

‘Sylvia Townsend Warner, Samuel Menashe, ebay and me’

Admiring both Sylvia Townsend Warner and Samuel Menashe, I was pleased to discover from the 2005 *STW Journal* that they admired each other. And I was both pleased and excited when the letter below came up for sale on ebay in November 2007.

27: x: 1968

Dear Richard Meyer,

Here is a poet you should approach for Genesis-group. (I had his address so carefully filed away that I have only just found it, or I would have told you of him before).

SAMUEL MENASHE
(Apt 15) 75 THOMPSON STREET
N.Y. N.Y. 10012

He is such a fine craftsman that his craftsmanship is imperceptible. His brief poems – often only four lines – are like snow-crystals, except that they don’t melt away. Do get in touch with him.

With best wishes,
Sylvia Townsend Warner

I bid for it, fairly vigorously, but somebody else outbid me – a reader of this newsletter perhaps? But I had transcribed the letter and copied it in a brief letter to Menashe, thinking that anybody would like to hear such words about themselves. He wrote back in his fine sloping handwriting, enclosing a transcript of one of his poems inscribed to me and urging me to phone, as he found writing by hand taxing and difficult. And so with some trepidation I phoned, a little daunted by the rabbinical gravity of some of his poems. But he was an altogether charming and chatty phone interlocutor, with a habit of pausing in the conversation to recite from memory one of his poems. I found this thrilling and startling when we first spoke, and always enjoyable even when the first surprise wore off; the poems were clearly woven into the fabric of his everyday thoughts and life. He read with extraordinary slowness and emphasis, with a faith that each word meant plenty. Youtube has a number of recordings of his readings; I recommend especially this one from October 2007 – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5nmWHB3Sf0>.

We continued to phone every now and then over the next few years, and I sent him a copy of my father’s war diaries, *Field of Fire*, knowing that both he and Samuel had endured the Ardennes campaign of 1944. There were plans to bring him over to give a reading at University College London, where I teach, but glitches of timing and health got in the way. And I had a plan to go to New York to interview him, and in particular to interview him about his friendship with Sylvia Townsend Warner; but alas I never

made it happen. Samuel died in 2011, having lived long enough to take deep pleasure in the late recognition of his poetry; there was a Library of America volume of his *New and Selected Poems* in 2005, and a UK reprint by Bloodaxe in 2009 with a few new poems and a DVD interview with the poet in the New York apartment he often wrote about:

Ghost I house
In this old flat –
Your outpost –
My aftermath

Like Sylvia, whose 1978 preface to *Mr Fortune's Maggot* ends with the touching words 'my world was now nicely and neatly over', Samuel foresaw his own death with peaceful courage. The final poem in the Bloodaxe edition is titled 'Leavetaking':

Dusk of the year
Nightfalling leaves
More than we knew
Abounded on trees
We now see through

Peter Swaab