

# Klein's *Hath Not a Jew: in Search of Vision*

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*Hath Not a Jew*, A.M. Klein's first volume of poetry, invites a reassessment of the poet's treatment of his Jewish roots. Despite the generally accepted view of Klein as a poet whose interests focus predominantly on the Jewish theme, *Hath Not a Jew*, published in 1940, displays a complex vision of the world at large at a critical historical juncture. The volume contains poems written in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Thematically, the selection marks progression from hopeful trust in a better future towards an increasingly pessimistic view of man and his works.

Some poems, such as "Gift," "Wandering Beggar," "Doctor Dwarf," portray the poet's happy childhood. They recount Chasidic fairy tales brought from the Eastern European "shtetl" and indicate the freedom of religious custom and observance in Klein's native Montreal. Indeed, at the time of Klein's childhood and adolescence in the 1920s, Jews in Quebec were enjoying good relationships with the French community. As Usher Caplan notes in his biography of Klein, despite occasional outbursts of anti-Jewish sentiments, "the individual relations between Jewish and French Montrealers were normally quite friendly."<sup>1</sup> So friendly that, as Lita-Rose Betcherman mentions in her study of Quebec in the 1930s, "the official organ of the Catholic Church [called] Quebec 'a paradise for minorities'."<sup>2</sup>

The sense of security fostered closeness with parental traditions and life style transplanted from Europe. In "Heirloom," Klein invokes his inheritance of faith and learning:

Books of the Baal Shem Toy, and his wonders;  
.....  
And sundry other tomes for a good Jew.  
.....  
These are my coat of arms, and these unfold  
My noble lineage, my proud ancestry!<sup>3</sup>

Klein's proud identification with Jewish heritage informs his quest for a better world; both the sense of belonging and erudition allow him to develop a world view which transcends the interests of the Jewish minority in Quebec. The referential framework of Jewish philosophy and political thought extrapolates the roots of the unfolding world-wide crisis. The poet's enthusiastic subscription to Spinoza's pantheistic concept of the organic unity of God, man, and nature proclaims the world's moral regeneration. His faith in humanism posits Zionism not merely as a nationalistic movement, but rather as materialization of the universal ideals of brotherhood and peace.

The rise of fascism on both shores of the Atlantic put an end to Klein's vision of a better future; both his journal writing and poetry reveal the poet's awareness of the forthcoming catastrophe. In Quebec, the fascist movement headed by Armand Arcand signified the end of peaceful coexistence of Jews and French Canadians. The sense of insecurity was exacerbated by the intensifying anti-Jewish terror in Nazi Germany. Hitler's threat to European Jewry enhanced the vulnerability of the Canadian Jew vis-à-vis his environment.

Klein's response to the political situation of the 1930s focuses on man as both perpetrator

and victim of tyrannical oppression. The recurring motif of the persecuted Jew illustrates Klein's use of Jewish thematics to elucidate the process of the universal moral disintegration. The metaphor of the legendary golem introduces the nihilistic notion of the world. The subversion of the folkloristic intertext establishes a vision which repudiates the oppressor and, at the same time, condemns the passivity of the victim. Recalling Maimonides' observation of man's perplexed stance vis- -vis the universe, Klein ascribes the emergence of anti-humanist forces of destruction to man's narcissistic misinterpretation of his position and purpose in the universe. Neither tradition nor religious institution may be of assistance in a reality whereby man in his arrogance fails to understand and implement God's will by adhering to the ideal of human brotherhood. Klein's critical representation of Jewish helplessness mirrors the entrapment of the modern man in self-made vicious cycles of violence and suffering. The poet thus suggests that the possibility of redemption lies in the recognition of human accountability towards the sacred values of life and freedom. Despite the increasing sense of despair, Klein's assessment of the darkening human condition predicates the hope for the victory of humanism upon humanity's readiness to actively confront the forces of mindless brutality and oppression.

#### Pantheism: the hope for redemption

Klein's reading of Spinoza's pantheistic system in the poem "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" (1931) manifests an attempt to offset an imminent outburst of human evil. The emphasis on God's immanence warns against surrender to human tyranny. Failure to recognize the divine in every instance of creation results in a threat of moral self-destruction. Identifying with Spinoza, Klein condemns the stultifying dogma of religious institutions, mocks "synods [which] tell God to be or not to be" (*CP*, p. 130). Like Spinoza, he perceives man's attempts to speak in God's name as manifestations of will to power and self-aggrandizement.

Spinoza ridicules man's arrogant claim to intellectual comprehension of both the universe that surrounds him and the divine power that created him; the philosopher sees man as "an individual thing [who] looks no further than his finite character can reach." Man, therefore, should use his intellect to understand that "he is a part and a tool of the whole of Nature... because she is infinite, and must make use of him, together with all other things, as an instrument."<sup>4</sup> Klein concurs with Spinoza's notion of nature's supreme position in the universe. Since nature is the manifestation of Divinity, God permeates the universe. Man, therefore, like all the other components of Creation, displays his uniqueness through the spark of the divine that informs him. The poet praises Spinoza,

the horrible atheist [who] compiled such lore that proved, like proving two and two make four, that in the crown of God we all are gems. From glass and dust of glass he brought to light, out of the pulver and the polished lens, the prism and flying mote; and hence the infinitesimal and infinite. (*CP*, p. 130)

The pantheistic vision of deity in nature does not belittle the human being; as God's creation, man is naturally both product and reflection of the divine. The poet thus turns to God not to claim favours, but to acknowledge the divine spark which links him to his Creator:

I behold thee in all things, and in all things: lo, it is myself; I look into the pupil of thine eye, it is my very countenance I see.

.....

For thou art the world, and I am part thereof;  
Howbeit, even in dust I am resurrected; and even in decay I live again. (*CP*, p. 132)

In contrast with the lifeless, mechanistic brutality of the arising political tyranny, spiritual life is constantly renewed through the Creator's eternal presence. Since dust and decay are parts of Creation, even death attests to the spiritual essence of the divine.

Klein then adopts Spinoza's concept of man as a part, not the centre, of the universe. Such view of man concurs with Klein's later reference to Maimonides, the great mediaeval Jewish philosopher and theologian. Spinoza, in fact, promulgates Maimonides' teaching that man should not imagine that the whole universe exists only for him... [but]... that the universe exists because the Creator wills it so."<sup>5</sup> Klein's representation of Spinoza in the final stanza of the poem aptly contrasts the unnatural, dogmatic rigidity of the religious institution with the philosopher's loving, harmonious relations with God and the universe. The poet sees

Spinoza . . . plucking tulips  
Within the garden of Mynheer, forgetting  
Dutchmen and Rabbins, and consumptive  
fretting,  
Plucking his tulips in the Holland sun,  
Remembering the thought of the Adored,  
Spinoza, gathering flowers for the One,  
The ever-unwedded lover of the Lord.  
(*CP*, p. 132)

G.K. Fischer, in her study of the poem, suggests that Klein chose to identify with Spinoza and emphasize the philosopher's "relevance, his modernity" in an attempt to resolve his own uncertainties regarding the religious institution.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the intensity and exuberance of Klein's response to Spinoza seem to transcend his personal doubts about religious observances. Klein's adoption of Spinozistic pantheism in the early 1930s signals the need for an adequate philosophical system in view of the increasingly menacing political situation. While the Christian Church seemed unable or unwilling to prevent the rise of anti-democratic, racist movements, the Jewish establishment remained passive in face of the threat.

For a moment, Spinoza's pantheistic vision seemed as a fitting answer to the dehumanizing aspect of the emerging totalitarianism. In the pantheistic system, man partakes of the divine; therefore, his life is sacred. Hence, murder amounts to the annihilation of God in man. In an unpublished version of the poem, the following lines leave no doubt as to Klein's deep conviction of the sacredness of human life: ". . . thou art the world, and I am part thereof; he who does violence to me, verily sins against the light of day; he is made a deicide."<sup>7</sup> The pantheistic principle of God's immanence thus enhances humanistic tenets of peace and brotherhood. At the same time, the pantheistic principle eliminates the concept of God's involvement in human fate. Spinoza's philosophical system perceives God as a universal source of life rather than a superior force engaged directly in human existence. In Spinoza's view, there is one God "from which an infinite number of things follow in infinite ways," and, therefore, "All who have any education know that God has no right hand nor left; that He is not moved nor at rest, nor in a particular place, but that he is absolutely infinite and contains in Himself all perfect ions."<sup>8</sup> Such perception of God helps understand His silence regarding His People's suffering. Though the divine is manifest in each and every particle of creation, its force does not manifest itself in the history of mankind: its spirit permeates the universe, but does not intervene in human affairs.

Klein's intent to maintain the pantheistic-humanist stance against the foreboding political reality focuses therefore on man's accountability towards God and fellow-men. Piety and love of God, according to Klein, is commensurate with the humanist principles of freedom and peaceful cooperation. It is man's sacred duty to achieve harmonious coexistence with fellow-

men; it is also his right and duty to resist forcefully those who prevent the actualization of the humanist ideal.

### **Zionism: the path to redemption**

Klein's espousal of Spinozistic philosophy elucidates his particular perception of Zionism. In Klein's view, the Zionist ideology implements Spinoza's perception of man vis--vis society and universe. Whereas Spinoza presents the theoretical grounding for man as defender and preserver of the divine force in humanity, the Zionist struggle to reassert human dignity embodies the hope of victory of humanism over tyranny. The Zionist ideal of the return to the land reconfirms the pantheistic notion of man's indelible affinity with nature and the divine. In the reality of the emerging totalitarian regimes, Jewish freedom to cultivate the ancestral land counteracts the threat of man's dehumanization; in that sense, Jewish national rebirth becomes the emblem of humanity's moral rebirth.

The sequence of poems entitled "Greeting on This Day" (1929) glorifies those who redress injustice through action. The Zionists vigorously implement the humanistic ideal by asserting the right of the Jewish people to life and freedom; rather than passively rely on God's intervention, they enact the divine purpose of human existence. The first poem in the sequence pointedly admonishes the victimized individual neither to turn to God for succour nor to succumb to sadness and despair:

Lest grief clean out the sockets of your  
eyes,  
Lest anguish purge your heart of happiness,  
Lest you go shaking fists at passive skies,  
And mounting blasphemies in your distress,  
Be silent. Sorrow is a leper; shun  
The presence of his frosted phantom. Plant  
Small stones for eyes so that no tears may  
run;  
And underneath your ribs set adamant.

(*CP*, p. 124)

The antidote to despair generates from the "adamant," concrete act of the return to the land. The metamorphosis of the oppressed, terrified Diaspora Jew into a proud individual who can defend himself is portrayed in section vi of the poem:

If this be a Jew, indeed where is the crook  
of his spine; and the quiver of lip, where?  
Behold his knees are not callous through  
kneeling; he is proud, he is erect.  
There is in his eyes no fear, in his mind  
no memory of faggots. And these are not words  
wherewith one tells a Jew.

(*CP*, p. 126)

The importance of Jewish self-sufficiency also emerges in Klein's journal writing. In a 1930 editorial, "Messiah of Our Days," Klein warns his people against passive faith in God's help and reiterates the responsibility of the Jews to take care of their safety and well-being: "Although we can admire the beauty and the sincerity of the belief in the miraculous intervention of Divinity Itself in our affairs, still rationalism forbids us to stand with arms akimbo, stolidly awaiting the Courier of the Lord. God helps those who help themselves. Our

aspirations towards the Homeland must be achieved by our own personal effort, not by a blind expectation of another's aid."<sup>9</sup>In a world where man is expected to assume responsibility for his fate, submission and dependency do not guarantee protection. A courageous confrontation with the perpetrator is necessary not only for a victimized individual, or an oppressed nation; the defence of a just cause strengthens the global impact of the humanistic ideal. In an editorial, poignantly entitled "The Modern Maccabee," Klein demonstrates the integrality of the humanistic ideal in Jewish tradition. "We are the people of peace," he claims. "The ideal of friendship and brotherhood has been implanted in us."<sup>10</sup>Yet, if need be, Jews in their Homeland will oppose persecution and oppression. By facing the aggressor, like the Maccabees, they will fight for their right to freedom. Jewish resistance to oppression will put an end to the abuse of tolerance and justice. Jewish independence signifies that "we Jews are no longer allowing ourselves to be made living sacrifices upon the altar of some Moloch of intolerance."<sup>11</sup>

The motif of Jews as fighting Maccabees resurges in Klein's poetry. In "Sonnet of Time of Affliction," the poet deplors the war enforced upon his Jewish brothers in Palestine:

Ah, woe, to us, that we, the sons of peace,  
Must turn our sharpened scythes to scitimars,  
Must lift the hammer of the Maccabees,  
Blood soak the land, make mockery of stars...  
(*CP*, p. 128)

"Greetings on This Day," however, concludes with a vision of peace. When the war is over, the humanistic ideal of brotherhood will finally materialize:

Izak and Ishmael are cousins met.  
No desert cries encircle Omar's dome,  
No tear erodes the Wall of ancient pain;  
Once more may brothers dwell in peace at  
home;  
Though blood was spattered, it has left no  
stain;  
The greeting on this day is loud Shalom!  
The white doves settle on the roofs again.  
(*CP*, p. 128)

The concept of national rebirth redeems the Jew from his passivity and presents him with a new self-image of a proud, independent human being. The long tradition of queries, complaints, and arguments addressed to God by the self-pitying, weak Jew has been transformed into a song of triumphant self-assertion. Klein, therefore, celebrates Zionism not only as a political movement, but also as an indication of possible redemption. The undertaking of an active role in forging man's present and future signifies a process of emotional healing and maturation. Weakness has been replaced with potency; the restoration of Jewish self-respect and self-reliance will result in renewed brotherly relations between "Izak and Ishmael." In Klein's representation of the future, Isaiah's prophetic vision of universal peace comes true. The Jewish farmer and the Arab fallah will cultivate the land together. The moral rebirth of human society will start in the Promised Land: the Zionist orientation transcends the limited concept of a political answer to a national need and reminds mankind of its sacred responsibility to strive towards peaceful coexistence among individuals and nations.

The focus on the return to the land signals an affinity with the pantheistic notion of the divine. The return to nature foregrounds the indelible ties between man and the divine forces

of life. Man no longer arrogantly claims a central position in the scheme of creation, but rather reaffirms his organic ties with the universe; the returning son reclaims his natural parentage: nature is a part of him to the same extent as he is a part of nature:

He has said to the sun, Thou art my father  
that gives me strength;  
and to the cloud, Thou art my mother suckling  
me thy milk.

.....  
A son has returned to her that bare him;  
at her hearth  
he grows comely; he is goodly to behold.

(CP, p. 126)

Writing after the Holocaust, Richard L. Rubenstein, a leading Jewish theologian, discusses the conceptual significance of the return to Zion. Rubenstein claims that the return to the land implies modification of the concept of deity. The Israeli Jew is not guided by the God of history, who imposes a burden of guilt" upon his believer; it is the deity of "earth fruitfulness" which evokes the liberating notion of "fertility, fecundity, and joy" in the returning Jew. Interestingly, Rubenstein's view of Zionism reiterates Klein's perception. Imbued with the consciousness of the Holocaust, the ultimate phase of humanist disintegration, Rubenstein speaks of the need for spiritual rebirth and regeneration that Klein presaged long before the Holocaust became reality. The return to nature enacted by Zionism is of primary humanistic importance to both writers. Like Klein, Rubenstein discerns in Zionism an expression of a universal need for renewal: ". . . Zionism can be far more than a provincial strivings of an insignificant people. In Israel the Jewish people has finished what it and fate had long ago begun. Spirit has in principle returned from its estrange ment; and history, man's inescapable negativity, has returned to the nature which gave it birth."<sup>12</sup> Like Klein in his reaffirmation of man's unmediated contact with nature, Rubenstein sees in the return to the land a release from the restricting ties of collective memory: "historical man knows guilt, inhibition, acquisition, and synthetic fantasy, but no *eros*. The return to the soil of Israel promises . . the return to *eros*."<sup>13</sup> "Eros," the notion of liberation from the haunting and enslaving past, informs Klein's vision of universal rebirth. In the reality of the 1930s, however, Klein had to acknowledge the incongruity of the Zionist alternative to the emerging terror. A portentous vision of a dehumanized world governed by mechanical messengers of evil supersedes the promise of universal harmony and peace.

### **The Golem: the shattered hope of redemption**

The political developments in the 1930s transmute the hope of the world's moral regeneration into a helpless fear of an encroaching, unavoidable catastrophe. The rise of fascism both in Europe and Klein's native Quebec defies the vision of a better world. Anti-Jewish propaganda portends an era of victimization and suffering, foreshadowing the defeat of the humanist ideal. In the sequence of sonnets entitled "Talisman in Seven Shreds" (1932), the central image of the golem illustrates the inexorable decline of humanism. Traditionally, the legendary figure of the golem represents, since Talmudic times and past the Middle Ages, the desire of the persecuted Jew to defend himself against the hostile world."<sup>14</sup> The best known is the 16th century story of the golem of Prague, created by the famous Cabbalist, Rabbi Yehuda Loew, the "Maharal." Klein, in his 1952 editorial, "The Golems of Prague," which denounces the Czech anti-Jewish purge trials of the Stalinist era, recounts the old story of the golem: "the wonderful legend which tells how Rabbi Jacob Loew, in the hour of his people's need, fashioned upon the banks and out of the mud of the Moldeau river, a *golem*, an

automaton, which would do his inspired bidding, is one of the brightest fables to issue out of the darkness of Jewish diaspora history". Klein stresses, however, the moral of the legend, in his view, unequivocally places the values of humane moral conduct above violence as solution to man's suffering: "one realizes that an artifact, a mere mechanical man, is no substitute for the truly human in the image of God created. . . the man who would fashion a human out of a clod of earth is doomed to defeat; for this creator, he is himself but earthly clod."<sup>15</sup>

In "Talisman in Seven Shreds," the golem image embodies the perversion of the divine Creation, a world in which God has been replaced with a terrifying monster. The opening sonnet, "Syllogism," outlines a logical proposition which invalidates the concept of man created in the image of God. The divine spark of life has disappeared in a world which worships its new clay idol, the golem:

If golem is the effigy of man,  
and man the simulacrum of the Lord,  
the sequitur - I blanch to mouth the word,  
the blasphemous equation framed to span  
chasm between the Lord and Caliban!  
Such is the logic that befouls the bird,  
bemires the stars, reduces to the absurd,  
the godhead on the heavenly Divan.

(*CP*, p. 133)

Ugliness and earthiness which have superseded the universality of the divine spirit are projections of human evil. In a terrible parody of the story of Genesis, man's creation of the golem has desecrated the holiness of the true Creator and thereby undermined man's own link with the divine. The logical argument that informs the sonnet exposes the absurdity of man's arrogant confidence in his ability to reason. The equation of "the Lord and Caliban," the result of man's blasphemous will to power, eventually amounts to no more than an "idiot's chortle" (*CP*, p. 133).

The intent to create a soulless, brutal defender of the Jewish people ironically exposes the victim's lack of faith. The spiritual lifelessness of the golem reveals its creator's doubts about the redeeming power of Divinity. The rabbi's *hubris* and oblivion of human limitations emerge in his undertaking to create the golem in order to prove that "He sleeps not, neither does He drowse, ! custodian of Israel" (*CP*, p. 133).<sup>16</sup>

The sonnet "Enigma" also demonstrates a conceited attempt to resolve the mystery of God's presence in history. If approached through logic, the issue of Jewish survival, despite centuries of oppression and persecution, undermines God's ultimate and unquestionable authority. In a world dominated by the golem, the anticipated, traditional response reconfirming God's eternal surveillance over His People is juxtaposed with a reductive alternative:

Is it the finger of the Lord's right hand?"<sup>17</sup>  
Of is the golem saviour, this rude goth  
whose earthy paw is like a magic wand?

(*CP*, p. 135)

The suggested parallel between the golem and God, the true Redeemer of Israel, manifests man's failure to discriminate between good and evil, between the soulless and the spiritual. For it is man, not God, that occupies the central position in Klein's darkening vision of the world. Man can achieve affinity with God by committing himself to the tenets of morality and justice; withdrawal from these wellsprings of spiritual life results in golem-like dehumanization.

It is, therefore, not God's disappearance that Klein deplores in the "Talisman" sonnets but, rather, the displacement of man's godly image of beauty and spirit. The ironic distortion of the biblical references in the poem undermines the notion of the world's preordained moral system while enhancing the evil arbitrariness of the golem, the man made ruler of the world. The chaotic discordance of the Golden Calf worship has replaced the harmonious song in praise of the true Creator.

True religion, for Klein, initiates the pursuit of the ideal of goodness and, at the same time, brings forth the realization of human inability to meet this goal. Acknowledgement of the inaccessible perfection of the divine predicates the acceptance of human imperfection. The sense of imperfection, in turn, motivates further endeavours aimed at the possible fullest ethical self-actualization. Man perverts the basic tenets of true religion when, guided by arrogance, he opts to abandon the difficult path of self-improvement. The rigid conformity of institutionalized worship parodies the essence of the divine; it facilitates the emergence of the golem's tyrannical rule. The mechanistic ritual of worship, whether Jewish or Christian, imprisons the believer in a dogmatic, thoughtless routine: the rabbi places "phylactery on brow in lieu of thought" (*CP*, p. 134), while the Christians are told to "do your genuflexions to the Rose." The arrogant assumption that "God is myth" (*CP*, p. 135) actualized in ritual rules out God as the origin of spiritual life, the source of human desire for excellence.

Klein's ironic use of Maimonides' *The Guide for the Perplexed* as the title of the penultimate sonnet underscores his derogatory view of man tragically misled by his own conceit and ignorance:

The tongue is bitter when it must declare:  
matter is chaos, mind is chasm, fool,  
the work of golems stalking in nightmare . . . .  
(*CP*, p. 135)

Klein's perception reaffirms both Maimonides' and Spinoza's observations of man's erroneous perception of his position in the universe. As Leo Strauss notes in his comparative study of the two philosophers, "Maimonides finds, as does Spinoza, that given man's insignificance compared with the universe, man's claim to be the end for which the world exists is untenable."<sup>18</sup> Man, according to Spinoza, misunderstands the world because "we have but partial knowledge of things. . . and because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictate of our own reason."<sup>19</sup> In the same manner, Maimonides contends that the misconception of the divine principles which govern life originates in man's narcissistic sense of centrality and importance, because "an ignorant man believes that the whole universe only exists for him."<sup>20</sup>

The denial of human limited knowledge of the divine mystery produces a self-centred, immoral golem-like human being. In a world that worships its own image of mindless, physical strength, spirituality is annihilated. In the last sonnet, "Immortal Yearnings," the poet discovers that the eternity of human spirit is by no means a certainty in a world devoid of faith. The final lines of the sonnet which also conclude the "Talisman in Seven Shreds" conjure up a scene which invokes Hieronimus Bosch's grotesque representations of humanity. The poet searches for traces of immortality in graves, looking for sparks of spiritual existence in the dust, the lifeless matter golems are made of:

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.  
(*CP*, p. 136)



The uncertain outcome of the quest for spiritual values in a reality shaped by brutal golems attests to Klein's apprehension of the increasing powers of tyranny. In his journal writing, the fear focuses on the intensifying anti-Jewish phenomena in Quebec. In 1932, Klein forcefully denounces the virulent anti-Semitic propaganda in the Quebec press, associating it with the "Judeophobic lampoons of the Middle Ages." He notes that in Quebec, where the centennial anniversary of Jewish emancipation is forthcoming, the provincial papers, referring to the Lindbergh's affair, revive ritual-blood libels, accusing Jews of kidnapping and murdering Christian children. Bitterly ironic, Klein challenges the viability of the humanist ideal: "Was it for this climax that the three great C's of history, civilization, culture, and Christianity had conspired?"<sup>21</sup>

The question is directed not only towards Quebec. Even at this early stage, Klein correctly diagnoses the root of humanist deterioration in Hitler's rise in Germany. Writing in the same year about the Nazi victory in the elections to the German Reichstag, he stresses the danger in the Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda: "The Jew now stands condemned in Germany as eternal alien; the deluded mobs who voted for the Brown Shirts now know where to find a scapegoat on which to vent their wrath and indignation. It is a scapegoat with a beard; it is a Jewish scapegoat."<sup>22</sup> The hatred of Jews is contagious; mankind has become the victim of fatal infection brought forth by racial hatred whose "headquarters seemed to be in Germany." In Klein's opinion, the calamity is global since "the pest of Jew-hatred, like the bubonic plague, was being brought from continent to continent, through the medium of rats."<sup>23</sup>

The only hope seems to lie in vigorous opposition to the spreading moral disease. The perpetrator can be vanquished only if confronted with the unshaken moral determination. Thus, Klein urges the Jewish community in Quebec to fight against anti-Semitic slander; he admonishes his coreligionists that by remaining passive they expose themselves to violent persecutions. Moreover, active opposition to the golem-like barbaric hatred and demagoguery will strengthen not only the victim, but also the embattled humanist ideal: "If ever there was a necessity for action, it is now... the battle is in our hands, and the law courts are open . . . Jewish youth in this city cannot stand with arms akimbo, and watch the progress of this chauvinistic charlatanism; a definite stand must be taken. . . . The states men, too. . . if they are concerned with the moral standards of Canadian life, must bring all their power and influence to bear down upon the ... malaria-spreading mosquitoes of Quebec journalism."<sup>24</sup>

The need to change the traditional image of the Jew as a helpless victim emerges time and again in *Hath Not a Jew*. The title of the volume, the famous quote from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, reminds the Jew of his right to assert himself forcefully vis-à-vis the non-Jewish world. The first poem in the collection, "Ave Atque Vale," presents the Jew as a valiant, life-loving, exuberant individual. The poem speaks of the "jolly company" of Jewish sages and their stories of exploits and adventures comparable to those of the vibrant protagonists of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson.

Not merely rabbins of the whetted brain,  
Not solely jousters of the supple thumb,  
But brawny men, who featly did maintain  
The Talmud pie, and argument a plum:  
.....  
When he forsakes you, Shakespeare, for  
a space, Or you Kit Marlowe of the four good lines,  
Or Jonson, you, your sack, your muscadine,  
your wines,  
This Jew Betakes him to no pharisaic crew. . . .

These legendary, passionate Jewish sages, highlight, by contrast, the total helplessness of the persecuted European Jew, terrified of the hostile world. The opening lines of the poem "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry" convey the terror of an approaching pogrom:

The Hebrews shivered; their teeth rattled;  
Their beards glittered with gelid dews.  
Gulped they their groans, for silence  
tattled;  
They crushed their signs, for quiet heard  
They had their thoughts on Israel battled  
By pagan and by Christian horde.  
They moved their lips in pious anguish.  
They made no sound. They never stirred.  
(CP, pp. 136-7)

While agonizing over Jewish suffering, the poem identifies the roots of man's brutality in the universal misinterpretation of God's will. It is not only the persecutor's inhumanity that blatantly distorts God's intentions; the persecuted individuals who display an attitude of helpless submission also misread God's will. Concurring with both Maimonides and Spinoza, the poet denounces the victimizer's as well as the victim's narcissistic claim to the role of the interpreter of God's will. The victimizers designate them selves as God's messengers; they regard torturing Jews as their sacred duty to exorcise the devil. They commit most horrible, mindless acts of brutality in God's name:

The market-place and faggot-fire -  
A hangman burning God's true word. . . .  
(CP,p. 137)

Paradoxically, however, the Jewish meek acceptance of the victim's part, also violates God's will. Instead of confronting their torturers, the terrorized victims insist on making out their Maker, trying to comprehend His reasons for their suffering. The poem portrays the futility of such a reduc tive attitude toward the ineffable in the victims' varying and absurdly contradictory attempts to unveil the mystery of the divine: the fatalist seems reconciled with his fate; the believer in hereafter justifies God's wrath; the epicure rejects the merits of martyrdom; the believer in retribu tion urges the sinners to repent; the talmudist deplors his burned manuscript which contained the definitive reading of God's mysterious ways. The talmudist's unconscious self-centredness exposes the irony in man's grandiose ambition to fathom the mystery of the divine and his ridiculously vain pursuit of glory:

The essence and quintessence of the book!  
Green immortality smiled out its promise -  
.....  
I thought to win myself eternal meed,  
Ah, woe is me and to my own endeavour,  
That on that day they burned my manuscript  
And lost my name, for certain, and for ever!  
(CP, p. 141)

In Klein's journal writing, the phenomena of anti-Semitic aggression and Jewish weakness are clearly spelled out and vigorously denounced. Anti-Semitism is condemned as anti-humanist, and Jews are told to oppose racism and defend humanist values. In Klein's poetry, the response to the political situation draws upon the intertext of Jewish myth and historical tradition. The theme of the golem as the *deus ex machina* avenger of Jewish suffering coalesces with the theme of medieval Jewish martyrdom. Intentionally, the poet subverts the

original meaning of both themes: the fantasy of the golem defending helpless Jews becomes a terrifying vision of the world governed by man-made, mindless, tyrannical automatons; the pious search for a divine purpose in Jewish martyrdom reveals a self-aggrandizing, conceited attitude towards the unfathomable mystery of the Creator. Through the particular treatment of the Jewish thematics, Klein attempts to warn the world against the emerging powers of destruction. The Jew's inept response to his victimizers underlies man's unwillingness to stand up to the forces of evil. The recurring motif of the silent, detached God constitutes an exhortation against passivity vis-à-vis tyranny.

Writing in 1937 about Bialik, Klein agrees with the great Hebrew poet's criticism of Jewish weakness at the time of persecutions. In his review of Bialik's famous elegy "The City of Slaughter," Klein significantly chose to translate the lines which convey total lack of communication between God and the victims of the pogrom:

For God called up the slaughter and the  
spring together:  
The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and  
it was sunny weather....<sup>25</sup>

In his own poetry, Klein subverts the tradition of "Jewish protestantism" to show that the proper reading of God's will constitutes in man's vigorous opposition to the golem-like forces of oppression. "Jewish protestantism," as examined by Byron L. Sherwin in his discussion of the post-Holocaust Midrash, presents stories of dissent against God's decisions vocalized by such biblical figures as Abraham, Moses, Habakuk, and Job; rabbinic masters, such as Rabbi Ishmael and Honi; and the Chasidic master, "the greatest protester of all," Levi Itzhak of Berditchev, "who stood in the center of the circle he had drawn and brought a suit for breach of contract against God."<sup>26</sup>

Klein's representation of Levi Itzhak's address to God takes on a distinctly parodic dimension. The rhetorical devices in his poem "Reb Levi Yitschok Talks to God" enhance the futility of the protest. The poem which ironically introduces Levi Yitschok as a "crony of the Lord" focuses on the human interlocutor. The long list of strategies employed to elicit God's answer underscores the silence of the divine party. Reb Levi Yitschok's intercession on behalf of his people raises the crucial issues of punishment and retribution, the suffering of the innocent, God's eternal promise to His People. The shifting modes of his appeal signal the seriousness of his address:

. . . . Reb Levi Yitschok talked . . .  
Vociferous was he in his monologue.  
He raged. He wept. He suddenly went mild  
Begging the Lord to lead him through the fog;

Nonetheless, the impact of his discourse is trivialized: Reb Levi Yitschok's "infant arguments to God" remain "unanswered even when the sunrise smiled." (*CP*, p. 147) Yet, the failure to evoke God's response constitutes an answer. Against Reb Yitschok's agitated outburst, God's silence implies resoundingly that the argument has been misplaced. The implied assumption of God as a merciful father, protector, and saviour seems no longer operative. In a sense, God's silence communicates the inappropriateness of the appeal; the expectation of God's direct response amounts, therefore, to a childish narcissistic presumption.

Both Spinoza and Maimonides would have concurred with the poet's ironic view of his people's dependency on the notion of personal God. No man, according to Spinoza, can "cause God any pleasure or displeasure [since] . . . these are human qualities and have no place in God."<sup>27</sup> Maimonides' perception of God invalidates the definition of evil in terms of

human suffering. Human suffering, according to Maimonides is, to a great extent, determined by human acts rather than God's will.<sup>28</sup>

In "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," a poem completed in 1938 and included in *Hath Not a Jew* just before its publication, Klein seems to retract, for a moment, his vigorous condemnation of passivity against despotism. In view of the approaching catastrophe, the enactment of moral accountability and emotional independence seemed no longer feasible. The British "White Book" barring Jews from entering Palestine compounded by the world's refusal to accept German Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecutions epitomized the inevitability of the atrocity; deeply ingrained patterns of persecution and exile seemed to intensify in the reality determined by tyrannical golems. The image of the Jew proudly returning to his land vanished in view of the perennially haunted Jew, the easy target of racial hatred. No longer does the poet claim the land of Israel as his home, as he did in "Greeting on This Day." Now he reclaims the collective past of the Diaspora, and emphasizes with the interminable suffering of his homeless people:

Always and ever,  
Whether in caftan robed, or in tuxedo  
slicked,  
Whether of bearded chin, or of the jowls  
shaved blue,  
Always and ever have I been the Jew  
Bewildered, and a man who has been tricked,  
Examining  
A passport of a polyglot decision  
To Esperanto from the earliest rune -  
Where cancellation frowns away permission,  
And turning in despair  
To seek an audience with the consul of the  
moon. (*CP*, p. 114)

Like his suffering ancestors, the poet resorts to the old pattern of passive submission to fate. The "stoic word" of the victims who preceded him teaches him again "The bright empirics that knows well that the/Night of the *couchemar* comes and goes away" (*CP*, p. 118).

However, the horror of the Nazi regime did not allow Klein to wait out the "couchemar" of hitlerlite tyranny. In 1943, he forcefully confronted the brutal terror of the Third Reich in a long mock epic, *The Hitleriad*, published in 1944. The poem, a vituperative satire of Hitler's regime, manifests a humanist attempt to counteract the ideology of terror. *The Hitleriad* presents a response whose crudity, vehemence, and unconcealed mocking rage proposes to mirror and expose the crass brutality of the tyrannical golem. In a sense, *The Hitleriad* actualizes the vision sought for and delineated in *Hath Not a Jew*, a vision of mankind ready to defend the humanist ideal. Klein's later work expounds the message of human self-reliance and accountability outlined in his particular treatment of Jewish thematics in his first volume of poetry: at the time when the sacred principles of life and freedom are at stake, the victim must confront the perpetrator vigorously to ensure the viability of humanism.

#### Notes

1. Usher Caplan, *Like One That Dreamed: A Portrait of A.M. Klein* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1982), p. 26. [\[back\]](#)
2. Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf Fascist Movements in Canada in the Thirties* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1975), p. 5. [\[back\]](#)
3. *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein*, ed. Miriam Waddington (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), p. 158. All further references to this work (*CP*) appear in the

- text. [\[back\]](#)
4. Baruch Spinoza, *Reflections and Maxims*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1965), p. 57. [\[back\]](#)
  5. See Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 268. [\[back\]](#)
  6. Fischer, pp. 37-38. [\[back\]](#)
  7. Fischer, p. 50. [\[back\]](#)
  8. Spinoza, *Reflections and Maxims*, pp. 30, 29. [\[back\]](#)
  9. A.M. Klein, *Beyond Sambation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 12. [\[back\]](#)
  10. .A.M. Klein, *Beyond Sambation*, p. 9. [\[back\]](#)
  11. .A.M. Klein, *Beyond Sambation*, p. 11. [\[back\]](#)
  12. .Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1966), p. 141. [\[back\]](#)
  13. .Rubenstein, p. 137. [\[back\]](#)
  14. .See G.K. Fischer, *In Search of Jerusalem: Religion and Ethics in the Writings of A.M. Klein* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1975), pp. 6 1-63. For further resources on the golem legend see also Gershom Sholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1974), pp. 351-355. [\[back\]](#)
  15. . A.M. Klein, *Beyond Sambation*, pp. 423-4. [\[back\]](#)
  16. .*Psalms*, chapter 121, verse 4. [\[back\]](#)
  17. .See, for instance, *Exodus*, chapter 15, verses 6 and 12; *Psalms*, chapter 21 verse 9. [\[back\]](#)
  18. .Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), p. 190. [\[back\]](#)
  19. .Spinoza, *Reflections and Maxims*, p. 57. [\[back\]](#)
  20. .Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, pp. 267-268. [\[back\]](#)
  21. .A.M. Klein, "The Twin Racketeers of Journalism," *Beyond Sambation*, pp. 27-8. [\[back\]](#)
  22. .A.M. Klein, "The German Elections," *Beyond Sambation*, p. 30. [\[back\]](#)
  23. .A.M. Klein, "The Twin Rocketeers of of Journalism," *Beyond Sambation*, p. 27. [\[back\]](#)
  24. .AM. Klein, "The Twin Rocketeers of Journalism," pp. 28-9. [\[back\]](#)
  25. .A.M. Klein, "Chaim Nachman Bialik," *Literary Essays and Reviews*, eds. Usher Caplan and M.W. Steinberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 18. [\[back\]](#)
  26. .Byron L. Sherwin, "Wiesel's Midrash: The Writings of Elie Wiesel and Their Relationship to Jewish Tradition," *Confronting the Holocaust: the Impact of Elie Wiesel*, eds. Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 122-124. [\[back\]](#)
  27. .Spinoza, *Reflections and Maxims*, p. 29. [\[back\]](#)
  28. .See Maimonides, pp. 267-268. [\[back\]](#)