

THE POLISHED LENS

Poetic Techniques of Pratt and Klein

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THE STYLE IS THE MAN. That familiar saying recalls what T. S. Eliot stressed in his analysis of Ezra Pound's poetry:

People may think they like the form because they like the content, or they think they like the content because they like the form. In the perfect poet they fit and are the same thing; and in another sense they are *always* the same thing.

A study, therefore, of the styles of two Canadian poets can be useful only if it delivers into our minds a clearer understanding of the poet's approach to his work, his themes. My aim here is not an analysis of technique for its own sake, but of technique for the sake of enlightenment.

In retrospect, the language of our Post-Confederation poets is singularly conventional and dull. Though often felicitous in its music and imagery it swings, supine, in a hammock: "golden and inappellable".¹ Adjectives predominate over verbs; and even such a good imagist as Lampman pads out his lines with useless words, simply to fit the required metre. In these poets there is no sense of being "seized" by language, in the Joycean way. By 1920 it was clear there was a crying need to liberate the language of poetry in Canada; and an equally urgent need to turn from the contemplation of nature to concern for the human condition.

The first sign of experimentation in both areas came with the publication of *Newfoundland Verse* by E. J. Pratt, in 1923; and more markedly with his *Titans*, 1926. Pratt, a robust talker from our northeastern shore, set Toronto crackling with his "Cachalot" and "Witches' Brew". The language was fresh, muscular, contemporary and often boisterously amusing. The metre was one that had been

rarely practised by a Canadian poet: octosyllabic couplets with an anapaestic roll, "perched on a dead volcanic pile"; and the content was not too strenuous to tax the average man's ingenuity. It bore with it strong echoes of mock heroic epic and light satire. Like Pope or Dryden, Pratt did not distrust the world he mocked, nor did he wish to destroy it. He felt it could stand up to attack. The style of these early extravaganzas, accordingly, was marked by punch and zest, the metre moving at a run or a gallop by means of strong, monosyllabic verbs; the rhyme staccato, to punctuate the humour.

They ate and drank and fought, it's true,
 And when the zest was on they slew;
 And yet their most tempestuous quarrels
 Were never prejudiced by morals.
 ("The Witches' Brew")

With his next poem, "The Great Feud", it would seem from the style alone that Pratt had begun to be aware of some conflict in his position. As Desmond Pacey has pointed out, "Passages of horrible conflict alternate with passages of rollicking humour." The theme is a more serious one than that of the "Cachalot" or "The Witches' Brew"; and yet the poet relies on the same octosyllabics, enjambment and witty rhyme to carry the rhythm of the fable. Agreed, the myth-making, story-telling elements are Pratt's own; but he does not support these with imagery, epithet, or colour. His chief structural weakness on the syntactic level (to be explored more fully later) is already evident. Pratt depends too fully on the prepositional phrase. On one page of 28 lines, chosen at random, there are 24 phrases: endless lists of nouns. Variety is gained, notwithstanding, by means of ingenuity in the choice of vocabulary and end-rhymes.

If we now compare Abraham Klein's earliest work with Pratt's *phase one* we find that his technical power, evident at the age of twenty, was amazingly versatile. Of the two poets Milton Wilson has remarked, justly, that at this period "Their diction often calls for the same critical adjectives: polysyllabic, technical, erudite, as well as colloquial or prosaic",² and in metre and rhyme Klein might be thought to be echoing if not imitating the older poet. Yet already in his first book, *Hath Not a Jew* (1940), Klein appears to have at his command a dazzling variety of poetic forms. The verse (never "free" and rarely unrhymed) ranges widely through octosyllabics, heroic couplets, *terza rima*; and from short bursts of lyricism to the long, sinuous biblical line with its caesura and parallelism:

If this be a Jew, indeed, where is the crook of his spine;
 and the quiver of his lip, where?

Behold his knees are not callous through kneeling; he
is proud, he is erect.

(“Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens”)

The effect here is created by the use of caesura or *juncture*, as it is now commonly called by prosodists. Besides the normal juncture between words Klein indicates, in Line One by means of punctuation, a pause accompanied by a rise in pitch which serves to place added stress and interest on the second rhetorical sentence:

If this be a Jew — indeed/where is the crook of his spine —

In Line Two, the placing of the rising juncture stresses the question word, “where”:

and the quiver of his lip/where —

In the next line the choice of the rhetorical word “behold” in itself creates a dramatic juncture:

Behold|his knees are not callous through kneeling — he —
is proud|he is erect —

It is by means of such skilful techniques as this that Klein creates his powerful rhythms. Klein uses rhyme also to emphasize his metrical effects. He has a notable facility with rhyme; and in his work it is difficult to find a rhyme that does not sound natural, at home. In the tetrameter stanzas he explores many variations in rhyme scheme and in the *terza rima* he varies one-syllabled with two-syllabled rhymes so that the rhythm is constantly subject to a new charge:

Seek reasons; rifle your theology;
Philosophize; expand 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;

That lance-points prick; that scorched bones hiss;
That thumb-screws agonize, and that a martyr
Is mad if he considers these things bliss.

(“Design for a Mediæval Tapestry”)

In this book, *Hath Not a Jew*, Klein established himself as a master of the craft. Added to the singular felicity of his metre and rhyme was the delight in vocabulary and the contrapuntal use of pause, or juncture, as evident in the poem quoted above (particularly effective in the last two verses and helpfully marked by semi-colons and colon).

ON NOW, to *phase two*, where Pratt's development will again be paralleled with Klein's. Pratt's work of interest here is *The Titanic* (1935), a poem in which he extricates himself from the tetrametric clutch. His line is extended now to heroic couplets. These, at their lowest level, can be platitudinous and dull:

Her intercostal spaces ready to start
 The power pulsing through her lungs and heart
 An ocean lifeboat in herself, so ran
 The architectural comment on her plan.

At the highest level, where the rhymes are more freely arranged, the features of enjambment and juncture create an inner tension which is most pleasing:

Pressure and glacial time had stratified
 The berg to the consistency of flint,
 And kept inviolate, through clash of tide
 And gale, façade and columns with their hint
 Of inward altars and of steeple bells
 Ringing the passage of the parallels.

These images are common ones, more vividly played upon by Melville ("The Berg") and by Roberts ("The Iceberg"); but Pratt's vocabulary saves the day, with quite a brilliant display of tension between polysyllabic words of classical origin (*consistency, inviolate, parallels*) and a catalogue of single-syllabled nouns: *gale, hint, bells, berg, flint, clash, tide*.

It must be faced, however: Pratt's passion for nouns leads him into two serious difficulties. One is the absence of texture; for without adjectives and adverbs it is not easy to appeal to the senses. And where, in Pratt's poetry, is there any evocation of touch, taste, hearing, scent? True, the visual appeal is there: "sloping spur that tapered to a claw"; but this is an appeal in outline, in black and white. One senses that the poet is colour-blind. The adjectives which he does use, sparingly, call no colours into view: *lateral, casual, polar, eternal, southern, glacial*.

But the monotony of Pratt's verse can be traced, I believe, to a deeper, structural cause. Because he is so concerned with "naming" — adding up nouns — he must catch hold of them by using two devices: by cataloguing; or by dangling them from the hooks of prepositions. It is rarely possible to find a line of Pratt without a prepositional phrase; more often there are two or three bolstering it up. In the lines quoted above this pattern can be seen in five of the six. In the

second line there are two prepositional phrases; in the third, two; in the fourth, two.

Now this pattern, in itself, is not deplorable: it is an essential element in English syntax. Praise of the noun (sometimes amounting to adoration!) can be found in much contemporary critical and creative writing. Gertrude Stein puts it one way:

Poetry is concerned with using with abusing with losing and wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. . . . Poetry is doing nothing but using refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns.³

and here is Harry R. Warfel, a linguist:

But how do these nouns come to be used so much? They play as subjects of verbs, as complements of verbs and verbals, as objects of prepositions, as independent elements, as headwords. What is important is their mode of turning up everywhere. For example, nearly every noun can be the object of several prepositions. If the working vocabulary of English has 200,000 nouns and these unite with only an average of ten prepositions, the result is two million adjective and/or adverb phrases. If you have ever wondered why some writers clutter their style with prepositional phrases, you can now see why.⁴

A skilful poet then, writing in English, will certainly use nouns to his advantage to vary the stress and juncture; but Pratt, I feel, tends to use nouns to his disadvantage. For instance, the indiscriminate use of "of" followed by nouns (lines 5 and 6) ends, from sheer repetition, in rhythmic paralysis.

As we have seen, Klein's metrical range was wider at the start than was Pratt's. In his *phase two* Klein continued to employ polysyllabics as well as the heroic couplet. Understandably therefore in *The Hitleriad* (1944) there are echoes of Pratt's style. The form is not narrative like "The Great Feud" but the intention is equally satiric:

And then there came, — blow, trumpets; drummers, drum
The apocalypse, the pandemonium
The war the Kaiser from his shrivelled hand
Let fall upon the European land

Noticeable even in this unremarkable stanza is the use of juncture for dramatic effect; of finite verbs; of inversion; and of clausal patterns which create rhythmic variation. Further on Klein writes:

Club-footed, rat-faced, halitotic, the
Brave Nordic ideal, a contrario!

A kept man; eloquent, a Ph.D;
 Carried no gun, forsooth; a radio
 Lethal enough for him, shouting its lies
 Exploding lebensraum and libido;
 Subtle in puncturing all human foibles
 Saving his own, prolific in alibis —
 Goebbels.

The Hitleriad is not a successful poem. It lacks an element which Pratt possessed in good measure: objectivity. Nonetheless as a long poem it is interesting to compare with one of Pratt's because, technically, it rings many more changes. Thereby it achieves pace; and on another level, irony.

In the same year, 1944, Klein's real lyricism burst forth in his "psalms", thirty-six short poems in a great variety of forms (published in *Poems*). Several are closely patterned on the Psalms of David in their long lines, parallelism, Hebrew inversions and rhetoric. Others leap away from anything but a superficial resemblance to the English iambic pentameter and allow strong stress rhythm, reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon and of Hebrew, to take over. Here is a delightful example, from Psalm XXVII, "a psalm to teach humility":

O sign and wonder of the barnyard, more
 beautiful than the pheasant, more melodious
 than nightingale! O creature marvellous!

Prophet of sunrise, and foreteller of times!
 Vizier of the constellations! Sage,
 red-bearded, scarlet turbaned, in whose brain
 the stars lie scattered like well-scattered grain!
 Calligraphist upon the barnyard page!
 Five-noted balladist! Crower of rhymes!

But this is Klein in his gayest, tenderest mood. He can be more easily likened to Pratt in a poem called "In Re Solomon Warshawer". Pratt's "The Truant" is quite comparable because it represents Pratt at a high technical level, breaking away from the confines of rigid metre. The heroic couplet still holds the thought in check, but in "The Truant" it is loosened, stretched or abbreviated to avoid monotony. The tone is vigorous, satiric; and the theme is man himself, pitted against a mechanical universe.

Sire
 The stuff is not amenable to fire
 There still remains that strange precipitate

Which has the quality to resist
Our oldest and most trusted catalyst

Lines such as these retain Pratt's robust, semi-scientific vocabulary; and his wit takes up the slack caused by the obsessive use of prepositional phrases. I find this Pratt's most interesting poem, both for its technical virtuosity and for its provocative thought. Man is being judged: but he reverses the tables, himself condemning "God" for creating a purely mechanical universe. In Klein's "In Re Solomon Warshawer" there also occurs a judgment scene; in this case between the evil forces in man, and the good. Man's plea before the court (a wartime tribunal) is that of the underdog, of the one in process of being destroyed, the Jew. The abstract Jew however is so particularized that the reader is constrained to identify with him (as also is the case in "The Truant").

Here is a Nazi soldier reporting to his superior:

Asked for his papers, he made a great to-do
of going through the holes in his rags, whence he withdrew
a Hebrew pamphlet and a signet ring,
herewith produced, exhibits 1 and 2.

I said, No document in a civilized tongue?
He replied:

*Produce, O Lord, my wretched fingerprint,
Bring forth, O angel in the heavenly court,
My dossier, full, detailed, both fact and hint,
Felony, misdemeanor, tort!*

I refused to be impressed by talk of that sort.

But passionate identification with the rightness of man's cause heightens the language to a degree not found in "The truant". Consider the lines which begin

They would have harried me extinct, those thrones.
Set me, archaic, in their heraldries,
Blazon antique! . . .

Rhyme is forgotten. Iambic regularity is broken by strong stresses aided by trochaic and dactylic rhythms. Added to these features are those of inversion, juncture, and punctuation used for intonational effect. In this respect the entire poem is a forerunner of poems in *The Rocking Chair* (1948) where:

it is tradition. Centuries have flicked

from its arcs, alternately flicked and pinned.
It rolls with the gait of St. Malo. It is act
and symbol, symbol of this static folk.

Here, most cunningly within the apparent framework of the iambic pentameter, Klein has overlaid the four-stress beat of much Hebrew poetry and caught at the same time the lilt of the French language. He achieves this *tour de force*, I believe, by emphasizing the four levels of stress; distinguishing between syllables that are nearly neutral and thus “outriders” in Hopkins’ sense (*alternately*) and those that bear tertiary, secondary or primary stress. His use of juncture aids in this process also, as it is always well-timed (or *isochronic*).

BY THE TIME Klein’s *Rocking Chair* appeared Pratt was already well established in his phase three, with *Brébeuf and his Brethren*, a long documentary narrative based on Quebec’s history and religious past. The epic length and scope of this poem would indicate that Pratt conceived it as a major production. But surely it could be criticized as a conventional piece rather than a creative one, for in form and intention it is eminently Victorian! Nor is it comparable with the later experimental poetry of Klein. On the technical level both poets have thrown off their patterned style, have pushed rhyme into the background, have sought a free flowing rhythm close to the rhythm of speech. But what speech? I would dare to say that Pratt’s speech here is prosaic, generalized; whereas Klein’s has the vernacular lilt, and is particular.

In *Brébeuf* Pratt offers us a steady but not a heady blank verse. Would not the opening lines, apparently attempting to create atmosphere, be equally effective if written as prose? And the second stanza is surely one long, wordy list, noun following upon noun?

The story of a frontier like a saga
Rang through the cells and cloisters of a nation.

This is not to say that *Brébeuf* is not without its moments of poetic intensity. In Stanza XII particularly the iambic line is made undulant and ominous by means of dactylic and falling rhythms. Then the poem climbs again to the climax, a simple image of

In the sound of invisible trumpets blowing

Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered
By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill . . .

These are the heights; but there are too many valleys where vocabulary, syntax, rhythm and imagery reveal only mediocrity.

How different has been the development of Abraham Klein! Behind him lies the shadow of three languages, three traditions. The Jewish writer in Montreal can indeed be said to bridge the English and French cultures, and to inject into these languages the rhythms, inversions, pauses and parallelisms peculiar to Hebrew and Yiddish.

Then he will remember his travels over that body
the torso verb, the beautiful face of the noun,

and all those shaped and warm auxiliaries.
a first love it was, the recognition of his own.
Dear limbs adverbial, complexion of adjective
dimple and dip of conjugation!
(“Portrait of the Artist as Landscape”)

In those lines of Klein we find the contemporaneous sound of the “loosened” iambic employed by Spender, Auden, Day Lewis, where the strong stresses pull the lines up short and leave words like “auxiliaries” “recognition” and “conjugation” with only one strong stress. We find also the emotional, rhetorical lilt of the Hebrew, created by inversion (“Dear limbs adverbial”), by dactyls, and then the counterpoint rhythm that surely echoes the French. This note sounds clearly in short poems such as “Political Meeting”.

he is their idol: like themselves, not handsome,
not snobbish, not of the grande allée. Un homme!

and also in that marvellous linguistic carnival: “Montreal”. In his linguistic sensitivity Klein is a surpassing fine juggler, holding three globes in his hand and tossing them about with dazzling dexterity. In this no other Canadian poet is his equal.

Let me now set down my hope that this examination of the style of two poets has revealed something of their attitude as creators. For me, Pratt is a self-made poet; Klein, a natural one, possessing a Blakeian simplicity. Pratt remained a story-teller to the end, an “old artificer” collecting artefacts and arranging them cunningly, without committing his deeper self. The man, like the style, is easily identified. As W. E. Collin has noted, “his mind has undergone a scholar’s disci-

pline, it never runs berserk.”⁵ Klein, a scholar also but in a narrower discipline, probed inwards to the human soul, revealing its possibilities for creative joy as well as its predilections for darkness, madness.

Palsy the keeper of the house;
And of strongmen take Thy toll.
Break down the twigs; break down the boughs,
But touch not, Lord, the golden bowl!

(from Psalm XXII: “A prayer for Abraham, against madness.”)

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ D. C. Scott, “The Height of Land,” in *Selected Poems*. Toronto; Ryerson; 1951.
- ² Milton Wilson, “Klein’s Drowned Poet.” *Canadian Literature*, No. 6.
- ³ Gertrude Stein, “What is Poetry”; in *The Language of Wisdom and Folly*, edited by Irving J. Lee. Harper, 1949.
- ⁴ Harry R. Warfel, “Structural Linguistics and Composition” in *College English*, vol. 20, 1958-59.
- ⁵ W. E. Collin, *The White Savannahs*. Toronto, Macmillan, 1936. p. 140.

