As dismissal and disdain of Jews speak through the art of some leading twentieth-century poets, so the poetry of Rodger Kamenetz artfully answers, framing in subtle terms the questions that haunt our culture—about the voices through which culture speaks, about the identity of poet and poetry, about the capacity of art to harm and to heal. Whether subjecting the anti-Semitic verses of T. S. Eliot to a literary trial; conjuring the eloquence with which Allen Ginsberg forgives Ezra Pound on behalf of the Jews; or drawing upon personal history, the Torah, and Jewish mysticism to explore the tangled relations of Jewish identity and modern literature, Kamenetz’s poems attest to the inexorable power of language.

My Personal Review:
The Jerusalem Post September 19, 2003, Friday

The Jew in the poet
BYLINE: P. David Hornik

The Lowercase Jew by Rodger Kamenetz. Triquarterly Books. 96 pp. $12.95
In this book Rodger Kamenetz, the American Jewish poet best known for The Jew in the Lotus—an account of Jewish-Buddhist dialogue—draws on his wide range of Jewish knowledge and feelings to produce a set of poems that are always interesting, of varied quality, and sometimes stunningly powerful. The book is divided into four sections, of which the first two, "Grandfather Clause" and "Torah," are the most compelling. The poems in "Grandfather Clause" are about the legacy of anti-Semitism, a sensitive but also much-trodden subject that Kamenetz handles with tact and originality. The deeply serious My Holocaust, a five-page-long meditation about having a vicarious, hence inherently problematic relation to the catastrophe, is strikingly honest and convincing. In a lighter vein is The Lowercase Jew, in which T. S. Eliot stands trial for the nasty anti-Semitism that mars his verse. Eliot’s main accuser is his own anti-Semitic creation Bleistein, whom Kamenetz colorfully and comically projects as a gruff, earthy Chicagian Jew who assures Eliot that it's punishment for you, but also me. I have to read these farkakta lines you wrote about the Jews. Later Bleistein grouses: London and Jerusalem; you called them unreal cities. Maybe what made those cities unreal was you never saw the people in them. The lines maintain the standup-comic tone while making a serious point about the coldness of this patrician poet. Nothing in The Lowercase Jew is meant to detract from Eliot’s greatness, but Bleistein’s indignant ramblings cleverly capture his shortcomings. The second section, "Torah," offers poems that are intensive, midrashic interactions with biblical texts. Adam, Earthling and
Adam, Golem are abstruse, straining too hard to make connections between a disjunct modern consciousness and the archetypal First Man. Genesis 1: 1 well evokes, in 16 lines, the impenetrable mystery of that verse; The Broken Tablets poignantly imagines the fate of Moses' first pair of tablets, their shards carried in the Ark all the way to the Promised Land. But the highlights of the section are Noah's Grapes, a bitterly powerful statement on aging and sexual decline; and the extraordinary Naming the Angel, which memorably interprets Jacob's night-long wrestle with the angel in terms of solitude and alienation. After his protracted, frustrating encounter with the mysterious being, Jacob wonders in anguish: Maybe nothing moves down the ladder but what we ask for, if in greed, then greed, if in anger, then horned angergores our nights. Nothing walks down the ladder but what we dream on the hard rock. These lines well exemplify Kamenetz's genius for rendering voices and mental states, his psychological insight and constant search for meaning. Kamenetz is also a laudably courageous poet, not shrinking from themes like the Holocaust and quintessential biblical texts, and the poem Proverbs (also in the "Torah" section) is actually a set of 34 original proverbs, none of them longer than one line, that are endlessly rich and provocative. My own favorites are "Hope burns the hopeless" and "It was dark, so he closed his eyes," but this is a prismatic group of maxims that send up different parts of myself every time I stare at them. The third section, "In the House of Mourning," starts with two poems about a lost love, 13 and Sparrow Land, that are not quite realized, seeming to shy away from the painful subject matter without quite conveying the point. The central issue of this section is Uncle Louis, or Why My Father Moved from Baltimore to Florida, a three-pages-long confrontation with personal pain that at its best achieves heights of vivid language and intensity, but at its worst is the only instance in the book where Kamenetz draws links with religious themes in a way that is just heavy-handed and harmful to the poem's authenticity. In the last section, "Blessings After the Meal," Kamenetz shows a different kind of courage, narrowing his focus to the culinary while still aiming at big meanings. It works best in Rye, which manages to locate virtues of equanimity and endurance in the taste, texture, and contents of a slice of Jewish rye: for there is wisdom in a crust that holds the whole within its ellipse, that restrains the moister whiteness like the mud shore of a lake in the sun. But in Turtle Soup at Mandina's the analysis of the physical qualities of that dish is so thoroughgoing that the poem leaves little but a physical impression; while You Don't Have to Be Jewish doesn't transcend a self-conscious ethnic levity with its references to corned beef sandwiches and caraway seeds. The last, again longer and more ambitious poem in the section, Psalm 1, a sort of celebration of life from the standpoint of a corner diner, sounds merely facile and grandiose in its repeated affirmations. Usually not an especially eloquent or musical poet (though Noah's Grapes, Naming the Angel, and passages of Uncle Louis are exceptions), at his best Kamenetz is a master at infusing seemingly plain words with resonance and depth, with subtle textures and playful ironies, and he is wonderfully open to a whole gamut of human emotions, from the sublime to the soiled and abject. Versed in Jewish texts and alive to
Jewish issues, Kamenetz's message is one of quiet affirmation of his identity, of appreciation for Jewish perseverance. On the whole this is a very worthwhile book of verse - thoughtful, fresh, and engaging.

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