

# HISTORY AND THE POETIC CONSTRUCT

## *The Modernism of A. M. Klein*

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**P**ORTRAIT OF THE POET AS LANDSCAPE” presents A. M. Klein’s fullest poetic rendering of the story of the archetypical modernist. The elegiac treatment of the artist, hopelessly alienated from his society, invokes comparisons with *The Wasteland*, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” and Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is clear that Klein himself envisioned the poem in such archetypically modern terms, “Portrait” supplying his version of the modern story of “the poet [who] is so anonymously sunk into his environment that, in terms of painting, his portrait is merely landscape.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet while the poem has obvious and substantial significance as a modern testament, in a curious way it represents not modernism at the height of triumphant defiance, but rather modernism tottering on the brink. For the typically modern positions Klein assumes throughout “Portrait” are eroded, subtly but persistently, by an increasingly disintegrated sense of experience, one that seems to move the poem out of the realm of modernism toward the increasingly unsettled borders of the post-modern. My aim here is to understand something of the forces impeding Klein’s attempt to maintain a modern position — in effect, to understand why it is so difficult for him to be modern even at the height of his modernity. But in order to understand this powerful dynamic as it informs Klein’s poetry, it may be helpful first to understand something of the struggle of modern poetry at large to sustain itself in the face of its most powerful opponent, the unfolding of modern history. And in seeking to establish such a context, I propose to focus on the attitudes of the poet who not only most fully embodies the modern attempt to construct a poetic response to history, but who, as we will see, so strikingly influenced Klein, namely, Ezra Pound.

**E**ZRA POUND PERCEIVED the problem of modernity to be essentially a corruption of value. "The disease of the past century and a half," he wrote, "is abstraction,"<sup>3</sup> by which he seemed to mean an increasing tendency toward the "dilution of knowledge,"<sup>4</sup> through either a proliferation of untrue or useless information or an increasing social obliviousness to "true" value as expressed by certain great works of art. Pound argued that while in past centuries and civilizations "good art was a blessing and . . . bad art was criminal and [society] spent some time and thought in trying to find means whereby to distinguish the true art from the sham," in modern society, "we are asked if the arts are moral. We are asked to define the relation of the arts to economics, we are asked what position the arts are to hold in the ideal republic. And it is obviously the opinion of many people . . . that the arts had better not exist at all."<sup>5</sup> Simply restated, modern society had lost sight of truth and value as they had existed in the past and, as a consequence, was wallowing in mediocrity. Thus Pound's self-appointed mission was to restore a sense of value to society, a mission he hoped to fulfil by reviving the true spirit of the past, thereby ensuring the future by re-establishing some sort of positive historical continuity.

Many of Pound's poetic strategies are clearly related to this desire to cut through what he perceived to be the superficiality of modernity in order to get at life's underlying and enduring values. Consider, for example, Pound's definition of Imagism:

An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time . . . [and] it is the presentation of such a 'complex' *instantaneously* which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis mine)

The central impulse here is clearly one toward the "dissolution of logical or grammatical relations,"<sup>7</sup> which, like the technocratic and circuitous routes favoured by modern society, obscure the self-evident truths revealed in the instantaneous presentation of the image. Pound's attraction to the ideogram, and to vorticism, is similarly centred on an impulse to cut through the surface in order to get at the heart of the matter. Like the image, the ideogram presents a complex of emotional and intellectual content all in a single instant so that what is conveyed is not primarily literal meaning, but rather a more fundamental sense of the relationships between the elements comprising the complex. Vorticism, in seeking to cut through the boundaries between art forms and to locate the artist in the still point of an obsessively moving world, again moves beyond literal meaning to the more fundamental messages trapped beneath the surface: first, that there *are* such still points or vantage points of truth to be had, and, second, that in the cultural continuity existing across art forms we may catch a glimpse of the true continuity of history. But it is

through his most enduring strategy, the juxtaposition of diverse historical and cultural allusions, that the beliefs underlying Pound's poetic method are most apparent.

Expanding on the Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa's argument that the "Chinese written character juxtaposes images that fuse in the reader's mind, Pound argues by analogy that juxtaposing histories should shock the reader into recognition of the moral that unites them."<sup>8</sup> So the paradox at the heart of Pound's strategy for combating the ills of modernity is revealed: in order to save history one must effectively deny it. As William Harmon has argued, if Pound's aesthetic and consequently his social mission is dominated by any single element it is precisely this sense of the "unreality of historical time."<sup>9</sup> Just as Pound argued that through imagism one could escape the aesthetic limitations of linear presentation, so he argued about history that "all ages are contemporaneous,"<sup>10</sup> freeing the poet to move at will through space and time. Viewed from one perspective such a notion of history implies nothing more threatening than the familiar and often nobly entertained modern notion that poetry and perhaps poets were what was required to prevent society from being overtaken by a corrupt perception of value. But under more careful scrutiny, these ideas appear to be considerably more problematic.

For example, Pound's notion of history raises a number of epistemological problems, such as the disavowal of any distinction between history as a series of past events and history as it is recounted by the historian. Ordinarily, one might expect that the subjective processes involved in rendering a version of the past would, by definition, introduce some sense of self-consciousness or doubt about the validity of the enterprise. For Pound, however, precisely the opposite is true: neither the subjective vision of the poet-historian, nor the potentially fictive vehicle of language (especially highly metaphoric language), contributes to uncertainty about the claims being advanced. Rather, the arts provide us with "lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man" in a classically scientific way."<sup>11</sup> Thus, while the debate may continue with regard to specific elements of Pound's theory of poetry, it is clear that he had tremendous confidence in the ability of poetry to respond to and indeed to transcend the unfolding of history.

While it may seem contentious to invoke Pound as a model for Klein, the two are, in fact, significantly connected. Despite Klein's unequivocal animosity toward Pound, it is clear that in many ways Klein was deeply influenced by him. Klein had more books by Pound in his library than by any other modern poet. As a lecturer in modern poetry at McGill University in the mid-1940s Klein had his students write parodies of Pound cantos, while he himself produced a brilliant example of such a parody in the form of a review of *The Cantos* in 1948. But most importantly, both Klein and Pound shaped their careers as a response to a shared set of historical circumstances so that while their politics were obviously violently opposed, Klein's

ideal of the poet-statesman bears an undeniable resemblance to Pound's definition of the social role of the poet.

Yet despite these compelling connections between Pound and Klein, ultimately nothing could be more different than their attitudes toward history and, consequently, toward modernity. As a poet who allows no substantial challenge to his modern sensibility, Pound is at liberty to suppose the problem of modernity to be a loss of value, to approach it as primarily aesthetic, and, indeed, to depend on the existence of art as an autonomous realm. For Klein the problem of modernity is not the loss of value but the problem of value assailed. As an unassimilated Jew, strongly attached to a multitude of living Jewish cultural and intellectual traditions, Klein's mission is not to reinstate the values of the past but to defend their continued existence in the present against the advances of dominant and hostile cultures. Jewish historical experience, epitomized through the first half of the twentieth century, never allows the poet to stray very far into an abstract sense of history. Thus while Pound may have felt free to construct a poetic theory based on the deniability of history, effectively recasting history in poetry's image, Klein cannot escape history's manifest undeniability. No matter how great his desire to believe in the effectiveness of art as an autonomous realm, Klein's poems simply cannot resist the historical onslaught. Invariably, history comes crashing through.

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING WAYS of approaching Klein's modernity in its relation to history is by considering his use of traditional poetic forms. Two forms in particular, the sonnet and terza rima, seem especially significant in this regard. Both are forms to which Klein returned repeatedly from the earliest to the latest stages of his career, and both are linked to weighty traditions and are often used by Klein to lend a sense of ritual and order to the poetic moment. Moreover, as structures formally implying their own closure, the sonnet and terza rima seem by their very nature to validate the notion of poetic autonomy.

At first glance, Klein's use of traditional forms recalls the modern strategies epitomized by Pound. Like Pound, Klein appears to be summoning tradition as an ally against the ills of modernity. But on closer examination it becomes clear that whether he is attempting to defy history through poetry, or to poetically represent the onslaught of history, Klein invariably chronicles the assault on the notion of poetic autonomy. Thus, far from offering us a Poundian affirmation, Klein's poems tend consistently to re-enact the failure of tradition.

"Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" provides an excellent example of Klein's efforts to fashion a poetic response to history. The poem recounts the excommunication of the philosopher Spinoza by the Jews of Amsterdam on charges of heresy. But viewed more broadly, it plays out an early version of the story of the

archetypal poet so central to Klein's entire career. Spinoza bears a striking resemblance to Joseph in "The Bible's Archetypal Poet," the poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," the wandering Melech Davidson, and the Jews, who as a people figured for Klein as a key example of the outcast poets in history. A truly creative individual, he is cast out by a society threatened by the unconventionality of his philosophy and while in exile realizes the secret of his own redemption. The poem ends with the image of Spinoza:

plucking tulips  
 Within the garden of Mynheer, forgetting  
 Dutchmen and Rabbins, and consumptive fretting,  
 Plucking 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.

Invoking tradition in some of its most resonant incarnations — Renaissance humanism, Dutch painting, Christian chastity, the return to Eden — Klein redeems his hero in an irresistible flood of associations.

Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is the degree to which Klein relies on formal symbolism to reinforce the redemptive sense of tradition lying at the heart of the poem. "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is symmetrically constructed, consisting of nine sections, with four sections leading up to the climactic central point and four moving away from it toward the poem's resolution. The climactic section, section v, is significantly set as prose:

Reducing providence to theorems, the horrible atheist compiled such lore that proved, like proving two and two make four, that in the crown of God we all are gems. From glass and dust of glass he brought to light out of the pulver and the polished lens, the prism and the flying mote; and hence the infinitesimal and infinite.

Is it a marvel, then, that he forsook the abracadabra of the synagogue, and holding with timelessness a duologue, deciphered a new scripture in the book? Is it a marvel that he left old fraud for passion intellectual of God?

At first glance, the section appears to function largely as a narrative centrepiece conveying an encapsulated version of both the previous four sections and of the material about to follow. In fact, as several critics have noticed, the passage has formal significance beyond its structural importance as the centre of the poem. Klein's account of Spinoza's discovery of the "infinitesimal and the infinite" "out of the pulver and the polished lens" is in fact not prose but prose concealing a sonnet. Thus, what Klein has produced is not merely a description of Spinoza's moment of discovery, but a self-reflexive formal construct which compels the reader literally to emulate the poetic moment; as Spinoza discovers his truth in revealing the lens hidden in the unshaped glass, so the reader discovers the sonnet. And the

message underlying both Spinoza's and the reader's moment of discovery is clear: beneath the prosaic chaos of exile lies the redemption of hidden reason and form.

In its strong affirmation of the power of poetry to effect social change, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is Klein's most Poundian poem. But having begun my discussion of Klein's formal strategies with this most persuasive and moving of his early works, I must now note that in terms of its affirmation of formal power, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is virtually unique in Klein's poetic oeuvre. As Zailig Pollock has argued, the poem, while at first a favourite of Klein's, was one he eventually came to dislike.<sup>12</sup> One of the two poems selected to represent Klein in the *New Provinces* anthology, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" was excluded from all future readings and publications, including a *Selected Poems* typescript which Klein assembled in 1955. Moreover, Klein appears to have attempted to retract "Pulver" by replacing it with a short lyric entitled: "Spinoza: On man, on the Rainbow," which first appeared as a revision to section seven of the poem. To follow Pollock's reasoning, the later poem is essentially a dialectical rewriting of the first and is ultimately favoured by the later Klein, whose thinking was increasingly dominated by an interest in the dialectic. Considering the social implications of Pollock's argument, one sees very clearly that what Klein was rejecting was a poem which, however beautifully, valorizes the alienation of the artist from his community. For it is not the community or even the relationship between the community and the creative individual Spinoza redeems, but art and the artistic self. It is difficult to imagine Klein dismissing the community so unsympathetically or taking such a callow view of tradition later in his career. As we will see, it is a stance which finds little support elsewhere in his work.

A later poem, "Sonnet Unrhymed," displays rather a different attitude toward the dynamic between poetry and history. Hidden in its lack of rhyme, as the sonnet in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is hidden in prose, "Sonnet Unrhymed" differs in that it is not simply disguised and awaiting discovery, but genuinely and deliberately formless. An unrhymed Petrarchan sonnet with fruitless copulation as its subject, the poem addresses the problem of form without consequence or the consequences of an undue emphasis on form. Coupling the notion of contraception with the use of the traditional form, the poem presents a striking inversion of the Poundian ideal. Rather than affirming the power of tradition to revivify the past, the poem rudely exposes the poet's self-serving activity, making him a contemptible object of study for the future generations whose existence he has prevented.

When, on the frustral summit of *extase*,  
 — the leaven of my loins to no life spent,  
 yet vision, as all senses, sharper, — I  
 peer the vague forward and flawed prism of Time,

many the bodies, my own birthmark bearing,  
 and many the faces, like my face, I see:  
 shadows of generation looking backward  
 and crying *Abba* in the muffled night.

They beg creation. From the far centuries  
 they move against the vacuum of their murder,  
 yes, and their eyes are full of such reproach  
 that although tired, I do wake, and watch  
 upon the entangled branches of the dark  
 my sons, my sons, my hanging Absaloms.

Condemned to the role of historical villain, the poet must endure the stress of the eternally unborn, the sonnet form standing here as damning evidence of the poet's wilful disengagement from history. Particularly resonant in this regard is the closing line of the octave where poetry and history collide in a single word. *Abba* is the Hebrew word for father, but it is also the rhyme scheme for the first quatrain of a Petrarchan sonnet — *abba*. Thus the muffled cry constitutes a dual lament, at once mourning the poet's betrayal of his social obligation to future generations and the emasculation of a poetic tradition as it is forced into an historical context that can no longer meaningfully support it.

**S**IMILAR TENSIONS ARE EVIDENT in Klein's use of *terza rima* in his poems; "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry" clearly displays this basic conflict. Like many of Klein's works, "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry" presents a series of related poems, which, from a variety of perspectives, examine a single subject, in this case, the persecution of Jews in a Medieval town. Framed by opening and closing material, the poem comprises ten sections, each of which offers a reflection on the experience of violent anti-Semitism. The effectiveness of intellectual or philosophical responses to history is thus centrally at issue in the poem as the unifying effect of *terza rima* is sharply played off against the speciousness or ineffectuality of the attempt to respond to chaos portrayed within each section.

Some of the poem's spokesmen seek viable responses to the violence of their situation. "Nahum-this-is-also-for-the-good" argues that

The wrath of God is just. His punishment  
 Is most desirable. The flesh of Jacob  
 Implores the scourge. For this was Israel meant.

Similarly, "Ezekiel the Simple opines":

If we will fast for forty days; if we  
 Will read the psalms thrice over; if we offer  
 To God some blossom-bursting litany,

And to the poor a portion of the coffer;  
 If we don sack-cloth, and let ashes rain  
 Upon our heads, despite the boor and scoffer,  
 Certes, these things will never be again.

In both cases, Klein's presentation of these solutions is clearly bitterly ironic. But in the latter instance, the naïveté of Ezekiel's belief is especially emphasized by Klein's use of the perfect formal ending of the verse. The single line, standing apart from the previous tercets, is meant to convey a sense of a final, grand affirmation. Clearly, however, the moment is not one of ideological triumph, but of terrible pathos, as the thrust of the poem as a whole simply demolishes this, as it does all of the poem's solutions.

Other sections of the poem convey the thoughts of those who have already been pushed beyond hope of a solution and who are effectively paralyzed by their sense of injustice. Daniel Shochet considers the unending displacement of the Jew:

The toad seeks out its mud; the mouse discovers  
 The nibbled hole; the sparrow owns its nest;  
 About the blind mole earthy shelter hovers.  
 The louse avers the head where it is guest;  
 Even the roach calls some dark fent his dwelling.  
 But Israel owns a sepulchre, at best.

"Isaiah Epicure," ostensibly mirroring the poem's dissatisfaction with attempts to philosophize away historical reality, is equally ineffective in his inability to move beyond the absolute material experience of physical suffering:

Seek reasons; rifle your theology;  
 Philosophize; expend your dialectic;  
 Decipher and translate God's diary;  
 Discover causes, primal and eclectic;  
 I cannot; all I know is this:  
 That pain doth render flesh most sore and hectic;

Most interesting, perhaps, is the treatment Klein reserves for those seeking literary solutions to historical problems. Solomon Talmudi, the scholar, seeks to win immortality through the explication of arcane religious texts. Claiming to have found the perfect textual unity, Talmudi posits the "simple sentence broken by no commas," which will render the teachings of scholars from Rashi to Aquinas obsolete. Ultimately, his inordinate belief in the power of exegesis is cruelly repaid when his manuscript, his "charm against mortality," is unceremoniously burned. An even crueller fate awaits the figure of Judith, who has based her expectations not simply on the presumed truthfulness of a text, but on a specifically literary model. In the section entitled "Judith makes comparisons," her faith in the chivalric tradition



collides violently with her real situation. While Judith expects the approaching knight to sing of “truth, chivalry, and honour,” she finds herself, instead, “wrestling” with a “cross-marked varlet,” who bears little resemblance to the knights of her literary experience. Here, Klein seems especially anxious to impress the reader with the dangers of Judith’s folly as the *terza rima*, otherwise regular throughout the poem, at this point begins to break down. The visual succession of tercets collapses into a single block, while the line “Judith had heard a troubadour” is ironically repeated, turning the rhyme scheme in on itself so that it regresses back to rather than progressing away from the original *aba*. The third tercet altogether abandons the prescribed pattern of rhyme:

Judith had heard a troubadour  
Singing beneath a castle-turret  
Of truth, chivalry, and honour,  
Of virtue, and of gallant merit, —  
Judith had heard a troubadour  
Lauding the parfait knightly spirit  
Singing beneath the ivied wall.  
The cross-marked varlet Judith wrestled  
Was not like these at all, at all . . .

Judith’s misfortune, brought on by her literary delusions, is so great that it seems to move beyond the poem’s predominant ironic strategy of interweaving perfect form with horrific content. Here, the bitterness is simply overwhelming, and the devastation of content precipitates the devastation of form. An even more striking example of the ineffectiveness of poetry as a response to history is provided by Klein’s use of *terza rima* in *The Hitleriad*.

Confronted with the contemporary horror of Hitler’s rise to power, Klein, in *The Hitleriad*, momentarily loses his sense of the limits of poetry in redressing the ills of modernity. Remarking to James Laughlin that he saw the poem as a summons to “the prophetic indignations of [his] ancestors,<sup>13</sup> Klein clearly sought to validate his position by association with the great literary traditions of the past. Thus relying heavily on the weight of traditional forms and unfortunately ignoring the lesson of “Design for Mediaeval Tapestry,” Klein here resorts to a recognizably Poundian strategy, but it is a strategy that he cannot effectively sustain. The extended use of such highly artificial forms ultimately trivializes the historical content and, in turn, reinforces our sense of the limits of literary satire. Rather than succumb to the formal persuasion of tradition and civilization, history simply shatters the formal strategies of the poem.

The glaring tension between the poem’s form and content is evident in section xxiv where Klein employs *terza rima* to describe Hitler’s self-declaration of godhood:

Nor did he merely wage his war on Man.  
 Against the Lord he raised his brazen brow,  
 Blasphemed His name, His works, condemned His plan,  
 Himself a god announced, and bade men bow  
 Down to his image, and its feet of clay! . . .

Here the ritual solemnity of the terza rima confronts the demagogic corruption of ritual perpetrated by Hitler in declaring himself a god. However, the terza rima, far from harnessing Hitler's evil, seems increasingly bombastic and ineffectual as stanza after stanza of evil is revealed:

The pagan, named for beasts, was born again.  
 The holy days were gone. The Sabbath creed  
 Unfit for slaves, superfluous to his reign,  
 Stood unobserved, the nine-month-littered breed  
 Traduced their parents to the Gestapo;  
 Adulterous, the stud-men spawned their seed.

In the final stanza Klein attempts to formally represent the collapse of civilization by allowing the metre to be overrun by the surge of the crowd as it roars its approval of the demagogue. In a perverse parody of the tripartite terza rima form, the final rhyme is reiterated three times, line after line, until at last it finds its resting place in an animal incarnation:

He raised aloft the blood-stained sword;  
 Upon the square the heathen horde  
 Roared.

But unlike the Judith episode in "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry," the gesture here is too calculated and facile. The overall effect is one of deluded self-satisfaction as the poem ultimately fails to address the material at hand in a serious way.

Yet despite its shortcomings, *The Hitleriad* ought not to be simply dismissed. Even with its strange mismatch of content and form, the poem foreshadows one of Klein's most masterful uses of a traditional form and, indeed, one of his greatest poetic achievements, "Political Meeting."

In "Political Meeting," a marked shift in Klein's sensibility becomes apparent, for while the familiar interplay between the poem and the event it describes is still evident, the strong binary oppositions characterizing earlier work are conspicuously absent. Good and evil, form and content, give way to complex and ambiguous social and poetic dynamics. For example, the dangerous idolatry, corrupt ritual, and mob rule of section xxrv of *The Hitleriad* all re-appear in "Political Meeting," but this time, insidiously, they do not bear the insignia of evil. Rather, the presence of evil suggestively pervades the poem, mingling invisibly with good. Like the priests, whose "equivocal absence is felt like a breeze that gives curtains the sounds of surplices," good and evil shimmer together, at once offering relief from the

stifling heat of the auditorium and exploiting the guilty vulnerability of the crowd overflowing into the street. Similarly, the orator, in sharp contrast to the figure of Hitler, exudes an unsettling ambiguity of intent. Rather than precipitate an obvious shower of evil, the ominous appearance of the orator — “The Orator has risen!” — unexpectedly shifts the mood of the poem to one of homey and comfortable intimacy. The orator is strangely familiar, yet at the same time he is clearly not one of Klein’s obvious demagogues. Not a self-appointed idol but a publicly acclaimed one, he is “Their idol,” “Worshipped and loved, their favourite visitor, / a country uncle with sunflower seeds in his pockets.”

Suggesting a compelling connection to the episode in *The Second Scroll* where the strangers from Ratno appear at the narrator’s home, the moment is one which gravitates toward a disturbing confluence of familiarity and evil. Like Houde, the European strangers overcome their unfamiliarity by producing sunflower seeds from their pockets, a gesture which, the narrator tells us has the power to evoke his entire childhood.<sup>14</sup> But as in “Political Meeting,” the understated intimacy of the moment is soon followed by evil, in this case, by news of the recent pogrom in Ratno. Unable to resist the childlike desire to accept sunflower seeds from an outstretched hand, one is faced with the realization that, at best, the offering is meant to serve as an amulet against evil and, at worst, as a lure toward it. In any event, until the evil itself has been revealed, one motivation is indistinguishable from the other.

THIS SIGNIFICANT MOVE AWAY from binary oppositions is equally evident in Klein’s use of terza rima in “Political Meeting.” In the poems we have previously examined, Klein’s formal strategy is clearly based on a strong sense of social order and disorder. Whether employing tradition and poetic regularity earnestly, as in “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens,” or ironically, as in *The Hitleriad*, Klein establishes a clear opposition between order and disorder evident in the formal order or disorder of the poetic structure. Formal poetic disruption, or an ironic use of form, is used to signify a more broadly significant set of social conditions. But in “Political Meeting” quite a different strategy is employed. Unlike earlier poems which tend to move from formal regularity to symbolic disruption, “Political Meeting” offers us no such unmistakable oppositions. While the poem maintains its regular succession of tercets until the climax of the poem, the rhyming pair of lines within each tercet is irregular.

One interesting consequence of this loosening of structure is a paradoxical reinforcement not of certainty but of uncertainty in the poem. Rather than simply reinforcing a sense of order, the traditional form here conveys a compelling sense of the ideological confusion experienced by the crowd assembled in the hall. Like

the priests, who are at once there and not there, and the orator, who is both hero and demagogue, the *terza rima*, in its tentative incarnation, at once validates and subverts the ritual being played out in the poem. Like the *alouette*, the traditional Québécois anthem of community, the *terza rima* is invoked in an appeal to tradition. But as the bird is “snared” and “plucked,” “throat, wings, and little limbs,” it becomes clear that nervous appeals to tradition here yield unexpected results. Despite the apparent “jocularity” of the hall and of the poet’s manipulation of form, startlingly, the people and the poet both find themselves in the midst not of rituals of unification but rather of dismemberment. Even more paradoxical, however, are the revelations which await the poet’s move toward formal regularity at the poem’s close.

Viewed from a social perspective, “Political Meeting” addresses a number of Klein’s deepest and most enduring concerns. Most obviously, it has as its subject, the ideological exploitation of the Québécois by corrupt political leaders during the 1940s and the consequent aggravation of alarming fascist sympathies. But even more broadly, the poem plays out the social paradigm which so consistently dominated Klein’s thinking. Basically, the poem represents the unification of a community experiencing great historical strain. Unfortunately, however, the version of the dynamic we see played out in “Political Meeting” is a dangerous parody of the communal unification Klein ideally envisioned. The orator, appealing to values dear to both the Québécois and to Klein, manipulates the assembly, engendering a false and dangerous unification:

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

Significantly, it is in building toward this conclusion that Klein chooses to redeem his lost rhyme scheme, conveying the parodic transformation of a community into a hostile mob in perfect *terza rima*. What then are we to understand by this unequivocal and violent inversion of the modern idealization of old poetic forms?

Clearly, it is in “Political Meeting” that poetry and history at last come face to face; in the orator the poet has met his match. Like the poet, the orator is full of “wonderful moods, tricks, imitative talk.” And, indeed, at this point one can hardly avoid wondering who is imitating whom. Using the very strategy that was meant to constitute a prescription against the ills of modernity — the appeal to tradition — the orator has transformed the poet’s remedy into poison. Klein’s chronic discomfort with the claims of modernism suddenly becomes acute. In “Political Meeting” it becomes an undeniable fact that poetry and history do not exist in isolation from one another and that positing art as an autonomous realm may delay but will not indefinitely postpone a confrontation with history. Moreover, the poem insists that we recognize the impossibility of constituting an effective

poetic response to history, for if it teaches us anything it is that despite the alluring claims of Poundian modernism, history and the poetic construct are ultimately inseparable.

One final poem, "Sestina on the Dialectic," moves us even beyond the striking revelations of "Political Meeting" to Klein's most radical transformation of a poetic tradition. As Klein was well aware, the sestina is "one of the oldest forms of verse."<sup>15</sup> Consisting of six stanzas of six lines apiece and a concluding three-line envoy or *tornada*, the sestina derives its structure not from rhyme but from a manipulation of the end words of each of the six lines comprising the opening stanza. The form was invented by the medieval poet Arnault Daniel, but more importantly, as Klein himself noted, one of the few poets to attempt the form in English before him was Ezra Pound.

For a number of reasons, it is clear that in alluding to Pound, the sestina Klein had in mind was Pound's highly reputed "bloody sestina," properly titled "Sestina: Altaforte." Noting with regard to the form of the sestina that "the second stanza is a folding of the first, and the third . . . a folding of the second . . .," Klein directly echoes Pound's own description of the sestina as "a form like a thin sheet of flame folding and infolding upon itself."<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Klein's remark that Dante had Arnault Daniel [*sic*] "justly placed in Hell" is clearly a confused reference to the Epigraph of Pound's poem: "Dante Alighieri puts this man in hell for that he was a stirrer-up of strife," which in fact refers not to Arnault but to Bertran de Born upon whose poem Pound's sestina is based.

Pound's rendering of Bertran's poem, like the original, is a glorification of war:

The man who fears war and squats opposing  
 My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson  
 But is fit only to rot in womanish peace  
 Far from where worth's won and the swords clash  
 For the death of such sluts I go rejoicing;  
 Yea, I fill all the air with my music.

And though Pound tentatively admitted that the "shrill neighs of destriers in battle . . ." were "more impressive before 1914 than . . . since 1920,"<sup>17</sup> like Bertran, he perceived a sense of social order in the field of battle. It is out of conflict, Pound argued, that civilization will arise:

Better one hour's stour than a year's peace  
 With fat boards, bawds, wine and frail music!  
 Bah! there's no wine like the blood's crimson!

"May God damn for ever all who cry 'Peace'!" As Peter Brooker has noted, in writing the sestina Pound, characteristically, "revivifies Bertran through his contemporary Arnault."<sup>18</sup> But what precisely does Bertran represent for Pound, and what perceptions and values attend his revivification?

For Pound, Bertran's importance exceeds his contribution as a poet. Bertran appears as an archetypal hero, a man "who sang of his Lady Battle, as St. Francis [sang] of Poverty . . ." <sup>19</sup> and whose "passages on the joy of war . . . enter the realm of the universal." <sup>20</sup> Bertran appears in Dante's inferno holding his "severed head by the hair, swinging in his hand like a lantern," <sup>21</sup> reflecting the crime of having incited the schism between Henry II and his brother Richard the Lionhearted. <sup>22</sup> But interestingly, for Pound, the headlessness of the hero does not signify defeat. Rather, the strange duality paradoxically bears witness to the unyielding spirit of monolithic figures, who engage courageously against one another. Unlike King Richard, whom Pound mocks by referring to him in his rendering of Bertran's poem as "yea and nay," Bertran is a hero in that he bears his dividedness, his severed head, as a symbol of illumination. "Thus," declares Bertran, "is the counterpass (law of retribution) observed in me." <sup>23</sup>

These same values are reflected in Pound's formal rendering of "Sestina: Altaforte." In applying the rigour of the sestina in "translating" a poem not originally written in that form, Pound reinforces the notion of formal poetic rigour as an emblem of courage and rigour in the world at large. Except for very minor deviations, Pound adheres faithfully to the difficult form, choosing end words that boldly proclaim his purpose: 'peace,' 'music,' 'clash,' 'opposing,' 'crimson,' 'rejoicing.' As a form which functions essentially by juxtaposition, as a fixed set of terms are presented and re-presented in a variety of arrangements, the sestina provides the ideal vehicle for Pound's idiosyncratic historicism.

In Klein's sestina one finds no trace of either literal or metaphorical monoliths; here there is only the dialectic, "braided, wicker and withe," so pervasive that "there's not a sole thing that from its workings will not out." Again, the difference between Pound's perception of the problem of modernity and Klein's comes to the fore. Pound sees "the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing," while for Klein:

. . . dynasties and dominions downfall so! Flourish to flag  
and fail, are potent to a pause, a panic precipice, to a  
picked pit, and thence — rubble rebuilding, — still rise  
resurrective, — and now we see them, with new doers in dominion!  
They, too, dim out.

But even beyond the obvious contrast of the political right versus the political left, fundamental differences between the poets' attitudes prevail. Klein does not simply seize Pound's mocking "yea and nay," transforming it into "yes yeasts to No, and No is numinous with Yes." For although Klein is clearly appealing to the dialectic as a way of making sense of history, here, as in the other poems we have examined, history cannot be mediated by the poetic construct. In Klein's hands, even the dialectic becomes subject to its own process of transformation, yielding not synthesis but perpetual uncertainty:

. . . O just as the racked one hopes his ransom, so I  
 hope it, name it, image it, the together-living, the  
 together-with, the final synthesis. A stop.

But so it never will turn out, returning to the rack  
 within, without. And no thing's still.

The formal difficulty and obscurity of the poem reflect this sense of the uncontainability of history. Indeed, in a sense, Klein's very choice of the sestina form verges on the absurd. The poem is so thoroughly enjambed and the defining end words so inconspicuous — 'with,' 'a,' 'to,' 'out,' 'so,' 'still' — that the form is effectively unrecognizable. Like "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," "Sestina on the Dialectic" constitutes a response to Poundian poetic strategies. But unlike the sonnet in "Pulver," which adopts the Poundian strategy by depending on a notion of truth as poetic revelation, the "Sestina," also a poem set as prose, attacks the Poundian view, arguing rather for truth as poetic dissolution.

At this point we may re-approach "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" with a new sensitivity to the uneasy modernity it displays. For while the poem presents itself in unmistakably modern terms — as a confrontation of the troubled relationship between the artist and society — it also consistently undermines its own defiance. Perpetually threatened by the forces of history and thus never truly at ease with idealizations of art or the artist's role, Klein, even in this, his most archetypically modern poem, is ultimately unable to sustain a modern stance.

The most obvious dynamic in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is that of the dialectic which, although it has its negative aspect, eventually transforms the poet from alienated outcast to "n<sup>th</sup> Adam" in a poetic Garden of Eden. Moreover, in moving from the pandering "ventriloquism" of the false poets to the "naming" and "praising" of the "first green inventory," the poem appears to redeem both the poet and the social status of his whole "declassé craft." But while one might thus characterize the mood of the poem as one of guarded optimism, another equally forceful dynamic undercuts the first, throwing its optimism into serious doubt. Progressively, the forces of fragmentation erode not simply the triumph of the poet, but, indeed, the very notion of dialectical historical progress, until, ultimately, with both the poetic individual and his sense of experience under attack, the context of the poem tips over from the social and modern to the epistemological and post-modern.

Increasingly, the poet "thinks an imposter . . . has come forward to pose / in the shivering vacuums his absence leaves." It is a vacuum filled by various identities throughout the poem: "the corpse in a detective story," "a Mr. Smith in a hotel register," "the Count of Monte Cristo"; the n<sup>th</sup> Adam is merely the last in the parade of "schizoid solitudes." And what of the poet's role? Does not the "naming" and "praising" "item by exciting item" bear a disturbing resemblance to the disintegrating experience of the false poets? While they "court angels," he "makes a

halo of his anonymity." They "stare at mirrors" and he at his "single camera view." They go "mystical and mad"; he seeks new senses, new life forms, new creeds. The poet may "love the torso verb, [and] the beautiful face of the noun," but does he himself not "mistake the part for the whole, curl [himself] in a coma . . . make a colon [his] eyes"? And what of the dialectic, Klein's model of history itself? For although it is on the upward swing of the pendulum that the poet climbs, "the better to look . . . upon this earth — its total scope," it is equally along this great arc of modernism that he descends, "wiggled with his laurel," until he finds himself, at last, alone, "shin[ing] like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea."

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Zailig Pollock for suggesting this Rilke connection to me and for his generosity in sharing his unpublished work.
- <sup>2</sup> Cited in *The Complete Poetry of A. M. Klein*, ed. Zailig Pollock (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1990).
- <sup>3</sup> *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (Norfolk: New Directions, 1954), 59.
- <sup>4</sup> Pound, *Essays*, 60.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.
- <sup>6</sup> Ezra Pound, "A Few Dont's by an Imagiste," *Poetry Magazine* 1:6 (1913): 200-01.
- <sup>7</sup> Alan Durant, "The Language of History in The Cantos," in *Ezra Pound and History*, ed. Marianne Korn (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1985), 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Maud Ellmann, "Ezra Pound: The Erasure of History," in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 246.
- <sup>9</sup> William Harmon, *Time in Ezra Pound's Work* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1977), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: Peter Owen, 1970), 8.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ian F. A. Bell, *Critic as Scientist: the Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (London: Methuen, 1981).
- <sup>12</sup> Zailig Pollock, "From 'Pulver' to 'Portrait': A. M. Klein and the Dialectic." Unpublished paper.
- <sup>13</sup> Cited in *Complete Poetry*.
- <sup>14</sup> See *The Second Scroll* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 11-13.
- <sup>15</sup> Cited in *Complete Poetry*.
- <sup>16</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 27.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.
- <sup>18</sup> Peter Brooker, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1979), 44.
- <sup>19</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 44.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>22</sup> See *Inferno*, Canto xxviii.
- <sup>23</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 45.