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ON A.M. KLEIN (Review Essay)

Pollock, Zailig. *A. M. Klein: The Story of the Poet*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1994, xii+324pp. and Klein, A.M. *Notebooks: Selections from the A. M. Klein Papers*. Edited by Zailig Pollock and Usher Caplan. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1994, xxix+260pp.

A great virtue of Pollock's *A. M. Klein: The Story of the Poet* is that it does not indulge in careless praise. It is a book worked out in extraordinary detail to demonstrate a particular pattern in Klein's writing, and it is quick to point out the difficulties in which that pattern involves the poet. I will try to repeat this pattern as Pollock traces it. The unrolling of the (Torah) scroll leads towards truth, but never reaches it. Similarly, every dialectical process falls short of synthesis. The moment of suspense that follows this realization, the realization that completeness cannot be achieved, reveals an inherent flaw in the interpretive commentary in which the artist, the Talmudist, and the philosopher are engaged. This pause, or rather the gap at the brink of consummation (for instance, the moment at which the artist expects to achieve symbiosis with his community), may in theory be leaped, but it can certainly never be bridged. The assumption that effort alone will lead one to the goal turns out to have been a mistake. In this light, the entire labour of Klein's difficult life is seen as if caught in a Kafkaesque aporia, in a

straining towards what in principle cannot be achieved. Where the pattern that Pollock finds in Klein differs from Kafka's is in its final phase; the effort to unroll the scroll is not maintained in the face of all discouragement, but is simply abandoned; the futile striving to reach the goal is given up; in fact, what ensues is an impulse to roll the scroll backwards, even to undo the consequences of the creative life, in fact, to negate the entire creative process.

Despite its scholarly density, then, Pollock's account of the growth—and decline—of a poet's mind is to be read almost like a detective story. If one pays enough attention to the details, if one watches the permutations of “scroll,” “dialectic,” “oneness,” and other such key words with unwavering attention, one will finally see how the pattern dominates and accounts for everything of importance that Klein wrote. It is an approach that, perhaps consciously, mimics the notorious paranoia of its subject, but it is also reasonably convincing and very satisfying, though it demands a degree of commitment to Pollock's argument that soon becomes exhausting.

There is great value in this discriminating approach of Pollock's to the interpretation of Klein. First, it makes Pollock hesitant to approve unconditionally of anything that Klein wrote, and so rescues Klein from the uncritical praise that can mask an author's idiosyncratic values. Second, it forces us to ask why an author who is suspended in a self-created limbo of imperfection can remain so compelling. The answer is clear: to attempt the impossible represents a noble effort. That is why Klein, much of whose writing is unreadable, moves us far more than most of the Canadian poets of his generation. We can feel in even his most awkward gestures, in his declamatory rhetoric, an unbroken seriousness of purpose.

Pollock holds Klein to his own impossibly high standards, rejecting even his most satisfying poems (such as the three “Mount Royal” poems) as tainted with escapism (pp. 192-194). They achieve their lyric perfection by avoiding certain harsh political realities. Not for a moment will Pollock hide behind

such obvious assets of Klein's style as his enormous multilingual vocabulary. Neither does he pretend that Klein's pioneering appreciation of Joyce and Hopkins exempts him from the ultimate demands of his own enterprise; nor does he find excuses for Klein's weaknesses in the terrible, draining and humiliating conditions under which he worked—conditions that, allowing for the differences, actually recall those under which Hopkins laboured.

There will, no doubt, eventually be a biography that will provide more than scattered glimpses of this tormented existence. Klein attended the same primary and secondary schools as well as the same college as I did (somewhat later), and he was a close friend of my mother's.¹ I knew his daughter, who died very young, when she was a student at McGill, but I have only two strong impressions of meeting with Klein himself. The first time was on the Park Avenue streetcar, returning from downtown. He was seated, and I remember his slightly smiling, dark, swarthy face. We exchanged small talk, while I kept wondering how someone who was thought to be subject to mental illness could continue practicing law.

In layers of mountains the history of mankind,
and in Mount Royal
which daily in a streetcar I surround
my youth, my childhood—
the pissabed dandelion, the coolie acorn,—

are still to be found.

("The Mountain," lines 7-11, 14)

The second memory I have is of visiting Klein, who was now clearly understood to be ill, with my mother at his apartment. His wife was present. After some general conversation and some of a literary nature, Klein began to tell me about the schemes and machinations of the people upstairs, and how (with a knowing smile) he would foil them. Klein's "Psalm xxii: A Prayer of Abraham, against Madness" is a poor poem, and it gives one little sense of what his own later experience

may have been like; but it reflects what must have been a constant preoccupation.

Pollock identifies “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” as Klein’s most important poem, or, at least, as the one that defines Klein’s role as poet most clearly. Pollock contrasts it (p. 159 ff.) with the earlier “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens,” in which Spinoza’s, the poet’s model’s, confident assertion of God’s unity and perfection is unequivocal.

Think of Spinoza, rather, plucking tulips
 Within the garden of Mynheer, forgetting
 Dutchmen and Rabbins, and consumptive fretting,
 Picking his tulips in the Holland sun,
 Remembering the thought of the Adored,
 Spinoza, gathering flowers for the One,
 The ever-unwedded lover of the Lord.

(Last stanza)

The tone of the “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” is more ambiguous, or what Pollock would call more “dialectical.” From the point of view of his community, the poet is now, at best, “a Mr. Smith in a hotel register.” (line 27). But he himself remembers the beginning of his love affair with language,

his travels over that body—
 the torso verb, the beautiful face of the noun

(lines 41-42)

and thinks perhaps he may still be brought into his own—“the unsuspecting heir, with papers;” (line 56), but it doesn’t happen, and whatever his fears and his illusions,

it is stark infelicity
 which stirs him from his sleep, undressed, asleep
 to walk upon roofs and window-sills

(lines 130-132)

Still, he will carry out his role: to praise and so to recreate the world, like another Christopher Smart or Rilke:

Until it has been praised, that part
 has not been. (lines 142-143)

He climbs up on another planet to look down on this new earth of his, himself:

and this,
this, he would like to write down in a book!
(lines 151-152)

Like Wordsworth, a perpetual debtor, he is desperate to
O, somehow pay back the daily larcenies of the
lung!
(line 158)

With much justification, he states
These are not mean ambitions. It is already something
merely to entertain them. Meanwhile, he
makes of his status zero a rich garland
(lines 159-161)

Most of the passages I will be quoting from Klein are familiar from anthologies of Canadian poetry, but it will do no harm for us to be reminded how good they are. Turning from his higher themes, Klein can also, as we know, write poems about refrigerators—

A bevy of milk, coifed like the sisters of snow;
(“Frigidaire,” line 10)

or, for that matter, about grain elevators, where lie
the scruples of the sun
garnered for darkness;
.....
the grain picked up, like tic-tacs out of time:
first one; an other;
(“Grain Elevator,” lines 11-12, 18-19)

But I find myself returning most consistently to the “Mount Royal” poems, of which there are three. Escapist or subtly evasive they may be; but (pace Pollock) perhaps that does not disqualify them as poetry.

Remembering boyhood, it is always here
the boy in blouse and kneepants on the road
trailing his stick over the hopscotched sun;

or here, upon the suddenly moving hill;
or at the turned tap its cold white mandarin mus-
taches;

("Lookout: Mount Royal," lines 1-5)

On a winter night a sleigh passes, and

One would say the hidden stars were bells
dangling between the shafts of the zodiac.

One would say

the snowflakes falling clinked together their
sparkles

to make these soft, these satin-muffled
tintinnabulations.

("Winter Night: Mount Royal," lines 26-31).

In summer there are, on this mountain, buttercups that

like once on the under of my chin
upon my heart still throw their rounds of yellow.

.....

One of these days I shall go up to the second ter-
race

to see if it is still there—

the uncomfortable sentimental bench

where—as we listened to the brass of the band
concerts

made soft and to our mood by dark and distance

I told the girl I loved

I loved her.

("The Mountain," lines 16-17, 37-43)

Yet, elsewhere, Klein can reject memory, and declare that "No thing is what I vividly recall—" ("Of Remembrance," line 24); and he is capable of harsh, immediate, and practical poetry, without a trace of nostalgia. In fact, some of his best passages are to be found in the workmanlike poems about Quebec politics, notably "Political Meeting: (For Camilien Houde)." (For a commentary on this poem see Pollock, pp. 185-189). The demagogue rallies his xenophobic crowd, until

(Outside, in the dark, the street is body-tall,

flowered with faces intent on the scarecrow thing
that shouts) (lines 15-17)

Political correctness goes, and poetry tells it like it is:

The whole street wears one face,
shadowed and grim; and in the darkness rises
the body-odour of race. (lines 38-40)

It may be fairly said that Klein's major preoccupation is with community; and, as Pollock points out, Klein's attack on Houde does not preclude a strong identification with the communitarian values and experience of French Canadians. The "body odour of race" is a reality; it is the flavour through which the solidarity of a group is experienced. In this case it may be, in fact it is, directly threatening to another group, the one that Klein represents; but it is the basic means of identification: the smell of those we belong with, that keeps others at arm's length. Translated into gentler language, it is also

the unity
in the family feature, the not unsimilar face
(“The Provinces,” lines 50-51)

But once more, as in the case of the Mount Royal poems, this milder language expresses a sentiment that Pollock rejects as “facile . . . bland and unconvincing” (p. 176).

The above snippets of Klein's poetry are intended to remind us that Pollock's book is worth reading for the quality of its subject as well as for the complexity of its presentation. The book is in the strictest sense a spiritual and artistic life; it draws on its author's vast knowledge of Klein's biography exclusively for the purpose of illuminating specific passages or ideas in Klein's evolution as a writer and thinker. The *Notebooks*, edited by Pollock together with Usher Caplan, provide much of the raw material from which the *Story of the Poet* was put together, and the texts which it reproduces serve to illustrate many of the ideas in Pollock's study. Among the materials transcribed are

autobiographical vignettes, such as the priceless account of Klein's interview with F. Cyril James, Principal of McGill University, before Klein obtained his appointment to a lectureship there (pp. 95-98), and various literary meditations, among them the commentary on Gerard Manley Hopkins (pp. 125-128). Of James, Klein says, "I detected . . . a sort of subtle intention that while he would feign the granting of my request, he really had plans of his own." (p. 95). "At times he looked, or made me feel that he looked, . . . like an older brother—one who has travelled, knows the ways of the world, but still appreciates the unprofitable persistencies of his younger brother . . ." (p. 98). In relation to Hopkins, Klein says, succinctly, "The Rorschach is the tmesis of the visual."

The longer selections from the notebooks, consisting mainly of beginnings and outlines for works of fiction, include parts of the "Raw Material File," which in turn contains three attempts at a novel to be entitled *The Inverted Tree* (i.e., the tree of the lungs; pp. 21-50); another novel, untitled, on a detective theme (pp. 129-141); and *The Golem* (pp. 142-181). The most interesting of these, as far as one can tell from work which is still in outline form, appears to be *The Golem*. This is the story that Pollock (pp. 262-269) interprets as the unmembering, or dismembering, of the "poet's progress" myth: creation read backwards: something like Alexander Pope's "uncreating word" (*The Dunciad*). Rabbi Löw, who once created a Golem to defend the Jewish community, is consumed with doubt, as his own death approaches, about his justification for having taken the act of creation into his own hands. He commands his scribe, Sinai ben Issachar, to record the events surrounding that occasion, as though the act of recording what had happened would in itself serve to clarify the purpose and the meaning of those events. Sinai tries to beg off, but he is commanded to proceed by the dying rabbi. The first two chapters describe, respectively, the death of Löw and the early life of Sinai as a merchant's son and scribe in Venice; the remainder of the novel is adum-

brated in numerous jottings, some of which are reproduced in the *Notebooks* (pp. 162-181). The Pollock/Caplan reading of this projected novel emphasizes, first, the doubts of Rabbi Löw about the value and the validity of the creative act; second, the inability of Sinai to unfold the scroll, to write on, i. e. to make sense of the creative act by continuing it; third, the blasphemous description (albeit by a presumed heretic) of the world's creation as *The Perfect Crime*; and, finally, the reference to the Golem's destruction as the "Book of Creation read backwards." (p. 181)

As the evidence is built up and interpreted by Pollock and Caplan, a strong case is made for the Golem's representing a repudiation by Klein of the act of scrolling, of the creative act. A less well-informed reader does not necessarily take away the same impression from these incomplete materials. For instance, the argument (p. 167) that the world must become completely evil before the Messiah will come is not to be read as an expression of personal pessimism or even personal heresy; it is standard Millenarian doctrine, found in many Messianic cults from the Middle Ages on, even as recently as during the Frankist movement of the eighteenth century. Although a non-specialized reader will certainly find numerous expressions of doubt and intimations of despair in the *Golem* text, he or she will not inevitably find them adding up to a total rejection of the creative life or a repudiation of meaning. As Rabbi Löw says to the protesting Sinai, "worse sceptics than you we should not have...." (p. 148).

Whatever our conclusions about Klein's final phase, we must surely conclude that his editors have done him justice: they have done a splendid job of presenting these selections from the voluminous legacy of his papers. Furthermore, on the assumption which they make, namely, that a clearly defined direction can be perceived in Klein's evolution as a writer and thinker, their inclusion of many apparently minor bits of evidence is entirely warranted. It is a tribute to their

devotion and evidence of their success that, the longer the time one spends with their work, the better justified and the more worthwhile it seems.

ENDNOTE

¹Concerning my mother, Ida Maza, see my *Identity and Community: Reflections on English, Yiddish, and French Literature in Canada* (Detroit, 1994).