

THE BLASPHEMIES OF A. M. KLEIN

Kenneth C. Russell

MIRIAM WADDINGTON argues in her study of A. M. Klein¹ that it is wrong to think of him as a religious poet. She vigorously maintains that, on the contrary, his outlook is secular and that much that is taken as religious in Klein's verse merely reflects his pride in his cultural inheritance. Indeed, she finds several of his so-called "religious" poems blasphemous² and she is amazed that critics stubbornly ignore the religious doubt which she sees everywhere in Klein's poems.³ Consequently, while Pacey and Dudek might label the poems of *Hath Not a Jew . . .* "religious",⁴ Waddington insists, "Whatever these poems are, they are not religious."⁵

Faced with such disagreement one must ask what meaning these critics are putting on the term "religious". What, in particular, does it mean to Miriam Waddington? This is never entirely clear but some of her statements reveal the presuppositions underlying her eagerness to establish Klein as a modern and therefore, secular poet. She remarks for example, that his editorials in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, his essays on Joyce, etc., "all show to what extent he was a twentieth-century artist, committed, not to the simple universal therapy of religion, but to the power and magic which reside in language."⁶ Her description of religion as a therapy and its juxtaposition with what is taken to be a twentieth-century cultural credo suggests that she sees religion as retrograde and the crutch of those not fully equal to life's demands. One cannot help but suspect that the dichotomy between religion and modernity, — the either/or gap between them that she seems to accept as self evident — will seriously influence her reading of Klein. For her, it would seem, he cannot be secular and religious, and above all, he cannot believe and doubt. Most certainly he cannot share the horrors of this modern age, shake his fist at the heavens and still believe.

A person who does not share her presuppositions might very well ask, "Why not?" And he might well look in vain for many of the blasphemies she points to and find little evidence of denial in the doubt she continually underlines. This is particularly true if he reads the poems against the backdrop of the religious tradition in which Klein grew up. One can hardly, for example, term Klein's "Psalm

XXIII" in which he breaks into heaven and wrecks the scales of justice blasphemous when one remembers that Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Bertichev summoned God to stand trial for the sufferings of Israel⁷ and told God bluntly that if grace and mercy did not come "Your throne will not be a throne of truth."⁸ And if some of the biblical psalms lack the playful wit of Klein's poem they nonetheless express consternation at the inexplicable vagaries of divine justice, and do this in the strongest language.⁹

In dealing with Klein's own frank way of speaking we should perhaps keep in mind Irving Layton's remark that God has been part of the Jewish family for so long that disagreements with him take on the characteristics of a domestic quarrel.¹⁰ We might also pay heed to what Klein himself says in "Psalm 166":

Consider my speech, O Lord, not too severely;
It does not mean what it does seem to say. . . .
For you I need not choose my language; surely
Need not measure the words with which I pray; . . .
I speak to you this day
Even as once I spoke to my sire, now with You.
And I never loved one more than I did my father. (258)¹¹

We should also note that Waddington calls "Psalm VI" a blasphemous complaint about God's indifference.¹² She tells us that in this poem God remains unmoved by the Nazis' extermination of the Jews while the very angels are driven mad by the sight of the atrocities.¹³ She quotes from the text but fails to include the last two verses:

And the good Lord said nothing, but with a nod
Summoned the angels of Sodom down to earth. (214)

The last lines, it is clear, cast quite a different light on the poem and in no way can it be read as a complaint about God's indifference. At the most it reflects an impatience with God's slowness to act but this element is also evident in many of the psalms and hardly amounts to blasphemy.

But it would be an injustice to Waddington and to Klein himself to deny that there are poems which seem to overstep the boundaries of religious propriety. The psalms of the Bible do, indeed, sometimes speak as though they are trying to jar a sleeping God into action¹⁴ but they never go so far as to dress down God as a "dotard" whose ears are stuffed with wads of cloud-cotton nor attempt to bestir him with the irritable plea, "How long will you sit on your throne, and nod?" (139). This would seem to strain even Elie Wiesel's proposition that from inside the community a Jew may say anything to God provided that it be on behalf of man.¹⁵

Nor is there any way to explain away the harshness of "Talisman in Seven Shreds." Here, God, by a sort of mirror image, has taken on the features of a

mechanized golem (robot) and all dogma has become foolishness in a fated universe:

What, then, is good and true and beautiful,
The tongue is bitter when it must declare:
matter is chaos, mind is chasm, fool,
the work of golems stalking in nightmare . . . (135)

And even faith that affirms justification after death in the face of life's miseries is bitterly mocked:

There is no witch of En-dor to invoke
asking dead spirits to pronounce the fact. . . .
But I will take a prong in hand and go
over old graves and test their hollowness:
be it the spirit or the dust I hoe
only at doomsday's sunrise will I know. (136)

If this were all there is to Klein one would be compelled to agree with Waddington's assessment that Klein's poems are certainly not religious in the ordinary sense of the word.¹⁶ At best they would seem to be the detritus of a faith crushed by scepticism. But the attitude evident in these poems is not typical of his work and they cannot be given privileged status while the more numerous poems in which his faith is evident are written off as wistful attempts to be religious or as weak departures from secularity. One wonders therefore on what internal evidence Waddington can write of Klein's "Psalm II" that here "we have a series of irresolute vacillations as the poet seeks to justify his political retreat and renewed religious belief."¹⁷ There is, in fact, nothing irresolute about the poem although he clearly knew what people would make of his attitude:

How is he changed, the scoffers say,
This hero of an earlier day, . . .
Who in his Zion lay at ease
Concocting learned blasphemies
To hate, contemn, and ridicule
The godly reign, the godly rule (210)

It seems to me that only a prejudgment which sees religion as weakness and withdrawal could conclude that this poem expresses uncertainty and retreat. Taken at face value it reads as a solid confession of faith in which the poet realizes that there are no arguments to convey to others his experience of God. But if there were

Then might they also know, as I
The undeniable verity,
The truth unspoiled by epigram
The simple, *I am that I am* (211)

At this point it would be appropriate to go on to examine later poems such as "Of Remembrance", "Stance of the Amidah", "Elegy" and others which can hardly be termed anything other than religious poems on the basis both of theme and attitude.¹⁸ But this would take us too far away from the criticism of Miriam Waddington and leave her emphasis of Klein's religious doubt unexamined. I should like, therefore, to leave a more thorough analysis of Klein's religious poetry for another time and to return to the questions of Klein's doubt and unbelief.

I use the plural "questions" here deliberately because while unbelief may be thought of as doubt grown into certainty they are not necessarily connected and they are certainly not identical. Doubt, indeed, or a certain disquieting questing after "proof" is one of the characteristics of faith which by its very nature leaves the mind thirsting after the sureness of vision. Theology itself is born of this need of faith to seek understanding but the coolness of the traditional phrase — *fides quaerens intellectum* — hides the personal anguish that is so often part of the individual's maturing process. It is a paradox that the naive faith of the child must give way to the adult's faith-in-tension to be resolved finally into the mature faith that says its amen in the darkness of unconditional acceptance. If the childhood faith is never doubted, never challenged by the questions that life throws up then it remains truly a therapeutic retreat from reality and can never come to tranquil maturity.¹⁹

KLEIN'S POETRY provides ample evidence of the three stages of faith's growth.²⁰ There are poems that remember an untroubled childhood faith,²¹ others that grapple with God's silence²² and finally those that accept the darkness of incomprehensibility that is an inescapable part of believing.²³ The first division is represented by many poems which look back nostalgically on the simple faith of childhood or find this faith preserved in simple people. But Klein has gone beyond this and he can only look back at an earlier time or upon an unquestioning faith with the realization that his questioning has separated him from such simplicity and caught him up in turmoil. This surely is a common experience of believers and so I cannot agree with Miriam Waddington that in "The Cripples" Klein deals openly with his loss of faith because he reacts to the extraordinary trust shown by the pilgrims to St. Joseph's Oratory by saying:

And I who in my own faith once had faith like this
but have not now, am crippled more than they (299)²⁴

I would think rather that his sense of weakness has been shared by many a Christian who has watched in wonder what seems the less complicated, stronger faith of his fellow believers and that this poem is accordingly akin to those which look back nostalgically on the religion of his childhood.

Such simple faith is admirable perhaps but for most men faith must eventually grapple with questions that trouble its tranquillity:

Nothing was difficult, O Master, then,
 No query but it had an answer, clear,—
 But now though I am grown, a man of men, . . .

There is
 Much that I cannot grasp, and much that goes amiss (232)

Most painfully of all, faith must suffer the silence of God who refuses to justify himself to man. This is the theme of "Reb Levi Yitschok Talks to God". In this poem the renowned Hasidic rebbe who was famous for his faith and blunt questioning of God turns to him to complain of the suffering of Israel. But after his raging:

He suddenly went mild
 Begging the Lord to lead him through the fog;
 Reb Levi Yitschok, an ever-querulous child,
 Sitting on God's knees in the synagogue,
 Unanswered even when the sunrise smiled. (147)

The same burden of silence is apparent in "Psalm I" of the "Psalter of Avram Haktani":

Where in this dubious days shall I take counsel,
 Who is there to resolve the dark, the doubt? (210)

There is no denying the burden of these lines in which the poet finds nothing to give him the clarity of insight that he seeks. The darkness is a fact and yet faith continues despite the irony and weariness. And so we have poems of mature, tranquil faith. Here, for example, are lines from "Stance of the Amidah":

Oh, give us such understanding as make superfluous second
 thought; and at Thy least, give us to understand to repent (346)

Psalm XXIV which begins:

O incognito God, anonymous Lord,
 with what name shall I call you?

concludes:

I have no title for your glorious throne,
 and for your presence not a golden word,—
 only that wanting you, by that alone
 I do invoke you, knowing I am heard. (224)

Although much of the doubt that Klein's poetry reveals seems to belong within the context of faith rather than outside it, there is no denying that there are lines in which doubt seems to have given way to unbelief. One might point, for instance to "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" where we read

My father is gathered to his fathers, God rest his wraith!
 And his son
 Is a pauper in spirit, a beggar in piety,
 Cut off without a penny's worth of faith. (117)

It might be argued, however, that in these verses the poet speaks in the name of modern Jewry which found itself the victim of persecution despite its modernism and secularity. It is harder, though, to explain away the lines in "Diary of Abraham, Segal, Poet," in which the speaker separates himself from both the religion of his father and the Marxism of his brother, saying bluntly, "My idols have been shattered into shards" (87). These lines and these negative sentiments are present in Klein's work and Waddington is right to insist that critics take note of them. It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate their importance or to insist that all the poems be read in the shadow they cast. Surely there is no reason at all why they should be linked with "Talisman in Seven Shreds" and considered the keys to unlock Klein's treasure.

The fact is that they only take on undue importance when the presupposition of a neat dichotomy between faith and doubt is accepted. Only then do they become paradigms for the interpretation of all his work. Otherwise they take their place in a body of poetry which displays the erratic evolution of one man's faith in its passage from naive simplicity through doubt and moments of outright denial to a faith that can affirm and delight in "The Mystery beyond the mysterious." (345)

Once we free ourselves from the either/or dichotomy that creates a gap between religion and secularity it is possible to accept peacefully the social dimension of Klein's poetry, his delight in language and even his belief in the quasi-magical power of words and to find all of these elements inseparably joined to his fundamental concern with man's relation to a transcendent and personal God. Once we move beyond this mental block we see that Klein is secular and religious, socialist and Jewish and that he both believes and doubts.

In conclusion then, we must say against those who call him a religious poet because they find him a pious optimist, and against those who deny him this status because they find him a faith-denying writer of minor blasphemies, that A. M. Klein is a religious poet, not because he writes devotional piety, but precisely because his work reflects without veneer the bitter tensions of a soul that takes God seriously.

NOTES

¹ Miriam Waddington, *A. M. Klein*, Toronto, 1970.

² *Ibid.*, 65 and 68.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ She presents their positions on p. 10 of her critical study.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98. Italics added.

⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's* (Published as one volume with *The Sabbath*), Harper and Row, New York, 1966, 84; Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, translated by Marion Wiesel, Random House (Vintage Books), New York, 1973, 110.

⁸ Wiesel, 110. A similar tone of accusation appears in the song "Rebono Shel Olam" attributed to Levi Yitzhak.

⁹ It is significant that when Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel dedicated his book *The Prophets*, Harper & Row, 1962 "To the martyrs of 1940-45" he quoted Psalm 44:

All this has come upon us,
Though we have not forgotten Thee,
Or been false to Thy covenant.
Our heart has not turned back
Nor have our steps departed from Thy way . . .
. . . for Thy sake we are slain . . .
Why dost Thou hide Thy face?

¹⁰ Irving Layton, "Review of *Poems (1944)*" in *A. M. Klein (Critical Views on Canadian Writers)* edited by Tom Marshall, Ryerson Press, 1970, 24.

¹¹ The bracketed numbers are page references to *The Collected Poems of A. M. Klein*, compiled by Miriam Waddington, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974.

¹² Waddington, *A. M. Klein*, 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ps 44, 23; 59, 4; 7, 6.

¹⁵ Wiesel, 110.

¹⁶ i.e. pious and devout.

¹⁷ Waddington, *A. M. Klein*, 64.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Helen Gardner, the editor of *The Faber Book of Religious Verse*, London, 1972, says of her own quest for a definition of a religious poem, "I arrived at the criterion that a religious poem was a poem concerned in some way with revelation and with man's response to it." I take this as an adequate notion which makes it possible to recognize as religious even poetry that grapples in a serious or agonized fashion with the question of man's relationship to God.

¹⁹ cf. Louis Monden, "Sources of Difficulties in the Life of Faith" in *Toward a Theology of Christian Faith*, edited by Michael Mooney et al., New York, 1968, pp. 212-39.

²⁰ In his essay on Klein, Louis Dudek tries to establish a chronological progression in his poetry away from religion toward "a realistic and cosmopolitan view of things". ("A. M. Klein" in *A. M. Klein (Critical Views on Canadian Writers)* edited by Tom Marshall, p. 68). He therefore arbitrarily confines Klein's religious verse to his immature period explaining anything later away with the remark "No doubt he can return to his origins . . ." p. 68.

It is manifestly difficult to accurately date poems on the basis of their publication dates as Dudek points out and I have not therefore tried to argue that any strict pattern of development of faith is evident in his poems. An examination of the manuscripts and the correlation of the poems with his other writings might allow such an order to be established. . . . I suspect however, that even then we would find that the stages would not neatly follow each other but blend and mix together as they evolve.

In the meantime, however, it should be remembered that when Klein describes the development of "Uncle Melek" in his 1951 novel, *The Second Scroll*, he sees his progression as having three stages: naive, "private" faith gives way to Marxist dedication and finally to a love of God which commits him to service of the oppressed. This is clearly a pattern of unquestioning faith, doubt and unbelief, and ultimately a mature, consuming faith.

²¹ cf. e.g. "Bestiary": (158-59), "Psalm XV" (219), "Autobiographical" (271-73).

²² cf. e.g. "Psalm XXXIV" (231-33), "A Psalm of Resignation" (261).

²³ cf. e.g. "Psalm II" (210-11), "Psalm XXIV" (224).

²⁴ Waddington, *A. M. Klein*, 97.

ARS POETICA

Dorothy Livesay

i

Words have
no morality
exist in innocence

handled well
can perform miracles
gently massaging
the heart

yet
like snowballs
secretly laden with ice
can strike the eye
blind

ii

Ralph,
on my first undistracted evening
in Ottawa
I heard you airing
your Russian travelogue
an historical architectural
spiritual journey:
yours, not Moscow's.

Thus do poets thrive!
We are vultures feeding
on the remains of man
in order to stay alive
and fly.