

Menke Katz'

Choice Poems

in Italian

by

Alexandre Amprimoz

MENKE KATZ' CHOICE POEMS  
IN ITALIAN

( Two essays on Menke Katz' life  
and works followed by a selection of  
his poems with Italian notes and  
translations.)

by

ALEXANDRE AMPRIMOZ

## Acknowledgements

Menke Katz' poems have been published in leading North American magazines. They have appeared in their final forms in the following collections:

Land of Manna, Chicago: Windfall Press  
1965.

Rockrose, New York: Smith-Horizon,  
s.d. 1970.

Burning Village, New York: The Smith,  
1972.

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## A NOTE ON MENKE KATZ

For those who are not too sure if they heard the name of the poet at a reading or if they saw one of his poems in the Atlantic Monthly or perhaps in the New Yorker or even in the New York Times, here is a reminder:

Menke Katz is the poet born in the Village of Michalishek, Lithuania who recently, seeing students drinking wine and snow, whispered: "They don't have to write poems, they drink them." He emigrated at the age of 13 to the United States, where he quickly mastered English. It was perhaps then that he began to discover poetry as a great natural force:

"I heard the stone speak in iamb  
on the way up - success, success; and  
in trochee on the way down - failure,  
failure."

Ten years later, he obtained his doctorate in modern poetry from Columbia University. However, Yiddish was his first love and as a young man he received his first encouragement from Yiddish poets. He has written eight widely acclaimed books of Yiddish poems. He has had Pulitzer-Prize nominations for his three English books: Land of Manna, Rock-rose, and Burning Village.

"Princes of Pig Street", a section of Burning Village was the winner of the Stephen Vincent Benet Award in 1970.

Suffer a few more generalities before we get to the center of our study. Menke Katz' poetry is universal: it has been translated into 50 languages. Nevertheless, the poetry of this great humanist is not abstract, it is charged with 'couleur locale' like a tasty fruit. His is the poetry of two worlds: New York

and the remote land of Lithuania.

In the introduction to the Modern Greek translation of Land of Manna, H. McKinley writes:

"...Yet this poetry is based on far more than only American or only Jewish responses and values. It extends to all time and embraces all mankind, with three qualities that are the rarer today, for being ever evoked: Menke Katz sings with real compassion, -delicate humour, and uncompromising love as he does in the spiritually-disturbing 'Hymn to the Mouse'."

But in these pages my concern is Burning Village: a modern Divine Comedy where the Inferno of a Jewish village destroyed by Russian and German armies during World War I is only balanced by a clear and powerful paradise which is 'Elchik's Love Diary' - the last section of the book. The comparison with the Divine Comedy can be made here because Menke Katz is an 'inventor' of new forms as Dante was the 'inventor' of a new language. 'Elchik's Diary' is the Paradise of the poetry of Menke Katz.

Elchik is one of the characters of Burning Village (yes, a book of poems with characters and character). In one of his recent letters, Menke Katz wrote the following, concerning my French translation of Burning Village:

"If it were possible to translate the whole section of 'Elchik's Diary'... my oldest brother who died at seventeen all alone longing for his love Dveirke, left by the armies to die of hunger... I actually wrote these poems with his diary in my hands. He and his love Dveirke swore eternal love, so after he died she never married until the Germans killed her...one of the six million

Jews killed by the Germans."

The first poem from 'Elchik's Love Diary' is 'In Abandoned Barrak'. I already said that Menke Katz is an inventor of new forms: 'In Abandoned Barrak' is a sonnet without the traditional rhyme and traditional rhythm. It resembles the sonnet only in that both have fourteen lines. Here is the poem:

In Abandoned Barrack

Dveirke,  
Dveirele,  
Oi, Dveirinke!  
loveliest of bare  
foot girls bred on the poor  
soil of einkorn wheat, flailed grain,  
lilac blue, potato apples.  
I write these lines yearning for you  
in  
this abandoned barrack which is stain-  
ed with  
the death of German and red armies  
who bled  
here white; mad with longing, high  
fever and hounding  
whims, left alone to fight fancy-  
mongers, a sunset  
or two before I die. The winds are  
here to curse my last  
twilights. The late sun is a snowrose  
in the teeth of the frost.

The sonnet begins with a two beat line and ends with a fifteen beat line. It is striking how natural this refined form of the sonnet appears to be. If you threw a stone into a calm surface of water it would produce ripples that could be represented by concentric circles of increasing diameter. 'In Abandoned Barracks' is a scream of love that ends on the shore of death.

Recently, the Poet Lore opened a

polemic about Menke Katz' poetry called 'The Battle of the Forms'. Suffice to say here that love and pain are increasing or decreasing phenomena, not constant quantities like traditional sonnets. Menke Katz' poetry is not free verse (and since T.S. Eliot serious poets know that there is no such thing as free verse) it has form, it obeys rules. However, those forms and rules are dictated by his heart - they are not arbitrary conventions. The materia poetica of 'In Abandoned Barrack' is too serious for Menke to think of his lines as mere experiments: the author mastered the forms that he invented. Any careful reader will notice a rhyme-like complex pattern of consonance:

(i.e.: Dveirke, Dveirele, Dveirinke.  
bare, poor, grain.  
apple, bled.  
bled, hounding.  
sunset, last, frost.)

and assonance:

(i.e.: in, with, hounding.)

Rhyme is supposed to add to the melody, those who used it too much sank into monotony, those who ignored it wrote chopped prose and called it poetry; Menke Katz, who is a master, used the idea of rhyme as a very efficient tool. About rhyme, Menke once wrote:

"Poems sit in rhymes  
Like men, beasts in cages...  
A tombstone does not mourn in  
rhyme...  
Wars do not kill in rhyme...  
Give the word a ripe scent like  
corn."

The 'enjambement', that brilliant French invention which contributed so much to break the monotony of traditional poetry, is widely used by Menke

Katz. Simply note:

"Loveliest of bare  
foot girls..."

as an example.

The unfinished 'Elegy' of Dylan Thomas is a poem which deals with the poet's father but actually it gives us many indications about the poet's nature. 'Elchik's Love Diary' tells us more about Menke Katz through his description of Elchik:

"...Let me cling to the horn of  
this new moon, to / Satan's teeth, to  
life. Give me gutter blood, pour me  
like waste / waters, free to dream, I  
am a river sailing to the sea."

or even:

"The dream, my love, is more real  
than all realities."

Menke, himself declared lately at a poetry reading:

"...man had to fly in legends and  
dreams before he could invent an  
aeroplane...First always came the  
poet - first always came the dream."

A poetry aware of form as a fluid nature where the richness and originality of images are only outplayed by a deep human compassion presents itself to the reader with the characteristic seduction of music.

Menke Katz' poetry, as he himself wrote in Rockrose, "Will outlive man and beast."



## Forme mitiche del tempo

E la nostra intenzione di analizzare in questo capitolo le forme mitiche del tempo nell' opera poetica di Menke Katz.

Incominceremo con la traduzione di 'Beyond', dopo di che passeremo ad un certo simbolismo nascosto dalla semplicità stilistica del poema.

## Beyond

I am drunk with  
the wines after me. O let  
us drink a toast: man,  
eagle, woman, rose, beast, sun  
to rise beyond my last day.

I marvel with you  
the worm as well as the stars.  
O scent me in your  
lilacs O distant ages  
O neighbors of tomorrow!

## Al di là

Sono ubriaco  
e i vini m'inseguono.  
Brindisi: uomo,  
aquila, donna, rosa, bestia, sole  
che sorgerà al dilà del mio ultimo  
giorno.

Come voi i vermi  
e le stelle mi stupiscono.  
O respiratemi nei vostri  
lillà O secoli a venire  
O vicini di domani!

## On History

What is history,  
if not a sea maniac,  
who counts each swept wave?

## La Storia

Che cosa è la storia  
se non altro che un mare maniaco  
che conta ogni onda?

'In vino veritas.' Il poeta come l'uomo qualunque è un miscuglio e la sua ossatura è composta di paura e di morte. Egli ha studiato le religioni le più antiche e le tecniche della medicina moderna, non è dunque per lui un segreto che il cervello è la parte del cadavere che sarà la prima ad essere visitata dai vermi - la prima a scomparire. Ma noi non troviamo ombra di tristezza in questo scritto dove la tradizione Ebraica raggiunge la tradizione Latina:

"Vinum bonum laetificat anima mea."

Anche Bacco sarebbe stupito di scoprire che il poeta spiega i misteri metafisici con una mano sul bicchiere; ma come immaginare la gioia del Baudelaire nel vedere l'eternità poetica diventare parte dell'eternità pura per mezzo del vino?

Ed ecco un altro poema in cui la realtà del vino si unisce alle dimensioni mitiche del tempo:

## Reunion

I am old fashioned as your wine,  
my love of a thousand years hence,  
verse-mad as your dew, tears, sunrise.

I have been riding to you ten  
longing centuries, no wonder  
I am old fashioned as your wine.

O the slow circling moments O  
the dragging vehicle of time,  
modern as your dew, tears, sunrise.

Mine the hands of the eternal  
clock; yours, the wrath of a thousand  
summers, old fashioned as your wine.

I yearn in stone an unsung ode,  
mine the glory of the unknown,  
faithful as your dew, tears, sunrise.

God is old, only moments grin,  
ages forever weep, my love,  
I am old fashioned as your wine,  
modern as your dew, tears, sunrise.

## Riunione

Sono antico come il tuo vino  
amore di mille anni or sono pazzo di  
come delle tue lacrime - rugiada dell'  
poesia  
alba.

Ti ho bramosamente inseguito  
dieci secoli, non è meraviglia:  
sono antico come il tuo vino.

O circoli lenti dei momenti O  
come si trascina questo veicolo del  
tempo,  
moderno come le tue lacrime - rugiada  
dell'alba.

Mie sono le lancette dell'eterno  
orologio, tua è la corona di mille  
estati, antica come il tuo vino.

Spero dalla pietra l'ode incantata,  
mia è la gloria dell'ignoto,  
fedele come le tue lacrime - rugiada  
dell'alba.

Dio è vecchio, soltanto i momenti  
sorridono,  
le ore piangono per sempre, amore  
sono antico come il tuo vino  
moderno come le tue lacrime - rugiada  
dell'alba.

'I am old fashioned as your wine.'  
Il poeta è fatto all'antica; egli ha il saggio sapore e il profumo del vino stagionato. La preoccupazione dello spazio temporale si esprime qui per tramite di elementi abbastanza semplici (l'orologio, l'estate) ma di nuovo non dobbiamo fidarci alla chiarezza stilistica. Il poeta è vecchio come il buon vino. Egli ha dunque l'esperienza ma nello stesso tempo veniamo a sapere che egli ha ugualmente la sincerità, dunque l'innocenza, delle lacrime o della rugiada. Pensiamo qui con tenerezza alle candide visioni del Leopardi o del poeta inglese Blake (Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience). Ancora una volta il vino incarna il simbolo dell'eternità.

Le lacrime sono una forma di esperienza salata come le sponde di Galilea. L'antichità del vino e la novità dell'acqua (rugiada): ecco dunque il miracolo di Cana che si estende nelle dimensioni mitiche del tempo. Il vino invecchierà sempre ma l'amore del poeta è immobile nell'alba infinita...

Giunto all'età di sessanta anni il poeta esprime la sua sensualità, il suo amore per la vita e soprattutto la sua preoccupazione del tempo in una poesia intitolata 'Wild Vine' (Vite selvatica) nella quale egli unisce i miti antichi e i miti della moderna New-York.





## On Distance

The end of time like  
the beginning is as near  
as you can see it.  
Farther than distance are you  
whom my craving can not reach.

## Distanza

La fine del tempo  
come il suo principio  
è così lontana come puoi vederla.  
Più lontana di ogni distanza sei tu  
e il mio desiderio non può toccarti.

## Autumn Rain

The earth drinks a toast  
to the true humility  
of the worm, the quest  
of the dead, the king of kings  
our master and commander.

## Pioggia di Autunno

La terra porta un brindisi  
alla vera umiltà  
del verme, l'invitato  
dei morti, il re dei re  
il nostro maestro e comandante.

## Methuselah

Woe, Methuselah!  
Even you, our oldest bore  
are with nine hundred  
and sixty nine years humdrum,  
a tarrying guest on earth.

## Matusalemme

Che sventura O Matusalemme!  
Anche tu, vecchio seccatore  
con novecentosessanta  
nove anni così noiosi,  
sei un invitato che sosta su questa  
terra.







My gay garret is your doll hospital.  
I bathe, comb, adorn you: with poke  
bonnets,  
a gown with folds falling in a cascade,  
gemmed shoes fit for the dance of an  
elf-queen,  
earrings to ravish the charm of legends,  
a key to open the locked songs of rocks.

We share our destiny: mine, the shade,  
yours -  
the light of solitude. Only sorrow is  
mine.

My fate is to grumble against the winds;  
yours, to smile to the end of misery.  
I touch you like the forbidden apple  
on the highest bough which no one can  
reach.

It is late, you played with every won-  
der.  
heard your poems carved on the "one  
girl" bed.  
Time to sleep, you close your doll  
eyelids,  
like Aphrodite listening to your ode.  
May you dream you are a live prankful  
child  
of Manhattan, O Sappho, my tenth muse.

La mia gioiosa soffita è il tuo ospedale  
per bambole.  
Ti lavo, ti pettino, ti adorno con:  
pompons e cuffie,  
una gonna con pieghe che cadono come  
una cascata,  
scarpe con gemme fatte per la danza  
d'una regina fata,  
orecchini per rapire il fascino delle  
leggende,  
una chiave per aprire i canti chiusi  
delle pietre.

Condividiamo il nostro destino: mia è  
l'ombra, tua  
è la luce della solitudine. Soltanto il  
dolore è mio.  
Il mio destino è di brontolare contro  
il vento;  
il tuo di sorridere fino alla morte  
della miseria.  
Ti tocco come la mela proibita  
sul ramo il più alto che nessuno può  
raggiungere.

E tardi, hai giocato con ogni meraviglia,  
ascoltate le tue poesie scolpite nel  
letto di "una donna".  
E ora di dormire, chiudi le tue  
palpebre di bambola,  
come Afrodite ascoltando le tue odi.  
Che tu possa sognare di esser una birba  
di Manhattan, O Saffo, mia decima musa.



## ENVOY

Sappho, traveling thousands of years  
the steep miles of centuries you arrived through  
at the beginning, breaking out of each  
time-bound bolt, you are free of the  
ages,  
you are now superhuman as a doll,  
a little girl who knows life beyond  
life.



## Rockrose

The loveliest harlots are in New York,  
nocturnal at midday, children of  
twilight,  
paramours of the mist, menaced by light,  
they sweet-scent the nights with every  
balm on earth.

Here comes Lilith - the first wife of  
Adam,  
hellbred, out of a night-scene of  
Goethe's Faust,  
(Her room in the slums - a perfumed,  
stale mouth.)  
a whore more naked in garb than all nude  
wives.

Her eyelids are like the green gates to  
Limbo,  
her navel like the eye of a sky-gazer.  
The streets are charmstruck by her  
generous arse,  
her delicacy - a rockrose of old New  
York.

The stars in the gutters are free  
dimelands.  
The wind - a daredevil rapes her in  
broad starlight,  
plants stoneseeds in her womb and runs  
the gauntlet.  
Her bride-bed, skyworn, is guarded by  
the cherubs.

## Rosa di pietra

Le prostitute le più incantevoli sono  
in New York,  
notturne a mezzo giorno, figlie del  
crepuscolo  
amanti della nebbia, minacciate dalla  
luce,  
profumano le notti con ogni dolcezza  
della terra.

Adesso viene Lilith - la prima moglie  
di Adamo,  
nata dall'inferno in un'immagine del  
Fausto di Goethe,  
(La sua camera nel quartiere miserabile  
è una bocca acida e profumata.)  
Lei è piu nuda vestita di tutte le  
donne nude.

Le sue palpebre son come i verdi can-  
celli del limbo,  
il suo ombelico è come l'occhio che  
fissa il cielo.  
Le vie sono colpite dal fascino del  
suo generoso posteriore,  
la sua delicatezza - una rosa di pietra  
della vecchia New York.

Le stelle nei bassi fondi sono paesi a  
poco prezzo.  
Il vento è un temerario che la violenta  
nella luce stellare  
e seminando pietre nel suo grembo le  
lancia una sfida.  
Il suo letto di vergine, consumato dal  
cielo è protetto dai Cherubini.

Non è la nostra intenzione di tradurre le opere complete di Menke Katz (dieci volumi: sette in lingua Hebraica, tre in Inglese); nonostante desideriamo dare alcune indicazioni riguardo ad altre poesie che sviluppano queste forme mitiche del tempo.

'Twilight On Lincoln Square' (Crepuscolo Sulla Piazza Lincoln) esprime le relazioni che esistono tra la storia e il tempo presentando la statua del noto presidente con lo sguardo del Dio Cronos.

'Undying Neighbor' (Vicino Immortale) è dedicata a Dante diventato vicino di casa di Menke Katz. Superando un ostacolo di sette secoli i due poeti esprimono in un dialogo proprio superbo una generalizzazione della nozione di peccato:

"The sins which can not sin even in  
hell,  
sins no rain will ever wash away.  
...Sins of angels, weary of heaven  
who  
defy the bondage of eternity,  
to love mortal maidens..."

I peccati che non possono peccare  
neanche in inferno,  
peccati che la pioggia non laverà mai.  
...Peccati di angeli, stanchi del  
paradiso che  
sfidano i limiti dell'eternità,  
per amare fanciulle mortali...

Altri poemi si inscrivono in questa tradizione temporale. Ecco un ultimo esempio che non richiede alcuna spiegazione:



## The Old Lyre of a Modern Poet

I cannot think of anything more vaguely defined in literature than lyric poetry. Archibald Macleish's dictum "A poem should never mean / But be" is perhaps a good attempt to define lyric poetry. The word 'lyric' comes from 'lyre': a musical instrument, a kind of harp with seven strings. The Greeks used it for singing and recitation. Most people associate the word 'lyric' with the words of a song in which one expressed personal feelings rather than description.

Most of the time, a lyric poem will be identified by its form (i.e.: short, structured, etc.). When they recited the Odyssey the Greeks used a lyre too, yet the Homeric long poem is considered an epic. On the other hand José-Maria de Heredia wrote sonnets that no one would dare to qualify with the label of lyric. The author of Les Trophées was in fact a Parnassian poet and like all the other followers of Leconte De Lisle he tried to be an objective observer of History. There is a man who wrote epic sonnets! More than length, structure and mode of recitation, a lyric poem seems to be defined as a work of art that remains faithful to musical qualities transposed to the world of speech. Let us attack the problem from another angle.

Eugène Delacroix wrote in his journal:

"A writer has to say almost everything in order to make himself understood, but in painting it is as if

some mysterious bridge were set up between the spirit of the persons in the picture and the beholder... Grosser minds are more easily moved by writers than by painters and musicians." (Journal, Oct. 8, 1822.)

Perhaps Delacroix didn't include the lyric poets among his 'writers' (he probably meant the novelists). Perhaps with his dictum Archibald Macleish was attacking 'the grosser minds' of certain critics. To seek meaning in a poem is as absurd as going to a concert with cotton in your ears and enjoying the gestures of the Maestro.

Music is a universe of its own because the tempo becomes the new life beat that replaces subjective and historical time. One can be moved by the music of Mozart without any exterior reference as Kierkegaard was. Now if 'all art must approach the condition of music' lyric poetry is better analysed without any exterior references; or at least if 'it must approach the condition of music', with the minimum number of exterior references.

As a modern one cannot help being concerned with the contemporary works of art. The only thing that one can do is to analyse a type of lyric poetry and in this field there is nothing better than an example. I will not try to derive rules or recipes from the study of my example; instead I will try to give you 'the formal discourse of an amateur' as R.P. Blackmur says.

The poem that I have chosen is 'Old Lyre' by Menke Katz. The lyric is taken from Burning Village (p. 17); Mr. Katz'



latest collection. Even though I am well familiarized with Menke Katz' life and work I will not speak of them in these notes. In fact the greater aesthetic pleasure is found in the poetry, anyone can learn about the man later and find other dimensions to his poetry.

Here is the poem:

### Old Lyre

Elchik plays the old lyre fit for king  
David,  
handmade by the genius of a forefather.  
The lyre has two open arms to embrace  
the long forgotten world of its creator;  
a spinebone which still has the tensile  
strength  
to bear life many fabulous ages;  
a brain made of the sensuous cells of  
rare plants as wise as music, ears of  
seashells  
reverberate the cry, longing and wonder  
of marine animals. Only the heart  
is invisible, hidden in every  
tone picture. When he plays, it seems  
the soul  
of his virtuoso forefather, petrified  
through  
the lyre is telling of his life after  
death.

In late June as a farewell to Spring,  
the wondrous lyre is hung on the roof-  
crest  
so that the strings (made of gentle  
guts) may learn  
the language taught by the wind, may  
allure  
the melodies locked in the cobbled  
alleys.

Elchik (Menke's older brother who died at seventeen, abandoned in an army barack in the distant land of Lithuania) plays the Old Lyre, an instrument which has been handed down from generation to generation. The lyre appears as a source of life "for ever young and for ever new". One of the pieces which comes to the reader's mind is Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. However, Katz' lyre is neither a "bride of quietness", nor a "foster-child of silence"; it is a "handmade" object with "open arms to embrace", with "a spinebone" and "a brain made of sensuous cells"; it has "gentle guts" and "reverberates in the ears of seashells". 'The Old Lyre' is a body so full of life that it makes the poet exclaim:

"...Only the heart  
is invisible, hidden in every  
tone picture."

There is at least an archetypal unity of awareness among sensitive souls. When The Little Prince returned to his tiny planet he did it with a secret locked in his heart:

"It is only with the heart that one  
can see / rightly, what is essential  
is invisible to the eye."

We know that the harp is a body with an invisible heart. Nevertheless, this body is not Yeats' "dying animal" that we find in 'Sailing to Byzantium'. As a matter of fact the body of the old lyre can "embrace the long forgotten world of its creator", it has a spinebone able "to bear life many fabulous ages". Yes, this musical instrument has an endless power of regeneration.

From the angle that we analysed the poem, it seems to us that the poet called only for our sensual imagination. If a good poem is a universe of its own it must have spirit; it must have things that are mysteries to inanimate matter; in short it must have an invisible heart.

The old lyre was made by a "genius" who was also "a virtuoso", it has cells "as wise as music" and a heart "hidden in every tone picture" in order to learn "the language taught by the winds" and "the melodies locked in the cobbled alleys". Finally we realize that the invisible heart is heard, it has a beat which is nothing less than music.

Therefore, it is music (art) only that links "king David", "the genius of a forefather", "his telling of life after death" and "Elchik".

If we ended the exploration of the poem here we would be unsatisfied with its didactic. However, the style is so beautiful that we would be tempted to say with Buffon:

"Le style c'est l'homme."

Does the poet make any attempt to define this music? Do we imagine someone sitting at the piano playing a few measures, stopping, writing notes down and shaking his long hair in a sign of impatience and frustration? Do we imagine a composer at work? No, our music here comes from a very different conservatoire: it is "the language taught by the wind" and its melodies are "locked in the cobbled alleys". The rhythm of the invisible heart is at once the beat of life and art. The lyre

as the true poet and the real man is obedient to natural laws:

"In late June as a farewell to Spring  
the wondrous lyre is hung on the  
roofcrest..."

The Old Lyre becomes an object-myth, an archetype for music and life which since the dawn of man were always docile to the heart's measure.

By describing a simple scene which he probably witnessed in his childhood Menke Katz creates a universe of language and music, where the words are planets that take on new colours, shapes and routes after every reading, where the spiritual, the sensual and the beat are a trinity expressed by a god of memory who turns into an endless present and where the poet and the reader share the same wonderland.

'The Old Lyre' is a lyric poem, it will neither help other poets to write other lyric poems nor critics to identify and clarify them; but if 'criticism is the formal discourse of an amateur' and if an amateur is someone who loves and tries to know better, then lyric poetry can be defined as the object of cult for the aficionado and not the superficial toy of the dilettante.

Also by

Alexandre Amprimoz

Initiation à Menke Katz

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