

A. M. KLEIN AS JOURNALIST

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ALTHOUGH A. M. KLEIN'S FAME as a writer rests very largely on his poetry, his prose writings, which extend over a period of more than a quarter of a century, also represent no mean achievement. For the most part, these writings are in the form of editorials, articles and book reviews prompted by contemporary events during the time that Klein served as editor of *The Judaeon*, *The Canadian Zionist* and *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle*. Even though during most of this period he was a practising lawyer and held various other positions, such as consultant for Seagram's Ltd. and lecturer in English at McGill University, he took his responsibilities as journalist very seriously. During his editorship of *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, for example, he contributed weekly a page or two of editorials and a section of commentary on current events, often very incisive and witty; he frequently added articles on such subjects as humour, folklore, poetry, the Bible; and in addition he wrote long book reviews and contributed poems, occasional short stories, and translations from Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Many of his editorials were written in response to passing local events, often out of a sense of duty to the community and its agencies, and at times written in haste to meet printers' deadlines, but they seldom descended to the level of mere hack work. These prose pieces, written regularly week by week, constitute, in effect, an intellectual and to some extent literary autobiography of A. M. Klein.

The influences that directed Klein to journalism and defined its purpose can be clearly discerned in his early background. Born of immigrant parents, he was brought up in Montreal, and except for a brief sojourn in Rouyn, Quebec, lived his life there. His formative years were spent in the tightly-knit community ghettoized in the area surrounding St. Lawrence Street. Even the Protestant high school that he attended, Baron Byng, had an enrolment that was preponderantly Jewish. The pattern of life that he experienced, with its religious festivals and observances, its institutions which sustained a high degree of social and cultural self-sufficiency, its mode of conducting business — on the street, in the small shops, in the needle-trade factories — and even its radicalism, was uniquely Jewish. The links of this

society were for the most part not with non-Jewish segments of the population in Montreal, let alone Quebec or the rest of Canada, but with the Jewish communities mainly in central and eastern Europe or with communities like itself in other cities in Canada and the U.S.A. News from these European sources was awaited eagerly and received fearfully. No child in this setting failed to hear from family and friends first-hand accounts of pogroms, imposed penury, abuse of every description suffered in the Old World from which they had fled. Klein's imagination and his responses were shaped by this pattern of life and these accounts, by the fears and the hopes for redemption which such experience fostered. They were shaped also by his home and his learning. From what information we have, Klein's home was rich only in domestic virtues. The father, a mild man, a presser in a clothing factory, provided only a scant livelihood, but both parents earned their son's reverent love. It was a religious home, and though Abe Klein was later in life to question some aspects of orthodoxy and depart from some of its practices, he was never able or willing to break the strong ties that bound him to the Judaism of his parents. This religious bond was reinforced by his studies. On completing his elementary education at the Talmud Torah, he studied with private tutors for many years and was fortunate in his teachers, whom he mentions affectionately in several poems and stories. As an adolescent, he was committed so strongly to Judaism that he considered going to a Yeshiva for rabbinic training. Instead, he embarked upon a secular career. After graduating from Baron Byng, a silver medallist, he went to McGill University for a B.A. degree (1930) and then to the University of Montreal for his degree in law (1933).

Klein's career as a writer began early. While still in high school, encouraged by one of his teachers, he wrote much poetry, revealing a concern for form and a sensitivity to language that promised well for his future as a writer. His literary interests developed much more fully, however, at University, where he became active in the Debating Union and contributed articles to *The McGill Daily* and founded a University literary magazine, *The McGilliad*. During his university years his circle of friends and his range of interests widened and embraced persons and causes not Jewish. But the main thrust of his life, determined by his beginnings and by the pressure of the social environment which tended to confine Jews to Jewish associations, was towards Jewish causes and needs. While at McGill he became treasurer of the Maccabean Circle, and a leading figure in Young Judaea, the Zionist youth movement. In 1929, at the age of twenty, he became editor of its national periodical, *The Judaeen*, and the following year was appointed Educational Director of Young Judaea of Canada. As the Zionist movement gained momentum in the 1930's and as the spread of fascism and anti-semitism became an ever more threatening menace, his involvement in matters Jewish deepened. He served for a short while as Associate Director of the Zionist Organization of Canada in 1936 and as editor of *The Canadian Zionist* from 1936 to 1937. During

these years and after, he often toured towns in Ontario and Quebec and on occasion visited other parts of Canada lecturing and organizing on behalf of Zionism. This early concern with Jewish affairs found expression also in articles which he published in *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle* in the early 1930's. In 1938 he became the editor of this Anglo-Jewish weekly, a post that he held until 1955.

In an editorial reviewing the achievement of *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle* Klein singled out two functions of such a press as deserving special mention. "The first was the fact that it served, and serves, as a means of bringing to our English-speaking population a knowledge of the traditions of the past and an awareness of Jewish problems in the present. The second was as a means of communicating with our non-Jewish fellow citizens who first learned of the reaction of our community to current events only from its columns."¹ In this statement Klein indicated two of the central responsibilities he had accepted on assuming the role of editor. He saw himself as an educator whose task it was to teach his own people, especially the young North American-born segment, about their rich cultural past and to heighten their consciousness as Jews and their pride in their Jewishness, and at the same time to make them more aware of their current dangers and responsibilities. He wrote many articles and editorials on great contemporary Jewish writers and statesmen such as Herzl, Achad Ha'am, Tchernichovsky, and he drew constantly on his knowledge of the Bible, the Talmud and the works of rabbinic sages and Jewish philosophers and poets of the past. Jewish holidays, as they occurred in the cycle of the year, were carefully noted and commented upon. Whether Purim or Passover, Yom Kippur or Chanukah, the meaning of each was developed, given its full historic significance and contemporary relevance. The annual public campaigns for Zionist causes, for welfare and other philanthropic institutions, for Hebrew schools, Jewish libraries and Rabbinic Colleges, were supported vigorously, the editor prompted by his own commitments and sense of duty. Klein's editorials on these subjects often read like sermons, exhortatory and admonitory, at times fervent, at times witty, nearly always learned.

THE CAUSE TO WHICH he devoted himself as a journalist most constantly and energetically was Zionism. He believed that at a time when Judaism was becoming increasingly pluralistic, cultural Zionism would provide "a new principle of coalition," a more effective means of preserving Jewish unity. He shared Achad Ha'am's dream of Zion as a renewed cultural and religious centre from which the Jewish contribution to civilization would be made in more specifically Jewish terms, reflecting what he believed to be the characteristic, individual genius of the people. In one of his earliest articles, written at the age of nineteen, Klein stated, "It is to arouse the just recognition of the Jew to his own abilities,

and to prompt him to use it for the creation of his own culture, that this Zionism exerts all its efforts. A culture not of one language (for in the Diaspora that is an impossibility), but of one thought, a literature not of one style, but of one spirit, a product singularly Jewish and yet remarkably cosmopolitan — that was the dream of Achad Ha'am, that is the goal of cultural Zionism.”²² This culture had to be rooted in the soil, in a Jewish Homeland, but it had to be more than a product or an expression of an agricultural undertaking, or of a political-economic arrangement; it had to be concerned with “the redemption of a spirit.” This ideal, this vision of an Israel restored to its Homeland, as a spiritual centre, persisted even though the rising menace of Nazism and the threat of physical annihilation of European Jewry made him emphasize the need for a Jewish state more urgently in terms of rescue and freedom from persecution. Throughout the late 1930's and 1940's, Klein, though an admirer in most respects of the British people, its institutions and its spirit, criticized the British government for its vacillating policies and its tactics in the Middle East and for its failure to implement the Balfour Declaration. In the force of his denunciations, as in the unqualified rejection of the Peel Commission plan in 1937 to partition Palestine, Klein went beyond the public utterances of most Jewish communal leaders, and displayed the integrity and boldness of a crusading journalist. The fulfilment of the Zionist dream, the achievement of Jewish statehood in 1948, was the happy culmination for Klein of years of dedicated labour on its behalf, an event made all the more solemn and exhilarating, momentous, almost Messianic in meaning, by the Holocaust in Europe that preceded it. Klein's response to that event found lyric expression in his “Notebook of a Journey,” a diary-like account of his journey in 1949 to the new state and to some of the older communities in Europe and in North Africa from which immigrants flocked, an account that formed the basis of his novel, *The Second Scroll* (1951). Klein's support of the new state continued undiminished to the end of his career as a journalist.

At the same time, however, that Klein praised every achievement of the fledgling state and urged other nations and Diaspora Jewry to aid it, he was not uncritical of a small chauvinistic element in it that tended to disparage the non-Israeli Jew and the culture of Diaspora Jewry, contemporary and historical. He felt the need to re-affirm the positive values of Judaism developed during twenty centuries of exile. His own learning provided him with such an appreciative awareness of the Jewish heritage and its contributions to religious and philosophical thought, to science and the arts, that he dismissed the superficial negation of the Diaspora experience as unrealistic and unjust. In an article called “The Dangers of Success” he angrily attacked this negation as divisive, calling it wicked and pernicious, because it undermined the Jewish unity that he hoped the attainment of Zion, a spiritual, cultural centre, would reinforce. It set up an “aristocracy of residence” and an “abominable class distinction” between Jews who returned to the

Homeland and those who remained in the countries where they lived. "The *primum mobile*," Klein insisted, "is neither land nor language; it is people. It is the folk — and all of it everywhere — which is of the essence. Domicile, status, speech, etc., these are but adjectival; the substance is *Amcho* — thy people."³

Klein's criticism is sound and in the prevailing circumstances, timely, but the force of the attack against a relatively insignificant group in this article and in a subsequent one only two months later, "Of Jewish Culture,"⁴ might suggest that it was in part also an attempted subconscious justification for his own unwillingness or unreadiness to live in Israel. The whole bent of his life, the essence of it as expressed in his writings, indicated that he should, but timidity and a deep affection for Canada weighed against such a step. In a later essay, "In Praise of the Diaspora,"⁵ he again movingly recounted the manifold achievements of Diaspora Jewry, the creation of a culture and a spirit that would live on through a renescent Jewry, but the central theme of his earlier essays on this subject — the expectation of a fruitful interplay of Israeli culture and Jewish Diaspora culture — is missing. The tone of this essay, one of Klein's finest pieces of prose, is nostalgic; the praise, a graveside eulogy. The Diaspora, he asserts, the conditions that prompted great Jewish creativity in scattered lands, is dead. Clearly there was a serious ambivalence in his feelings about his own position, and perhaps a sad foreshadowing of his own not too distant withdrawal from life.

Almost as significant to Klein the journalist as his espousal of the Zionist cause, was the task of alerting his people to the gathering dark forces from within the local scene and from abroad that threatened their security and even their existence. This constant concern was addressed not only to his Jewish readers, but to the non-Jewish public as well. He felt it incumbent on himself as journalist to take up the challenge thrilled vituperatively by anti-semites from public platforms and in the press. Passionately and logically he made the case for his people to those whom reason and sincere feeling could reach, countering the lies and innuendoes of the anti-semites, and condemning anti-semitic action, whether vandal acts by a misguided mob or the calculated policy of civic politicians. He denounced restrictive covenants and other discriminatory practices in Canada, and he replied to the slanderous attacks by the Coughlinites and the American Firsters in the United States. His dislike for Soviet Russia on ideological and humanistic grounds, deepened by his resentment at its anti-Zionist stance, was related to what he recognized as its deeply-ingrained anti-Jewish bias, which existed despite the state's lofty proclamation to the contrary. Jewish cultural genocide was no more palatable to Klein than physical oppression, and he foresaw and warned against the connection between the two. His greatest concern, however, was over the increasing manifestation of anti-semitism, discriminatory and violent, in eastern and central Europe, by the governments and people of Poland, Rumania and Hungary, and above all of Nazi Germany. In his journalism, as in his poetry, he reviled the cruel policies

and barbarous acts. He appealed to the moral conscience of western nations and was deeply outraged at the relative indifference shown by the so-called liberal democratic nations of the western world to the plight of the victims in Europe and the refugees drifting on land and sea. The moral apathy of the world at large distressed him and may well have contributed to the deep depression from which he subsequently suffered.

The moral concern so clearly evidenced in Klein's articles and editorials on anti-semitism and the refugee problem, was not limited to matters Jewish. Scattered throughout his journalism are vigorous condemnations of harsh and arbitrary treatment of other minority groups. He denounced, for example, the policy of apartheid in South Africa, the unjust policies of the Canadian government towards its Japanese citizens on the West Coast, and of the Quebec government towards the Jehovah's Witnesses sect. Klein was equally ready to criticize his fellow-Jews when their actions in his view deserved censure. Thus, though he shared the ultimate objectives of the Irgun and the Sternists in the Yishuv — an independent Jewish state — he unequivocally condemned their acts of terror as conscienceless betrayals of morality. This concern over political and social abuses, voiced frequently in his prose, found parallel expression, stated or implied, in poems published in the 1930's such as "The Soirée of Velvel Kleinberger," "The Diary of Abraham Segal, Poet," or "Barricade Smith," and again in several poems from the forties. It underlay his political stance, that of a liberal socialist. Though for most of his life he was not active in political parties or political processes, he did let his name go forward as the C.C.F. candidate for Montreal Cartier in 1944, a riding with a heavy Jewish vote, but he subsequently withdrew it. In 1949 he was again prevailed upon to stand for the C.C.F. in the federal election and this time he fought an unsuccessful campaign. Although his defeat was not unexpected, the task of electing a C.C.F. candidate in Quebec at that time being virtually impossible, he had reason to be deeply disappointed in view of his record of service to the community.

Klein's journalism largely reflects his views on public affairs and his involvement in them, particularly in matters pertaining to Jews, but it manifests also another important aspect: his interest in literature. Although the journals that he edited and to which he contributed most of his prose non-fictional writings were directed chiefly to a Jewish public and perforce dealt with topics that interested them as Jews, Klein used the opportunity afforded him as editor to publish many reviews and articles on literary topics. Frequently these writings, too, dealt with Jewish themes, such as the Bible as literature, or Jewish folklore, or with books by or about Jews, but Klein wrote also about literature in general. His journalism reflects specifically his interest in the Canadian literary scene. Paralleling his increased involvement in the 1930's in Jewish affairs was his valued association with Leo Kennedy, A. J. M. Smith, and Frank Scott, the group known as the Montreal Poets, whose achievement, according to Klein, marked the emergence of a modern,

sophisticated literary culture in Canada. In the 1940's Klein's association with P. K. Page, with Irving Layton, John Sutherland, Louis Dudek, the *Preview* group and the *First Statement* group, attested to his continuing close connection with literary circles in Montreal. The strong moral sense revealed in his response to public affairs is evidenced also in his judgment of writers and writing. Thus he condemns Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Robinson Jeffers as poets on moral grounds, even though he finds much that is praiseworthy in the art of the last two. Similarly, his admiration for certain qualities of Karl Shapiro's poetry is over-shadowed by his angry criticism of what he considered to be Shapiro's negative, even hostile attitude towards the Jewish tradition. On the other hand, his high praise for poets such as E. J. Pratt and Chaim Nachman Bialik was earned not merely by their technical craftsmanship, their artistic skill, but also by the fact that they wrote within a national tradition and expressed clear and unequivocally strong moral values.

THE TASK OF THE JOURNALIST, according to Klein, was to be not merely the eyes and ears of the world, reporting its activities, but also a sensitive conscience, for which beliefs and values provided necessary standards. And, furthermore, the journalist had to be prepared to commit himself to act with the power at his command on behalf of those causes to which his conscience compelled him. In a review of Pierre van Paassen's *The Forgotten Ally* Klein scornfully provided a simple diagnosis of what he termed the classic ailment of reportage: "a pseudo-impartiality, a cynical hard-boiledness, a spectatorial and olympian aloofness from the realities which are presumably the journalists' *métier*. At such a one you can level no greater insult than to say that 'he takes sides.' It is his proud and pathological boast that he never takes sides, that he can describe the workings of iniquity with the same dispassionate unconcern with which he retails the philanthropies of virtue, and that he is, essentially and by definition, *au dessus de la bataille*."⁶ Klein was well aware that the journalist, in taking sides or espousing a cause, might become a propagandist, or seem to become one, but this possibility the journalist had to risk. Facts for him were merely indicia; he had to search for conclusions and in his search he had to be guided by conscience and personal judgment. Klein sums up his views on the responsibility of the journalist by referring to van Paassen's quotation from a letter of Alfred Loisy to Pope Benedict: "No one has a right to be neutral in moral questions. Whoever pretends to be indifferent is in reality siding with him who is wrong."

Much of Klein's journalism is, as might be expected, ephemeral in nature, though many articles transcend the occasion that prompted them. All, however, are part of the history of the times, recording and commenting on the grim and

exhilarating decades that saw economic depression and growing international tension; the cancerous growth of Nazism with its accompanying horrors — the plight of the unfortunate refugees, uprooted and drifting, and the monstrous fate of the still less fortunate, the millions who perished in the Holocaust; the events of World War II and their happy termination; and the struggle for a Jewish Homeland which saw the emergence of the Jewish state. Whatever new events and public figures the passing years brought to the fore, most of these subjects constantly recurred, and the point of view — the events seen largely in terms of their impact on the Jewish condition — remained more or less the same through the decades.

Stylistically, Klein's editorials, articles and reviews differ markedly, but together they reveal the qualities that characterize Klein's writing, many of which are to be found in his poetry as well. He loved words, the sound and the sense of them, mouth-filling, polysyllabic words, teasing words that playfully become puns or homonyms, words that create pictures and extend the imagination. His notebooks reveal that his search for novel, strange diction, technical or obsolete or rare, was constant, and his essays and articles show the results of this search. He seasoned his writing with foreign words, Latin and French, Hebrew and Yiddish, and with historical allusions, often quite esoteric and remote, with the result that his writing is frequently over-spiced. His play with language is one form of his pervasive wit. His satire is another form, usually sharp, a quick plunging flash, but at times heavy and obvious, a verbal mallet. His tone and mood were varied. He could build up a case logically, writing in a cool, dispassionate manner, but much more often he indulged in rhetoric, the mannered, argumentative stance of the debater, a pose that he loved, or the swelling, denunciatory tones of the angry attacker or desperate defender, the spokesman committed to a cause dearer than life itself. In his strident passages Klein's comment on the Soviet journalist Ilya Ehrenburg applies to himself, for he, too, "is the Jew who writes with passion, with the memory of atrocity perpetrated against his kith and kin, with invective and malediction last heard of only in the *tochacho* pages of Deuteronomy."

Klein's prose is frequently flawed structurally and grammatically, a consequence undoubtedly of the haste in which he wrote many of the pieces. Klein's sons relate that frequently he was composing at the very last moment, even as he was hurrying to the typesetter. Often he would dictate to his wife, seated at her typewriter, an entire editorial or article, with virtually no pause in the diction and no time for revision. One stylistic consequence of composing in this way is that such writing bears the impress of the spoken word. In these works Klein's prose rhythms are speech rhythms and the language is simpler, more colloquial than that of his more polished or more carefully wrought essays.

Klein's journalism suffers somewhat more serious flaws than those of careless grammar. He is at times too self-consciously "clever," and rhetorical to the point of artificiality. His unusual diction and abundant learned allusions, which clearly

reflect his mastery of language and his knowledge of Jewish and non-Jewish culture, also suggest at times an unawareness of the limitations of his readers, or of the fact that they might be distracted or bored by his frequent use of foreign expressions, or English words that are archaic or pedantically rare. Perhaps it would be more correct to speak of his unconcern — for he must have been aware — an unconcern that reflects a degree of indifference to the level of his readership and an occasional readiness to subordinate his journalistic responsibility to his literary impulses. While on the one hand it is to his credit that he never wrote down to his public and that he tried to be himself in his writing, saying what he had to say in the manner that best suited and pleased himself, these characteristics of his style suggest a measure of intellectual ostentation, and his indifference, insofar as it existed, perhaps indicates an aspect of cultural snobbishness, or at least conscious distancing, that seems to have been an element in Klein's complex make-up. His sense of verbal play and his obvious delight in the exercise of an agile, sophisticated mind, qualities which endear him and his writing to us, could at times become a compulsion to be witty at all costs, so that his humour strikes one at such times as forced or misplaced. But such lapses, seen in perspective, are really minor matters and do not significantly detract from the over-all achievement of Klein the journalist.

In an editorial celebrating the centenary of the *London Jewish Chronicle*⁸ Klein mentioned two other purposes of an ethnic press, not unrelated to the purposes discussed earlier. The pages of such a journal, by chronicling the daily or weekly events of a community, serve as an authentic history of the community, but the journalist, he adds significantly, must not only record this history but also, in a sense, make it. Klein's writings constitute a truthful though not dispassionate account of the times. They did more. His journalism, which for him was not separable from his participation in the work of the Zionist Organization of Canada and of the Canadian Jewish Congress, or from his literary activities, undoubtedly helped to make the history of his community. It is difficult to assess the impact of a writer on his generation, but we can safely affirm that Klein's influence was pervasive and widespread. As editor of the leading Anglo-Jewish journal in Canada for many years, at what was probably the most critical period in post-Biblical Jewish history and indeed in world history, he reached a large reading-public and on the whole successfully gave expression to their feelings and helped to shape their responses. His wide reading, sensitivity, and intelligence made him a perceptive observer and an able analyst of current political developments, while his command of effective language, his passion, rhetoric and wit, made him an eloquent spokesman, on most occasions, for his people. These qualities put to the service of his people, particularly in their struggle against anti-semitism and on behalf of Zionism, enabled Klein in his journalism to carry out admirably the responsibilities, as he saw them, of chronicler and champion.

Klein's journalism, apart from its value as a chronicle and commentary on events of world-wide import, has particular significance for the student of literature. It is a body of prose writing of genuine literary merit in itself, and insofar as it relates frequently in substance and in language to his poems and fiction, it provides a very useful background, a context, for the study of his creative writing. In a more general sense, by revealing aspects of Klein's personality, ideas, values and commitments, these non-fictional prose writings contribute to our understanding and appreciation of A. M. Klein the poet-journalist.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, May 12, 1944.
- ² "Notes on Cultural Zionism," *The Judaean*, November 1928.
- ³ *C.J.C.*, March 18, 1949.
- ⁴ *C.J.C.*, May 13, 1949.
- ⁵ *C.J.C.*, January 9 - February 27, 1953.
- ⁶ *C.J.C.*, January 28, 1944.
- ⁷ *C.J.C.*, September 22, 1944.
- ⁸ *C.J.C.*, March 21, 1941.

POEM FOR VLADIMIR

G. Ripley

time bagged you at last,
pushed through your abdomen
that pin
which holds you tight inside
a cabinet of earth.
death classified you thus:
genius, aesthete, athlete,
a type both rare and known,
here local to the steppe.
when numbers moved and flexed
against your sleep,
you mimicked life, made hours stop
with words, made worlds,
holding the dream at bay and spreading
wings above the plane and linden trees.
perhaps you felt
the night explode again and multiply,
when time said you were dead.