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The Bright Minimalism of Samuel Menashe

WH. AUDEN REACTED TO EACH NEW POEM HE READ as if it were a “verbal contraption” in need of investigation, a phrase more than usually applicable to octogenarian New Yorker Samuel Menashe’s work. His tiny poems (most are under ten lines) have been variously described as hand blown and polished and lapidary, diamond clear, like tabors, like (and not like) boxes, and — all from the same reviewer — filigree, cloisonné, Fabergé eggs, microchips, and Rubik’s cubes. These responses express the particular pleasure of possession evoked by any finely wrought miniature, the object small enough to be wholly encompassed by the hand or eye, with its toylke reminder of your own comparative enormity and, equally, the relief of escaping it, as you enter the diminutive structure before you. As Frost observed, “Sometimes it is a whole poem if short enough that takes possession of you.” But if a Menashe poem might at first appear to be a container too small to reward exploration, a reader willing to delve is likely to discover a light-filled and remarkably capacious interior.

Menashe’s ‘Sheep Meadow,’ glitteringly attractive on the surface, its depths largely concealed under the snow of its own mystery, is a case in point:

French spoken
across the snow
on Sheep Meadow
evokes a very rich hour
of the Duke of Berry . . .
three men traversing
a field of snow —
one of them alone —
hedged by trees
on the south side
where the towers
of the city rise . . .
one of those hours
in early afternoon
when nothing happens
but time makes room

With the exception of the eighth line, in which one of the three men is described as being “alone,” the text seems light in tone, even slight (the adjective of dismissal most often invoked by Menashe’s detractors); in fact, the poem is almost overburdened with meaning. A quick internet search reveals Sheep Meadow to be a

restored greensward in New York City's Central Park, Menashe's home turf where once upon a time a flock of Southdown sheep and a shepherd resided, vanished now but for the vestige of their presence evoked by the place name. The "very rich hours" in the poem allude to the Duke of Berry's *Les Tres Riches Heures*, the premier masterpiece of the illuminated manuscript, the high point of the miniature and the finest example of a medieval Book of Hours — a private prayer book containing devotions for particular hours, days, weeks, months, or seasons of the year. With its extreme attention to detail, its small scale, its representation of both the human and the divine, and its focus on the life of the spirit, such a miniature also represents Menashe's own aesthetic: small is exquisite; the body and soul require one another; the perishable (the figures of the men on the snow) and the eternal (the field of white they must cross) are only different aspects of the One. Heaven inspires, and humanity takes up a pen or a paintbrush in praise.

Menashe's "three men traversing / a field of snow" appear in the calendar section of *Les Tres Riches Heures*. It is February, the coldest month of the year, the theme is ordinary life, and this famous snow scene is depicted with great care, down to the hapless winter birds driven into the farmyard in search of sustenance. Two of the male figures are active: one is chopping wood, while the other leads a pack animal up the hill. But the "one of them alone" appears miserably cold, and clutches a woolen shawl around his head and shoulders to try to warm himself. At the center of the painting is a sheepfold full of sheep, looking well tended and contented. The freezing man has already crossed into the circular wattled enclosure surrounding the farm (he is within its ring of protection, no longer outside it) and is headed toward the fold. Thus, in the heart of an early art form that depicts nobles in sumptuous surroundings and characters from the Bible and peasants constantly at their work, Menashe singles out for our notice the figure of human isolation and vulnerability: the same now as it was ever: "I lie in snows / Drifted so high / No one knows / Where I lie."

But now we do. With a generosity half shy, half sly (the clues are there, but you decide whether to follow), the poet shepherds us across the lovely contemporary emptiness of Sheep Meadow to another time in order to locate the flock of the faithful, long gone from Central Park. The 23rd Psalm, also known as 'The Lord is My Shepherd,' which the poem's title evokes — Menashe's work is grounded in the Psalms — was written by his role model David, the most beloved of all the Jewish kings, a poet who, according to Jewish tradition, wrote the entire Book of Psalms. As a young shepherd, he saved his people by managing against all odds to slay the Philistine giant Goliath, whom no one else would fight. (Yes, go ahead and relish the idea of the marginalized — by cultural Philistines? — Menashe winning The Poetry Foundation's Neglected Masters Award and taking the poetry world by slingshot at the age of eighty.) David's history is told in none other than The Book of Samuel (the prophet who anointed David king). In a brief recitation at

the National Poetry Book Festival in 2005, Menashe related two stories of David's exploits and closed with the poem 'The Shrine Whose Shape I Am,' which is animated by David's presence. There is a lost book of the Bible called The Book of Samuel the Seer (probably written by the prophet Samuel), and as I listened to the reading via the internet, I had the strong impression that Samuel Menashe was taking pains (not the right phrase, perhaps, as he appeared the whole time to be delighted) to show us a book within a book, the Bible's Book of Samuel hidden within the Book of Samuel Menashe. I can't help thinking of Menashe's New and Selected as a post-millennial minimalist version of that lost work, the Book of Samuel the Seer, finally found in a fifth floor walkup with a kitchen bathtub in that loveliest of all Gomorrahs, New York City.

The trek across the snow, for both the speaker in the poem and the figures in the painting, is the story of humanity itself, which is to pass on through and out of time, but to try to leave some small trace of its having made the journey. The poem is an *ubi sunt* meditation, the French-snow association a nod to Villon's famous lament about the transitoriness of human life: "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" Melted away in a time long past, and still falling here, in a miniature painting from the 1400s, hung within a modern miniaturist's dazzling hall of snow. In praise the human soul makes art, which in turn retrieves human consciousness from the snows of history. Something beyond ourselves is present in every step we take and can only move along by virtue of our always half-deluded but somehow glorious persistence. It is characteristic of Menashe to access the dark content of the abyss, of which this bright minimalist is well aware, and transform it into affirmation: the fact that we will all one day vanish from the earth becomes a continuity with the beings of the past, as if they were only our former selves, and art, communication across time, preserves (*becomes*) a kind of hope. In the hunched shape of the little man against the snow, imperiled but almost home, the poet locates for us (and this is his genius) the *emotion* of belief, the impassioned love of which only humanity is capable.

The prayers in *Les Tres Riches Heures* that once were said on the hour are no longer spoken, and yet we are here on the same snow with the same number of hours to fill, and the same yearning for something beyond ourselves. The three men on the field of snow are also a lasting trace of the three Limbourg brothers, who painted *Les Tres Riches Heures* for their patron the Duke of Berry, and evidence of their journey as artists (elegant miniaturists, like Menashe) across the blank vellum, over the field of nothingness that precedes and invites creation both in nature and in art. All three died young, in the same year, probably of the plague, leaving their work unfinished, as in a way we all do. But before they did, they helped to introduce night and the summer stars and yes, *snow*, into our art.

The images of the Shepherd's Psalm — the still waters, the green pastures, the rod and the staff — refer to a day and/or a year in the life of a shepherd. Thus Menashe offers up this most famous passage of consolation in the Bible as yet another Book of Hours, to stand with *Les Tres Riches Heures*. But, uniting the artistic and the spiritual in the life of the individual, he gives us a third Book of Hours, too: both the speaker's and our own. What are hours lived in a time beyond faith like? After the ellipses close, when that endless bright room of snow the poet ushered you into for a time disappears again, those ancient hours of prayer so earnestly offered up as handholds for the soul's ascent come down to our sort of hours "in early afternoon / when nothing happens." Our time is our own now, not God's anymore — but we are bereft of the simple grace of knowing what words to say that might save us when the clock strikes the hour. "Nothing" assumes a much more active role in our present, "but time makes room" — both the space in which nothing can take place (nothing always displaces something else), and also a room for the reader to enter to escape the field of blankness that is Sheep Meadow now, and to find meaning. With Menashe, the end of a poem is often just the beginning. His brevity makes this necessary; his artistry insists on it.

Like some of Menashe's critics, Robert Frost was skeptical of such "poetry by ellipsis hiatus and hint": "All poetry has always said something and implied the rest. Well then why have it say anything? Why not have it imply everything?" But Menashe, in his "brevity and undersaying," proceeds in the tradition of the Bible's wisdom literature, such as the Psalms and Proverbs, which is intended to praise God and offer moral insight, often in the form of poetry. The parable, the riddle, the wise saying, the tools of Menashe's trade, are all forms of wisdom speech. And pithiness and memorability and, yes, charm are indispensable teaching aids. Giving the devil, Pound the Imagist, his due, Frost pinpoints a stylistic strength deriving from Menashe's exclusion of almost everything: "Pounds [sic] tightness naturally tended to stripping poetry of connective tissue. Never mind connections — they'll take care of themselves — if only you make your poetic points. The method gives very ancient Old-Testament flavor to expression," a felicitous result in work as Bible-steeped as Menashe's. David Malick writes that "Wisdom/Poetic Literature is practical direction for obtaining substantial wholeness out of the brokenness of natural life," a nearly perfect summary of Menashe's body of work which, like the Psalms, the heart of Jewish daily worship, is "an expression of Mankind's heart toward God in the varied nature of life: fears, doubts, tragedies, triumphs, joys, and hopes."

But if he is "essentially a religious poet," as Dana Gioia has pointed out, how does Menashe avoid the heavy-handedness and smugness of the prophet? How is it that his poems sidestep imposition and maintain their modest, good-humored gentleness? Wisely, as befits a mortal talking in all seriousness to other mortals about matters essentially spiritual, he instructs by way of indirection, with

a very light touch, offering up his own loneliness and lacks and hesitations so that we feel free to take for ourselves anything we might be able to use, and are not blinded by the light in the poems, but are drawn toward it. In other words, intentionally and yet without condescension, Menashe plays the fool.

But because his subtext is eternity, Menashe in his fool's role, always enacted with a curiously sane dignity, is more like Lear's nameless stalwart than the Feste for whom he is sometimes mistaken. And with this poet, as with Lear's devoted jester, as Isaac Asimov put it, "the great secret of the successful fool [is] that he is no fool at all." He summersaults linguistically both to enchant and to console ("A pot poured out / Fulfills its spout"), while sustaining the reader on a crust of Blake-leavened wisdom ("Owe, do not own / What you can borrow") and a hey nonny, or a hundred, of grief-absorbing acceptance ("Pity us / By the sea / On the sands / So briefly"). His "sprite of delight [. . .] Vaults out of sight" in order to rise "self-spun": one of the virtues of neglect is the freedom to become oneself; company as much as loneliness can whittle us away. His fool persona's cryptic utterances (fools were thought to be touched by God) are intermediary between the sublimities of heaven and their expression, in miniature, in life on earth: "Eaves at dusk / beckon us / to peace / whose house, / espoused, / we keep." Menashe's enigmatic lines in which the self tries to chart its own progress across time ("I am who I was," "I was where I am") echo God's naming of himself to Moses ("I am that I am," "I am what I will be"). But Menashe insists on the eternal nature of the human, too, both its resiliency and its regret: "I am where [ever] I go"). In the Menashe world-view, humanity cannot live without God, but God needs boots on the ground to accomplish his work and to give praise. The self-identity in the words "I am" is held in common by Deity and human alike, and Menashe insists that they can survive only in each other.

A reader would be well within his rights to ask himself, if these poems are so demanding and sequestered and time-consuming, why bother? An entirely legitimate response to Menashe, particularly since, as an aphorist, he engages in less mood-setting and music than many readers might require. Galway Kinnell has traced the littleness of Emily Dickinson's poems, to which Menashe's have sometimes been compared, to the fact that she "omits the warming-up, preface and situation — and begins where a more discursive poet might be preparing to end." The same is true of Menashe, which means that he requires a great deal of the reader. But to say that he is slight is to mistake him. His poems are, to use one of those colloquialisms that Menashe adores, bursting at the seams.

'Spur of the Moment' is a case in point: an eight-line poem that covers the subjects of individual freedom and responsibility; the creative process; sin, redemption, and forgiveness; and man's relationship to his Maker; all while subverting a colloquial phrase, exploring multiple meanings, making analogies between horseback riding and at least three other activities, alluding to the Bible, suggesting

a concealed writing metaphor, and providing a gloss on the poet's methods. The scenario Menashe provides for us is that of a horse (or is it a man?) that has just been spurred (urged on toward something by a stimulus of pain — a rowel in the side, or perhaps the anguish of mortality):

His head rears back
 Cresting upon his neck
 His uplifted legs prance
 As he champs at the bit
 The unbridled rider sits
 With reins in hand
 Astride this dance
 He is saddled with

A “spur of the moment” act is one that is spontaneous (*sponte* means free will) and entered into without constraint; an older definition includes reference to a “native internal proneness” or “readiness.” This animal is ready to make a bold move.

The beast prances, as horses do, but the verb also means to move in an excessively prideful way, while it “champs at the bit,” rebels against the feel of the metal mouthpiece used to restrain its movements. The rider sits “unbridled,” not only uncontrolled, but also freely expressed. It is in this line that the reader realizes that horse and rider (and, sub-textually, the writer) are one and the same, and the quiet enjambment abets the surprise: “As he champs at the bit / The unbridled rider sits.” The word enjambment itself comes from the Old French *enjamber*, meaning to *straddle*, a word found nowhere in this poem about straddling, but nevertheless evoked — both definitionally and sonically — at some Menasheian midpoint between the sounds of *saddle* and *astride*.

Having completed the transformation from beast to human in the previous line (this creature is evolving in spite of himself), the man now sits “With reins in [his] hand” that are attached to nothing at all (he has lost control of the process, a promising development). He is now astride the dance, this peculiarly unruly horsetrot of life “He is saddled with”. The poem is about the thrill of riding (and writing) the *moment* at the instant it suddenly reveals that all along it has been riding (and writing) you. One could make the case that this is a love poem as well, describing the awkward leap of faith love requires of us. But there is more.

The image of the unbridled rider comes from Psalms 32:6, in which David atones for his adultery with Bathsheba — and for knowingly causing the murder of her husband — and God forgives him. Along with David's words, in a turnaround of tradition this psalm includes God's comment to man: “Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.” The word *moment* in the title

comes from the Latin *momentum*, meaning movement. The poem, then, is about the spur of the moment (the sharp feel of our own finiteness, which goads us toward change) and the subsequent movement of a soul from a position of straddling (still champing at the bit, feeling a false sense of control, being on the fence about commitment to faith) to a wholehearted surrender to belief that renders the bit and bridle completely unnecessary. The psalm states that “the Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.” This feeling of deep confidence, which pervades Menashe’s work, is an affirmation that renders the poem’s wild ride in the saddle, though it moves from control to helplessness, a joyful progress toward meaning. It would be false to the spirit of Menashe’s work as well as nearly impossible to attempt to consider his poems in a purely secular way. It would be like calling George Herbert a writer of acrostics. Menashe constructs a dwelling place for God in almost every poem he writes. His intense spirituality is one possible reason for his neglect.

To use as support text a psalm not directly mentioned in the poem is a rather blatant case of that supposed cardinal sin of poetry criticism, reading in. But with Menashe, reading in is no sin but an entirely appropriate, indeed a *necessary* response. The poet courts it, and the ability of his oeuvre to be fully received by the reader depends upon it. A good deal of the thrill of these small poems is the exhilarating degree of participation required of the reader. Menashe’s poems are not just small; they are compressed, and their transmission is not complete until a reader, by way of his own experience and understanding and willingness to delve, expands the original texts into something of his own.

This is true of all poetry, to a varying extent, but it is of particular importance in the case of Menashe because of his subversive approach to time. He has been identified as essentially an aphorist, or a writer of apothegms; if you prefer, a minimalist. As Randall Jarrell complained of William Carlos Williams’ imagist-objectivist limitations, “the poems are so short, often, that there isn’t time for much.” Indeed, often they can be read in mere seconds. Menashe sometimes repeats them during readings, and why not? It doesn’t take long. But a goodly amount of profound meaning is brought into being by these small verses. And here lies the truly unusual quality of Menashe’s work: that often the bulk of the experience of the poem is apprehended by the reader *after* the poem is over, and in a space beyond its textual borders. If, as Frost put it, a poem should proceed “from delight to wisdom,” in a typical Menashe piece the delight comes in the reading, but the greater part of the wisdom is stored *outside* the poem itself. Paradoxically, Menashe, who seems uninterested in providing the reader with anything but a shorthand list of his poems’ true contents, a man who is surely, in Frost’s phrase, “caviare to the masses”, exists in a relation of deep dependency on and a profound intimacy with the reader. As with love — and doesn’t all poetry seek to give or get it in its own way? — Menashe’s poetry of solitary contemplation, its ability to make it all the

way into the world, depends heavily on its acceptance by a sympathetic Other: "O Many Named Beloved / Listen to my praise / Various as the seasons / Different as the days / All my treasons cease / When I see your face." These lines are not only a gifted psalmist's praise song to God in the Davidic tradition, but also a love song for the reader, the poet's many named beloved, on whom, for Menashe, so much depends.

One of Menashe's true subjects is filiation and the preservation of original attachments when a birth family is not replaced by a second family of one's own making, as if a loving sensibility unable to arrive at a shared future may have no choice but to slow to a stop and circle homeward. For whatever reason(s) a life enacts itself in this way, there is a courage rarely acknowledged in gathering up whatever one was born with and making do with it for a lifetime, in deciding, in Frost's words, "to belong to what belongs to you." Menashe, in search of his beloved dead parents lingers at the spot at which they were last seen, which is his own life. He understands that the point of connection between their once having been, and forever as it unfolds, is his body, his memory, his words. In the poem 'Here,' in only four ruefully affectionate lines, he describes a habitation somewhere between the time of love for a living person and the forgetting that will come to each of us: "Ghost I house / In this old flat — / Your outpost — / My aftermath." Thomas Merton, a poet who shared Menashe's hermitical tendencies, wrote of the "vision [to be found] in obscurity" and the saving paradox that it is sometimes possible to find in loneliness a "fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity." Menashe's poems are the beneficiaries of the world's neglect and a preservation of what Hardy called, in his poem 'Heredity,' "the family face": "I am the family face; / Flesh perishes, I live on, / Projecting trait and trace / Through time to times anon, / And leaping from place to place / Over oblivion." Sometimes it is the family's solitary soul who ensures the continuation of the line.

Menashe is an eloquent poet of the life unlived, which, he reminds us, is always a life, too. In the poem 'In My Digs,' the title's noun referring to an archaeological excavation as well as to living quarters, the speaker tries to unbury the evidence of a lost life that happens to be his own: "Caked in a glass / That is clear / Yesterday's dregs / Tell me the past / Happened here." The implied images of wedding cake and the glass the groom would smash at a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony (never needed, it remains intact here) combine with images of the dregs at the bottom of a glass, the least valuable and most long-lasting tiny particles of a life. The speaker might also be surveying his own time-altered face in a looking glass. Evoking several images from a single line such as "caked in a glass" is one of Menashe's methods of imbuing a very small poem with a great deal of meaning. And whoever you are, whatever sort of life lays claim to your days, the past happens anyway. Lived or unlived, life ends. In 'Morning,' the family begun by the wedding that never took place materializes in the "No wife, no son" of the speaker's

(c)harméd life. The poems are inhabited not only by the lingering presence of a father and mother who are dead, but also by the absence of a wife and child who never lived. In ‘At a Standstill,’ one of Menashe’s most powerful and most personal poems, the un-lived life takes shape before the speaker’s eyes:

That statue, that cast
Of my solitude
Has found its niche
In this kitchen
Where I do not eat
Where the bathtub stands
Upon cat feet —
I did not advance
I cannot retreat

In a standstill, all activity stops and any further movement is barred. The speaker has arrived at a moment of unwanted revelation and he cannot escape it. The word “cast” has multiple meanings (these delight Menashe and are one means by which he crowds an abundance of implication into his poems): the cast of just one performer in this personal drama; the rigid shape taken by the speaker’s own loneliness; even something that is shed naturally in living, like a snakeskin or insect casing or worm feces. This is a kitchen in which the speaker does not eat — he is not being sustained by his life as it is. The bathtub, quintessential sign of the one-room urban flat with its suggestion of days and nights spent alone, “stands / Upon cat feet —” a nod to Sandburg’s ‘Fog.’ (The embedded literary reference is another means by which Menashe expands the meaning and emotion available to his small poems). Like fog, such a life arrives by stealth and creeps over you, obscuring your ability to see things clearly. Yet the military metaphor of advancement and retreat with its rueful secondary reference to worldly success does not apply here: neither action is possible. This is one of Menashe’s most unflinching poems, a spiritual taking stock à la troubled Calvinist Dickinson. In his poems of despair Menashe does not blame God for human failings. The speaker in his poems takes personal responsibility for his own days on earth, the ways he’s lived them, and equally the ways he has not. But even in the midst of the bleakest self-assessment, Menashe’s faith remains.

The hollow is a recurring image of profound spirituality for Menashe (“The hollow of morning / Holds my soul still / As water in a jar”). And the bathtub at the center of the piece forms a perfect hollow. The poem contains an answer to its own despair: here is the bathtub, like the proverbial elephant, in the living room. It will not remain empty, but will be filled again with water, traditionally a symbol of spirit, especially so for Menashe. Images of immersion and cleans-

ing — both body and soul — suggest themselves. And there is an encouraging reminder of the “this too shall pass” quality of human pain in the allusion to the Sandburg poem. The fog is only temporary and in the last line “moves on,” as will the human hopelessness that has stolen over the speaker.

In ‘Cargo,’ Menashe writes that “Old wounds leave good hollows.” The last five lines encapsulate the spirit of forgiveness, even of the self, that animates his poems: “I am made whole by my scars / For whatever now displaces / Follows all that once was / And without loss stows / Me into my own spaces.” Substitute the word hollows for spaces, and we arrive back at the paradoxical definition of hollow: to form something by removing its contents. For Menashe, emptiness is creative, and what it leaves behind is a life well lived. One could spend paragraphs on the enigmatic last line of the poem and the way it loops back on itself, but it is the self-willed words “without loss,” the poet’s insistence that praise is what the living have to give this world, no matter what it asks of them, that make sense of Samuel Menashe’s oversized work and life and faith.