

POET OF A LIVING PAST

Tradition in Klein's Poetry

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I N "AVE ATQUE VALE," the opening poem in his first volume of poetry, *Hath Not A Jew* (1940), A. M. Klein states that his intention is to turn to his Jewish heritage, to become, as he said in a later poem, the poet "who unrolled our culture from his scroll." Probably no other major Canadian writer so deliberately and consistently wrote within a tradition. This purpose was all the more easily accomplished, for it was a rich heritage which, existing as a minority culture, was clearly defined and discernible. He was at the same time an intensely personal poet, his awareness and concern with himself probably being reinforced by the realization of the separateness of himself and his tradition in the general social milieu.

The personal element is to be found in the tone and style of his poetry, the flavour of personality that permeates most of what he wrote. The quality of unembarrassed sentimentality — nostalgic, tender, affectionate — usually preserved from excess by simplicity of statement or held in check by light irony; the tone of impassioned indictment or commitment; his whimsical humour; and his enthusiasm as seen, for example, in his delight in festivities or in expressing his awareness of the divine: all these characterize his work, less tangibly perhaps but as definitely as his highly individual poetic language. But Klein is personal in a more direct manner. Autobiographical statements are to be found in many poems, from the first poem in the first volume to the last poem, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape", in his fourth and final volume of verse, *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948). He recalls scenes from his childhood at home, in school and on the street, the sights and smells of the Montreal Jewish quarter and the games he played; he reminisces often about his parents and teachers, who

shaped his growth. In *Poems* (1944), in a sequence of thirty-six poems entitled "The Psalter of Avram Haktani", Klein describes or alludes to the major events of his life from his birth through his marriage. The title makes clear the personal reference in the poems. It contains an obvious play on his own name, the word "Haktani" in Hebrew meaning "small" or the Yiddish and Germanic "klein". These poems disclose his inmost fears and hopes, thereby revealing many of his interests and values.

Klein, however, for the most part, subordinates the personal element. Even when he is concerned with himself, he usually sees himself in relation to a continuing tradition, an attitude which keeps the personal element confined and yet achieves a kind of enlargement for it by identifying it with a larger entity. Klein conveys this sense of identification most clearly in "Psalm XXXVI, a Psalm touching genealogy".

Not sole was I born, but entire genesis:
 For to the fathers that begat me, this
 Body is residence. Corpuscular,
 They dwell in my veins, they eavesdrop at my ear,
 They circle, as with Torahs, round my skull,
 In exit and in entrance all day pull
 The latches of my heart, descend, and rise —
 And there look generations through my eyes.

Klein, a learned Jew, has a strong sense of history and his place in it. He is always conscious of himself, as the furthest extension and summation of his people and its heritage. For Klein, as for all traditionalists, the past has an immediacy that makes it a present reality. Furthermore, in Jewish religious teaching, which shaped traditional responses, time is regarded as hallowed, and moments in history, persons and events are exalted. Place, on the other hand, is rarely sanctified and tends to be disregarded. This attitude to place, with its religious basis and significance, has probably been reinforced by the Jewish emphasis on inner experience and by the fact that so much Jewish history has occurred in unwelcomed or tyrannous exile, where no attachment, no deep sense of belonging was possible. In his poetry Klein reflects these traditional attitudes. The sages of Sura and Pumbeditha, Reb Levi Yitschok, or the poet-rabbi Jehuda Ha-Levi are his contemporaries, constituting a past that is living for him. Little or no attention is paid in the first three volumes of Klein's poetry to settings. In *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems*, however, Klein does indicate a marked sensitivity to place, whether it be a pawnshop, St. Lawrence Boulevard, or Mount Royal. As

in his other relationships, he finds it difficult to maintain any psychic distance from that which he experiences; the places become part of him, and in describing them he becomes very tender and personal. However, Klein's sense of time and of place tend to merge. In fact, he seldom thinks of place without some time referent. Places have history and, as we can see in such poems as "Montreal", "Lookout: Mount Royal", and "The Mountain", it is the history of the place, the events that are associated with it that appeal to him as much as the physical elements, and probably more.

At the core of Klein's traditionalism is his intense religious commitment, a concern that is compounded of an emotional attachment fostered and shaped from his infancy on, both at home and at school; an intellectual attraction to the challenge of Talmudic debate and the fine-drawn disquisitory logic of the post-Talmudic scholars; and perhaps most important, the spiritual need for a metaphysic or a system of beliefs that would order human experience meaningfully and purposefully and enable him to find himself in such an order so that he could better understand this experience, and that would prompt him to reach beyond the seeming finitudes of time and place — in brief, to seek God.

In Gloss Aleph of *The Second Scroll*, a poem entitled "Autobiographical", Klein enumerates many of the vivid childhood memories that reveal the emotional basis of his religious attitude. His environment, the Montreal ghetto, was almost totally Jewish and centred about the home, the synagogue and the Hebrew school. The outstanding calendar days were the religious festivals, with the ceremonies and games associated with them. Klein's attachment to ceremony and ritual is evidenced in the series of poems "Haggadah" in *Hath Not A Jew*, in the nuptial psalms in *Poems* and in many affectionate references to the Sabbath and holy day ceremonies at home and in the synagogue. His parents, humbly circumstanced, were gentle and pious. His brief recollections of them here are of his mother "blessing candles, Sabbath-flamed" and of his father telling tales about the famous Chassidic Rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov. He frequently refers to his parents in his poems and in nearly every instance the context is some religious practice or observance and the relationship is one of love, "Love leading a brave child/Through childhood's ogred corridors, unfear'd". His references to his childhood religious teachers reveal the same quality of affectionate trust and acceptance. To some extent, undoubtedly, Klein's later religious seeking reflects a somewhat nostalgic yearning for the relatively simple, secure and abundantly happy days of his childhood, a seeking in memory for "The strength and vividness of nonage days". This aspect of Klein's religious attitude emerges in many

poems where, after considering the evils of this nightmare world, he puts his trust in God, a parent-figure, to see him safely through. The imagery in the concluding section of "Reb Levi Yitschok Talks to God" clearly suggests this aspect.

He raged, he wept. 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.

The imagery here, however, should not be taken to indicate, as some critics have suggested, an abdication of mature responsibility for a child-like faith in a father-figure, though certainly much of the emotional force stems from such a deeply-rooted association. But Klein is expressing not primarily a desire to escape from the complexities of life, or a personal longing for his earlier simple, protected existence, but rather a traditional Jewish attitude which regards God metaphorically in terms of a homely, intimate, familial relationship, not remote or austere, without confusing the metaphor with the reality.

Klein's studies in Jewish law and philosophy continued after he graduated from Hebrew school in Montreal and even long after he abandoned his intention to enter a seminary to study for the rabbinate. He draws on his learning for his abundant — perhaps over-abundant — references to Biblical and post-Biblical figures, and for the historical events and legends on which he builds many of his poems. The poems in "Talisman in Seven Shreds" (*Hath Not A Jew*), and in "A Voice Was Heard in Ramah" and "Yehuda Ha-Levi, His Pilgrimage" (both in *Poems*) illustrate not only Klein's scholarship but also his ability to discover the relevance of history and tradition to contemporary circumstances. Through these allusions Klein indicates clearly his intellectual attachment to the Jewish religious heritage. In the opening poem of his first volume, *Hath Not A Jew*, Klein emphasizes that when he turns from his cosmopolitan interests and friends back to Jewish concerns, he is called by the "sages of Sura, Pumbeditha's wise", the scholars in the Babylonian centres where the Talmud was compiled, and he turns to Johanan ben-Zakkai, who founded the centre of learning at Jabna when the Romans destroyed the Jewish commonwealth and dispersed the Jews. Very frequently in his poems Klein attests not only to his knowledge of Judaism, but to his love for these builders of Jewish scholarship.

I followed them, I loved them, sage and saint,
 Graybeard in caftan, juggling the when and why,

Ascetic rubbing a microscopic taint,
 Scholar on whose neat earlocks piety ascended
 In spiral to the sky —

Klein's religion was more than a nostalgic return to a happy and secure condition of childhood, a passive acquiescence to the ways of his forefathers. His was a continuing struggle between belief and disbelief, an attempt, not really successful, to reconcile his ancestral faith with his acceptance of his sceptical, contemporary society.

DESPITE HIS REVERENCE for the great Jewish scholars and his respect for the elaborate code of ceremony and practice that constitutes traditional Judaism, Klein was not unaware of the dangers of orthodoxy. In "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" (*Hath Not A Jew*) in the passage dealing with the excommunication of Spinoza, he castigates the rigidity of dogmatists that breeds intolerance and harshness. But such notes of condemnation are scarce in Klein's writing and do not seriously shape his religious position. Of much greater import are the few brief references, asides almost, in which he confessed his own inability to hold firmly to his faith. In "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" (*Hath Not A Jew*) after mentioning that his forefathers gathered strength to endure historic anti-semitism from their converse with God, he added,

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.

A similar and more obviously intrusive confession of doubt is to be found in a later poem, when, after describing at some length the cripples climbing on their knees the ninety-nine steps to the Oratoire de St. Joseph, the tone of ironic detachment which suggests the rationalist's sense of absurdity of the action, is dramatically broken. The poet suddenly becomes personal,

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

In view of such doubts co-existing with his veneration of Jewish sages and their teachings, one is tempted to apply to Klein the very comment he made about

his good friend and fellow-poet, A. J. M. Smith. "Moreover, Smith is, albeit in no orthodox sense, of a 'true-religious heart'; like a renaissance pope, he may or may not believe in God; but all His saints he venerates." (*The Canadian Forum*, Feb., 1944, pp. 257-8).

But such a view, while undoubtedly true at times, is inadequate. Much more often than such direct assertions of disbelief are the statements which firmly express faith, the readiness to go beyond the reach of his intelligence and the limits of the self. In the poem "In Re Solomon Warshawer" (*Poems*) Klein indicates the need to overcome one's own spiritual shortcoming. In this poem, based on legend, the exiled king Solomon, the quintessential wandering Jew, says,

Mistake me not: I am no virtuous saint.
But I at least waged war, for holy booty
Against my human taint.

The outcome of these struggles in Klein's poems is usually a re-affirmation of faith. In fact, usually the struggle is not with one's own spiritual inadequacy or doubts, but rather one that takes place within the framework of belief, of over-all acceptance, and it involves the need to reconcile evident injustice and suffering with faith in God's justice and mercy. The tension in these poems develops out of this attempt. This is made clear in "Reb Levi Yitschok Talks to God" and again in "Rabbi Yom-Tob of Mayence Petitions His God" (*Poems*) where he affirms "What the Lord gives, He owes; He owes no more." But the need to understand in human terms "The how and when, the wherefore and the why" remains and hence the cry,

Let there be light
In the two agonies that are my eyes,
And in the dungeon of my heart, a door
Unbarred. Descend, O Lord, and speak.

It might be argued that in these poems since the poet puts the affirmation into the mouth of his historical characters, he might simply be indicating his awareness of such responses and the strengths derived from the accepting attitude without committing himself to them. However, such statements are so frequently and sympathetically presented that it is fairly obvious from tone and context that Klein shares them. Furthermore, in very many poems he does speak in his own voice to the same effect. The thirty-six psalms in "The Psalter of Avram Haktani" (*Poems*) in mood and thought are fundamentally religious. Psalm II is the most direct admission of his return to his traditional religious beliefs.

How is he changed, the scoffers say,
 This hero of an earlier day, . . .
 O Lord, in this my thirtieth year
 What clever answer shall I bear
 To those slick persons amongst whom
 I sat, but was not in their room?
 How shall I make apocalypse
 Of that which rises to my lips,
 And on my lips is smitten dumb. . . .
 Do Thou the deed, say Thou the word,
 And with Thy sacred stratagem
 Do justify my ways to them.

His last and fullest statement of the spiritual odyssey from unquestioning faith and devotion to religious learning through doubts and denials back to faith is found in his novel *The Second Scroll*, where "miracle" becomes the keyword to our understanding of events and the mysterious intertwining of good and evil. The emergence of good out of evil suggests a power and a design beyond human comprehension, and the series of poems constituting *Gloss Hai*, the final passage in the book, express unequivocally and joyously in the language of prayer Klein's essentially religious nature.

Although Klein's attachment to the Jewish people and its traditional religious beliefs and practices were so deeply rooted in him that he could probably never have entirely escaped its influence, his views and interests did undergo change as his widening range of activities took him beyond the culturally self-sufficient and enclosed Jewish community. It is not surprising that the adolescent, struggling to achieve independence under these circumstances, should have done battle with "The wicked theologic myth", and concocted "learned blasphemies" as he tells us in *Psalm II (Poems)*. Although Klein's emancipation began when he left Hebrew school and attended a secular high school in Montreal, it was only a slight emancipation there as almost the only non-Jews in the large school were the teachers. The broadening process really got under way when he attended McGill and later the University of Montreal. Here Klein got to know directly members of the other two racial groups that with the Jews constituted the tripartite population of Montreal, and perhaps even more important he came to know the riches of a culture other than his native one. The impact of the great figures of English literature, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Donne, in particular, was considerable. By the beginning of the 1930's Klein, like most young poets of the time, came under the influence of T. S. Eliot. Although for the most part Klein

still dealt with Jewish experience, his style in such poems as "The Soirée of Velvel Kleinburger" and in passages even in "Reb Levi Yitschok Talks to God", reflected Eliot's. The colloquialisms, the use of refrain, the seemingly disjointed phrases, are obviously borrowed characteristics and even the poet's attitude of cynical despair, of condescending pity and humorous contempt for Kleinburger are an imitation of Eliot's treatment of Prufrock and Sweeney. Like most writers of this period Klein was stirred by the effects of the depression and then the Spanish Civil War. His radicalism at this time, a continuing political attitude — he stood for Parliament as a C.C.F. candidate in 1948 — does not indicate a reversal in his basic social response, for it did not stem from a determinist or materialist philosophy, but from a moral passion nurtured by the Hebrew prophets. This increasing concern with the general issues confronting society was reflected in such poems as "Barricade Smith, His Speeches", "Blueprint for a Monument of War", and "Of Castles in Spain", none of which he saw fit to re-publish when his collections of poems appeared. His association with the emerging group of able young Montreal poets, particularly A. J. M. Smith and F. R. Scott, became closer. Together with Leo Kennedy, Robert Finch and E. J. Pratt, they constituted the distinctive group whose work was published in *New Provinces*, 1936. Two related forces, however, Zionism and anti-semitism, both significant elements in the Jewish tradition, kept Klein from drifting far from his Jewish concerns; in fact, they intensified his commitment to his heritage.

In 1927 while still a student at McGill, Klein became president of Canadian Young Judaea, a national Zionist youth organization. Shortly after, he became editor of its paper, *The Judaeon*. His involvement in Jewish affairs deepened when he was appointed assistant executive director of the Zionist Organization of Canada, directed its educational programme, and in 1936 edited *The Canadian Zionist*. He became a regular contributor to the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* and in 1939 assumed the editorship of this Anglo-Jewish paper in Montreal, a position which he held until 1955. In these posts he became one of the outstanding leaders and probably the most effective spokesman for the Canadian Jewish community. The effort to establish a Jewish Homeland in Palestine and the need to expose and combat anti-semitism became his daily burden.

KLEIN'S INTENSIFIED PREOCCUPATION with Jewish issues in the late 1930's and 1940's is reflected in the fact that he chose for his first volume of poetry, *Hath Not A Jew* (1940), only poems dealing with Jewish matters. He deals with Jewish legend and history, the struggle to realize the dream of nationhood in Palestine, and he rejoices in the variety of Jewish characters and activities. Even when he might have been critical he refrained, his deft ironic humour, as we see in such poems as "Landlord", "Shadchon", and "Preacher", softening comments that might otherwise have been caustic. In part this attitude reflects Klein's broad tolerance, a comprehensive affection for all mankind, except the haters, which reminds one of Chaucer. In part, however, he might have refrained because this book is in some sense an apologia, a conscious defence of his people, as the very title of the book suggests. Although in the opening poem "Ave Atque Vale" the apologia has in it a tinge of apology, for the most part the portraits that Klein presents are a proud display of his heritage, a dignified counter-portrait to the degrading image projected by the Nazis. One of the most frequently recurring themes is that of anti-semitism, a theme that Klein examines from many aspects and to which he responds in many moods.

The poems that deal with anti-semitism in Klein's first volume taken together reveal through their themes, imagery and allusions, a many-sided and rather full consideration of the problem. Whether they were consciously selected for this purpose or not is hard to say, but certainly they reveal how the mind of the poet grappled with the issue. Although this theme was given terrible and immediate significance by the German Nazis and their imitators, Klein, drawing on a great deal of knowledge, historical and contemporary, gives the topic a perspective needed for adequate understanding. In "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" Klein depicts the contemporary scene in which the western nations remained relatively indifferent to the catastrophe overwhelming the Jews, equivocating and delaying their deliberations on refugees, and for the most part refusing them admission. The emphasis in this poem is on the Nazi outrage which Klein castigates in staccato, ironic phrases, and in a tone of fierce mockery that foreshadows *The Hilleriad*. The next poem in this volume dealing with hostility to the Jews, "Sonnet in Time of Affliction", through its allusions to David, Bar Cochba and the Maccabees, touches on three different periods in Jewish history when the people were endangered by the Philistines, Romans, and Hellenized Syrians. In a series of poems that follows, "Design for Mediæval Tapestry", Klein treats of the Christian persecution of the Jews in the Middle Ages.

Klein not only makes reference to varying moments in history to establish a context for the contemporary phenomenon of anti-semitism; he also explores in these poems the various ways in which it manifests itself and the varying motives behind it. In "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" Nazi anti-semitism is seen as an insensate, primitive racial rage, violent and sadistic. In "Design for Mediæval Tapestry" the basic motive was religious antagonism supplemented by greedy desire for material and sexual plunder. And in the last poem in this volume on this subject, Poem V of "Sonnets Semitic", Klein returns to the modern period, but the aspects of anti-semitism presented differs from the others: here Klein reveals the polite prejudice which does not destroy but merely limits and humiliates.

Klein was at least as much concerned with the nature of the Jewish response to this external threat. The twentieth-century speaker in "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" considers and rejects prayer, though he recognizes the strength his forefathers derived from it under similar circumstances, because he is cut off from his faith. He rejects Esau's argument because violence is antithetical to the traditional way of life developed by the ghetto Jew, and he does not accept the escape offered by suicide, for such an ignoble end is a denial of the worth and dignity of one's heritage. The only defence the poet here envisages is

The frozen patience waiting for its day,
The stance long-suffering, the stoic word,
The bright empirics that knows well that the
Night of the Cauchemar comes and goes away, —

In the eleven poems that constitute "Design for Mediæval Tapestry" Klein depicts a wider range of responses: attempts to escape through flight, fearful hiding or apostasy; and varying attitudes that prompt acceptance. Some, as Klein points out, accept their condition passively, displaying a fatalistic resignation ("Reb Daniel Shochet reflects") — or acquiescence in the will of God ("Nahum-this-is-also-for-the-good ponders"). Others, accepting also like Nahum the justice of God's acts, postulate their own guilty, sinful nature, and attempt to persuade Him to change His will through their repentance and reform. Still others, however, refuse to escape or acquiesce. In "Job reviles" God is arraigned for his failure to act, while in the last poem in this series, "Esther hears echoes of his voice", there is a passionate demand for an explanation.

In *Poems* (1944) Klein is less preoccupied by the theme of anti-semitism. Psalm VI is a moving total indictment of mankind for the Nazi horrors, per-

petrated or tolerated, and Psalm XXV simply asks for an explanation of “the folded present”. In two long poems in this volume, “In Re Solomon Warshawer” and “Rabbi Yom-Tob of Mayence Petitions His God”, Klein does, however, re-state aspects of this theme developed in his earlier volume. In *The Hitleriad* (1944), a thematically simple and direct satire, Klein catalogues the Nazis and their crimes. Despite the explosive force of Klein’s wrath in this poem, and the sharpness of his wit, the poem fails primarily because no amount of rhetorical sarcastic sneers and name-calling, no collection of insults or invective, it matters not how effectively phrased — and some lines are very effective — can convey adequately the shock that came from the recognition of the possible extent of human depravity.

With the cessation of the war and the defeat of Nazi Germany, the threat of anti-semitism waned and Klein’s poetic interest in the subject ceased. It was a crucial theme for him not merely because he felt that he and his people were threatened, but because this complex and pervasive phenomenon with its social and religious implications revealed much about the nature of man and his inter-relationships with his fellow men and with God. In so far as it raised the question of evil and God’s relation to it, this theme impinged directly on Klein’s religious ideas, tested his belief. The fullest exploration of this aspect of this theme is to be found in the novel *The Second Scroll*.

The problem of anti-semitism related also to Klein’s commitment to the Zionist cause. He welcomed the restoration of the spirit of independence and self-reliance that the Zionist effort brought to the Jews in their confrontation with anti-semitism. But Zionism was a much more meaningful concept than merely a mechanism for self-defence or even for the realization of a nationalist objective. If anti-semitism was the negative agent, the centripetal force compelling Klein to the centre of Jewish experience, Zionism was the positive force attracting and holding him there with a religious fervour. Franz Kafka, in a reflection, commented that the Zionists had grabbed hold of an edge of the “tallith” (prayer shawl) as it disappeared around the corner in the twentieth century. This shrewd observation, made long before its truth was as obvious as it is today, applies only in small measure to Klein, for to him the nationalist ideal never became a substitute for the religious one. For Klein, the reach for Zion, was, as it had always been traditionally, a religious yearning. Zion had an imaginative reality and expressed an imaginative and spiritual need, like the world of his childhood which he sought to regain in memory.

It is a fabled city that I seek;
 It stands in Space's vapours and Time's haze.
 ("Autobiographical", Gloss Aleph, *The Second Scroll*)

The nationalist impulse, which Klein also fully accepted, was but an expression of the urge for redemption and an attempt in twentieth-century terms to realize it. Though Klein may have had misgivings about other aspects of Judaism, on this issue he never wavered.

Klein's involvement in Zionist activity began early. In the late 1920's and 1930's he was active in Canadian Young Judaea, and later in the Zionist Organization of Canada. This interest in Zionism was reflected early in his poetry. In January 1930, at the age of 21, he published in *The Menorah Journal* (later reprinted in *Hath Not A Jew*) a sequence of poems *Greeting on This Day* in which he considers various aspects of Zionism, the terror and the wonder of the new life in the Holy Land, the relationship of Jew to Arab, the development of the new Jewish prototype, the straight-backed pioneer Jew. These two themes are reiterated in two other "Zionist" poems in *Hath Not A Jew*, "Sonnet in Time of Affliction" and Poem II, "Sonnets Semitic". In the former Klein is distressed by the violence that compels those who seek to rebuild peacefully the Homeland to answer with force. The second poem, whose opening line is an echo of the last line of "Sonnet in Time of Affliction" emphasizes with its imagery of white doves and orange blossoms the joyful aspect of the return to Zion. In "Yehuda Ha-Levi, His Pilgrimage" (*Poems*), a long allegorical romance about the exile of the Jewish people from their Homeland and attempted return by the poet-philosopher Yehuda Ha-Levi, Klein reveals clearly his own passionate longing for the return. The fullest statement of Klein's Zionist concept is to be found in his novel, *The Second Scroll*, where the national theme is most clearly interwoven with the religious theme, for the search for Zion is inseparable from the search for God and an understanding of His ways; its attainment is seen as a miraculous manifestation of His will.

THOUGH KLEIN WAS SHAPED by his beginnings and then impelled by the forces of the 1930's and 1940's to concern himself primarily with the experiences of the Jewish people, this concentration of interest did not diminish his achievement. As E. K. Brown has pointed out, the effect has been enlarging rather than limiting, for Klein's world of characters, events and ideas

possesses "a solidity and an intensity . . . very rare in our literature." Although Klein drew considerably on his heritage, his poems usually depict human traits that are universal and express a religious or moral attitude common to Christian and Jew. E. J. Pratt, in a review of *The Hilderiad* (*Canadian Forum*, Oct. 1944) stated that "Despite the difficulties springing out of his scholasticism, his legalistic lore, and his Talmudic terms and references which needed footnotes, Klein could appeal to us on the basis of a moral culture common to Jew and Gentile — that of the Hebrew prophet and psalmist. All of his best work possessed this appeal, whether it was the ringing affirmation of Isaiah or the subdued litanies of Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes, and David."

Klein's interests were not merely Jewish. Canada, too, was part of his heritage. In the 1930's, as has been briefly noted, he was closely associated with the *New Provinces* poetry group, affected by the literary influences of Eliot and the seventeenth-century metaphysicals, and by such social conditions as the depression and the rise of fascism. In the early 1940's he was part of a group of active Montreal poets, which included Patrick Anderson and Irving Layton, who published in *Preview* and *First Statement*, the forerunner of *Northern Review*. Partly as a result of the impetus of this new poetic movement, and in part reflecting the intensifying sense of Canadian nationalism widely felt at the end of World War II, Klein felt drawn to the Canadian scene generally. With the defeat of Hitler and the removal of the menace of anti-semitism, Klein's imagination was less dominated by the Jewish condition and he felt released from his burden of responsibility as Jewish spokesman. He no longer needed to cry his outcry, or to set beside the ugly stereotyped portrait of the Jew, the Jew and his tradition as he knew them. In *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948) Klein turned to new themes.

The subjects of the poems in this last volume are taken for the most part from the city and the province in which Klein lived. They are perceptive and sympathetic commentaries on people and the objects and activities which express essential aspects of their lives. Generally speaking, however, the poet is less personally involved in his material than in his earlier poems. His tone is quieter, less declamatory and less urgent. He achieves greater objectivity and even greater artistic control because he maintains a measure of detachment from his subject. In his earlier poems the poet wrote from within the world he depicted, totally committed to it, expressing warmly, with a sense of immediacy and intimacy, its achievements and dreams, its pride and its fears. Despite the dangers which such psychological proximity and commitment pose for the artist — excessive emo-

tionalism, and the subordination of artistic and critical considerations to extra-literary concerns — weaknesses from which Klein was not entirely free, these poems speak directly and forcefully to us. The poems in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* are much more controlled, the poet no doubt finding it easier to order his feelings and to shape his expression of them when dealing with grain elevators or frigidaire, or even when describing Mount Royal or Monsieur Gaston.

While contrasts between Klein's last poems and his earlier ones can easily be drawn, both groups reflect certain continuing characteristics of the poet. Klein still searches for the archetypal image to sum up an aspect of a society or a culture, a symbol of a condition or tradition whether it be a shrine, a rocking-chair or oxen "lyric with horns", banks or pawnbrokers, liquor stores or filling stations. His sensitivity to tradition makes him the readier to discover those symbols which aptly distinguish a people. Delicately and accurately Klein depicts phases of French-Canadian life — their sustaining faith, the demagoguery of the politicians, the emphasis on class in a hierarchical order. In the title poem, *The Rocking Chair*, Klein successfully conveys the mood and pace of French-Canadian life, its slow conservatism. Though for the most part Klein refrains from comment, through his use of irony the poet shows that he is not unaware of shortcomings. He has always, however, a sympathetic understanding, even an affection, for the Canadien. Deeply rooted himself in an old tradition, he responds sensitively to the French-Canadian tradition. In an article which appeared in *Les Gants du Ciel*, Dr. A. J. M. Smith underlined this relationship. "Dans l'entité patriarcale, traditionnelle et ecclésiastique qu'est le Canada français, Klein a trouvé un univers que sa sensibilité juive lui permet de comprendre et d'aimer."

Klein's traditionalism, his conscious attempt to re-create the Jewish world past and present as he experienced it in all its particularity affected his style and language. The influence of Biblical rhythms with its balanced and contrapuntal effects is obvious in many of Klein's poems, but the effect on his language is even more notable. Clearly, in part, Klein's language is distinctive because he, the poet, is unique, with his own "flavour" and outlook, his own tastes. But his diction is distinctive also because the world he describes is unique and he wished to convey this quality. Klein, though born in Canada, belongs to that generation of Jews that came from Europe, and fashioned for itself its own community in Canada quite separate and almost complete. This community developed its own character and personality within the national pattern, a part of the prevailing Canadian mosaic. Through the special qualities of his language, the use of foreign

words, especially Hebraic and uncommon English words, and his imagery with its exotic and at times esoteric qualities, Klein tried to achieve a kind of linguistic apartness that would reinforce the similar impression of the community and its traditions that he was writing about. Words and phrases like “malefic djinns”, “cognomened”, “alembic”, “cauchemar”, “shadchan” and “pilpul trick”, appear frequently. His poetry is filled with allusions to the Bible and post-Biblical Jewish sources, often relatively unknown, and much of his imagery is drawn from the same sources and from religious ceremony and ritual. The sky on Passover night “is dotted like th’unleavened bread” and the moon is a golden seder platter used for the Passover Feast (*Haggadah*). In speaking of the poet Yehuda Ha-Levi on his journey to the Holy Land, Klein invokes rich images associated with the place.

And from the beaker of the soul, that wine
Which sours not; and from the bowled brain
Grape clusters torn from paradisal vine;
Honey of Samson’s bees; and milk from Pharaoh’s kine!

We find the same linguistic tendency when he writes about the French-Canadian community in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems*. The scholarly librarian, Monsieur Delorme, is described as one who so loves bindings and the old régime “that in his mind is gobelin’d fleur de lys.” The description of Montreal not only conveys its history through image and allusion, but its character through the Gallicized vocabulary.

Grand port of navigations, multiple
The lexicons uncargo’d at your quays,
Sonnant though strange to me; but chiefest, I,
Auditor of your music, cherish the
Joined double-melodied vocabulaire
Where English vocable and roll Ecosic,
Mollified by the parle of French
Bilinguefact your air!

Although Klein in this poem carries this device to such an extent that the poem becomes almost a linguistic “tour de force”, the result, on the whole, is startlingly effective.

Klein’s traditionalism, then, shaped and directed his creative powers. It provided him with a body of experience from the living past that stirred his imagination and his feelings, and at the same time enabled him to consider contemporary

events in historical perspective, a capacity which gave depth and added meaning to his experiences. His source of inspiration was the Jewish tradition and he remained fixed, rooted, in its scheme of reference and moral values, but the arc of his angle of vision widened so that he embraced much more.

