe's poems, though so brief, are not epigrams. They have not been whittled down or chiselled clean of rhetoric. The rhetoric was never there. (I speak of the effect they make) . . .

There is nothing in this that I now want to unsay, but at one time I thought there might be; and I have been at pains to establish that Menashe has indeed had no acquaintance with the tradition of ancient epigram, neither the Latin nor the Greek, neither in Ben Jonson nor in Landor. What led me to doubt was the recurrence in the poems of the images of honing and whittling, of cutting to the bone; for these are tropes frequently used by the epigrammatist to characterize his chosen activity. However, in Menashe as we have seen they have a quite different function. And now I like to think that Menashe's personal aesthetic, his testament as to method, is in a recent poem, "To Open":

Spokes slide
Upon a pole
Inside
The parasol.

For this imagery—of jointings, of ribs and spars—conveys the important point that Menashe is in the strictest sense a highly articulate poet; not for him that pregnant juxtaposition without copula which Pound discovered in some *haiku* (by no means in all) and brought over into English to make the imagist poem. Menashe I suspect has never read the Imagist poets, nor translations from the Japanese either. (Not that he is an ill-read man however; I owe to him my introduction to the rewarding Portuguese novelist of the last century, Eca de Queiroz.) Menashe's verbs carry much of the thrust of his meanings, and he writes in sentences; if he suppresses punctuation, this is not to disorder or derange syntax, but simply for rapidity. He is able to suppress punctuation precisely because his syntax is firm and clear without it; ambiguous syntax occurs at times, but sparingly, and

only when the poet intends it and can control it. It is articulation, the grammatical ordering of his speech, which alone permits the poet to open himself to experience and to lay it open for us; and what that opening does for us (so Menashe's poem seems to say) is something necessary and humane like shielding, tempering, giving shade.

A negative reason why Menashe is not an epigrammatist is that he is at his weakest when he essays what is often thought to be the epigrammatist's chosen field—the massive commonplaces like *Carpe diem*. The least memorable pieces in *The Many Named Beloved* are some in which he addressed himself directly to the commonplace, mutability:

In the world
A while we go
And soon are gone
As last year's snow.

"Ice" and "Small Kingdom," both from *The Many Named Beloved*, are more elaborate attempts in the same vein, but really no better. I'm not sure that I'm much happier with recent pieces which try to give us new-minted a familiar commonplace about how the dreamer and the poet are near allies; such a poem is "Dreams":

What wires lay bare
For this short circuit
Which makes filaments flare—
Can any bulb resist
Sockets whose threads twist
As fast as they are spun—
Who conducts these visits
Swifter than an eclipse
When the moon is overcome?

The conceit is certainly ingenious, and sustained with ingenious consistency; moreover, like "The Niche," the poem shows a vast increase since *The Many Named Beloved* in musical expertise, in using no word that is not bewilderingly related through sound to others in the same poem. Yet in such a poem I miss the flash of insight, the delivering of something new. For unlike the epigrammatist (and unlike the *haiku* poet also, so far as I understand him), what Menashe offers in the best of his short poems is not poignant recognition but astonishment; not confirmation, but discovery—though we must always allow for the possibility that a Jewish commonplace is an English novelty.

I suspect indeed that Menashe is a Jewish poet more profoundly than he recognizes. For instance, set beside "Promised Land," which I have given already, a poem called "Fastness":

I shoulder the slope
Which holds me
Up to the sun

With my heels
Dug into dust
Older than hills

That “older than hills” . . . one saves it from vapid hyperbole only by setting beside it a thoroughly Jewish poem like “My Mother’s Grave”:

Bones
Are mortar
For your wall

Jerusalem

Dust
Upholds
Your street.

What precedent can the poet appeal to in English, for giving “Jerusalem” the weight that in such poems he asks us to give? Menashe’s own answer, which seems to me conclusive, is to point to the one English writer, apart from Shakespeare and the translators of the Authorized Version, who has meant much to him. This is William Blake; not the Blake of the Prophetic Books, but the poet of

I give you the end of a golden string.
Only wind it into a ball
It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.

And indeed, for the form of Menashe’s small poems we need look no further than to the aphorisms, some in verse but more in prose, which we may find in Blake. The whole theme of the mystic and yet quite literal significance of the Jewish physiognomy depends for instance on a central Blakean tenet, conveyed by Blake in aphorism: “The body is that part of the soul perceived by the five senses.” To a Jewish child who knew his own Scriptures only in their English version, Blake’s short poems were not merely the logical next step but also the talisman and guarantee that the Jewish experience of exile had been, and could be again, naturalized into English. If we continue to ignore Menashe, or allow him only the abstracted nod that we give to unclassifiable oddity, we are in effect saying that he doesn’t deserve to profit by the promise that Blake made.

A poet can be damaged—even destroyed, certainly mutilated—by lack of recognition. Blake himself may be thought of as a case in point; his writing becomes more private and idiosyncratic as he advances into his Prophetic Books, with less and less hope of getting any public response and therefore writing more and more for no one’s eye but his own. There is a real danger of the same thing happening with Menashe. It shows up particularly with his revisions. Short as his poems are, he revises them constantly, and always so as to abbreviate them further. For instance, one of the longest poems in *The Many Named Beloved* is called “There is no Jerusalem but this”:

The shrine whose form within
My physical form is limned
Streams fire to my skin
And I, kilned one, chant
Canticles which flames scan
Through me shaped as I am

There is no Jerusalem but this
Breathed in flesh by shameless love
Built high upon the tides of blood
I believe the Prophets and Blake
And like David I bless myself
With all my might

I know many hills were holy once
But now in the level lands to live
Zion ground down must become marrow
Thus in my bones I'm the King's son
And through Death's domain I go
Making my own procession

This has now been revised: "terrain" comes into the penultimate line in place of "domain" (a notable improvement), and the first stanza is only three lines long:

The shrine whose shape I am
Has a fringe of fire
Flames skirt my skin

The withdrawal from public statement into private talisman is manifest in this revision, and the privacy closes around the poet impenetrably when he nowadays regards those three lines, untitled, as in themselves a complete poem. Similarly he confesses that he has been tempted to cut down "Small Stones" (its four lines I have given earlier) to the single ejaculation: "Small stones for the Temple." This was perhaps a trap laid for him from the first because he saw poetry as liturgical, as worship; for the untranslatable ejaculations "Hosannah" and "Hallelujah" are not poems. But if this is the trap, it is one that Menashe might have, and could still, evade, if he had some play-back from an audience, particularly a Gentile audience.

And it is time in fact to make it clear that, despite my emphasis on his Jewishness, Menashe does address a Gentile audience and has much to give to the Gentile reader. When he is writing confidently, and with hopes of being heard, he can universalize his Jewishness and thus transcend it. My example shall be one of his most astonishing and memorable poems, "Cargo":

Old wounds leave good hollows
Where one who goes can hold
Himself in ghostly embraces
Of former powers and graces

Whose domain no strife mars—
I am made whole by my scars
For whatever now displaces
Follows all that once was
And without loss stows
Me into my own spaces⁵

The fifth line is flat; the remainder—with “hold” fulfilling its verbal and its nominal functions at once, and with the crucially meaningful submerged rhyme, “hollows . . . follows . . . stows”—is magnificent. And what is said holds as true of Gentile and personal wounds as of historical Jewish ones.

¹ “Promised Land,” from *The Many Named Beloved*. All the poems I quote are given in their entirety.

² *The Many Named Beloved*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

■

Four Poems by Samuel Menashe

As a stick that divines
I am tugged by what I see
Through sleep’s rough mine
Whose crystals encrust me