

Madness in the Methods: Reading Something from Nothing

Rachel Brenner. *A.M. Klein: The Father of Canadian Jewish Literature*.
Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen press, 1990. 144 pp.

This is a sometimes provocative but mainly uneven critical work. Moreover, one gains the odd impression that there are two writerly voices here, one, less audible, irregularly sounding various notes of post-structuralist discourse, intent on undermining the grounds of its own critical investigation, the other more articulated, more consistently positioning itself in a subject-object relation to Klein's work, intent on targeting the meaning of Klein's complex poetic contraries. Reading Brenner reading Klein one therefore wonders at what point such much-read and diverse interrogators of language systems as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Julia Kristeva, and Michel Foucault (all of whom are quoted in this work) intersected with Brenner's confidence in a rather different constellation of post-war theoreticians, such as Emil Fackenheim, Northrop Frye, and Frank Kermode (also all quoted here). While Klein's writings impart a learned and profound familiarity with a remarkably wide field of texts, genres, and subjects, it does not necessarily follow that a reading of Klein benefits, in turn, from an apparently casual reliance on a number of theoretical sources, none of which here in particular strengthens or illuminates the business of reading Klein, still a troubling and challenging business after all these years.

That Brenner should more comfortably inhabit the realm of humanist inquiry which sets up texts as data to be mined for both meaning and mimetic certainty is obvious from the unfortunate pronouncement of her title. In a critical climate that so prudently suspects anyone's claims to (anyone's) paternity, it is difficult to approach *A.M. Klein: The Father of Canadian Jewish Literature* (subtitled *Essays in the Poetics of Humanistic Passion*) with anything but wariness. If we have to talk of firsts at all, then we might be reminded that the honour of Jewish Literary Progenitor was probably originally bestowed upon Klein by Ludwig Lewisohn who, in his famous celebrated and celebratory piece of 1936 which later became the "Foreword" to *Hath Not a Jew...*, wrote that this "young Montreal attorney was destined to be the first contributor of authentic Jewish poetry to the English Language."¹ Disregarding Lewisohn's sanguine use of such adjectives as "first" and "authentic" for the moment, Klein's parental guiding influence on Canadian literary sons Henry Kreisler, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, and Seymour Mayne, and on figurative daughter Miriam Waddington is not only as obvious as inherited hair colour but is also directly acknowledged in some measure or another by each of these children, no matter how far from the tree they may each claim to have fallen. Brenner's implicit acknowledgement of Lewisohn's exalted tribute to Klein as "first" Jewish writer partakes of the conventions of conferring the privileges of fatherhood on the usual suspect. But what does the charge of paternity really point to here? Readers might be quickly clouded by Brenner's disclaimer in the "Introduction" against any right or definitive reading of Klein's work (i). By logical extension, then, could Klein's fatherhood be in doubt? Do we need the results of a blood test?

I raise the question not out of facetiousness but out of some confusion occasioned by the divided loyalties of Brenner's study. On one side, the expressed titular aim of the work is to confer Klein with ownership of a national Jewish literary tradition and thereby to stabilize the nature of the poet's apparently ceaseless quest for cultural fixity and ethnic distinctiveness in the face of dissembling global catastrophe. Indeed, the main critical line of *A.M. Klein* is taken up in varying measures with a published-work by published-work account (from *Hath*

not a Jew... to *The Second Scroll*) of Klein's almost always successful attempts to define a moral-aesthetic position suitable for poetic framing in the modern age. On the other side, Brenner intrudes on her own writing every now and then to comment on the unstable identity of the author who, as she acknowledges Foucault would have it, has disappeared (85). What a curious intervention to make in a text that identifies a poet as the source of a corpus of literature. Could Brenner plead innocent to two charges, then? First blasphemy — creating the Father — and then patricide — doing away with Him?

Perhaps understandably in view of Klein's own obsession with ordering systems and linguistic patterns, Brenner cannot stifle the urge to provide a totalizing view of Klein's writings, one that would account not only for his often confounding formal interests and difficult linguistic patternings but also for his disturbed twenty-year silence before his death. Indeed, she attempts in her "Introduction" and First Chapter, "The Image and Self-Image of A.M. Klein," to explicate a reading of the written legacy of Klein's achievement in the light of that which was *not* written over two decades. For Brenner, the silence of the end speaks of a "vision too poignant for the world to hear" (iv). Accounting for this period of nothingness, as it were, Brenner thus attributes to Klein a creative strategy that anticipates "moral revival" (iv). Moreover, Brenner argues that the

representation of the apocalyptic ends in silence and the redemptive hope in speech — a central motif which recurs in the four works, *Hath Not a Jew*, *The Hitleriad*, *The Rocking Chair*, and *The Second Scroll* — transcends the view of Klein as a frustrated poet who let his dreams of fame defeat his poetry. (iv)

It would be pretty to think so, but we might well be suspicious of such an overreaching and idealistic interpretation that depends, first, on Klein's active, full and rational participation in his own melancholy and, second, on the displacement of other rather acceptable, if permanently unverifiable, readings of his silence. Moreover, why the inclination to "transcend" another critical view at all?² Openly borrowing in her "Introduction" from J. Hillis Miller, Brenner disavows any "'demonstrably right' interpretation" (v) of Klein's work, but yet she seems driven to provide a singular, unifying narrative that would, by definition, banish all other narrative accounts of Klein's work.

To be sure, in spite of textual interventions warning against either totalization or closure, Brenner prefers to discover the "Father" in the poetry, thereby suitably endowing Klein with ultimate creative responsibility not only for his own multidimensional writings but also for future (Jewish Canadian literary) texts that he seeded, "illusions" though they may be³. In coming to her study to praise, and not to bury, Klein, Brenner is compelled ultimately to provide a critical script assuring the poet the leading role as victim, at times a self-imposed one, in a drama of persecution and redemption, indeed, the very myth of exile and return which Klein's writings frequently perform. So it should come as no surprise when we fall upon such unhesitatingly declarative statements as this: "A.M. Klein's fate is marked by tragic irony" (2). In this example, which prescribes an all-too familiar reading programme, Klein is cast in the role of the doomed poet who, like all those before him (Shelley, et al), suffers from the litany of modern symptoms ("depression," "alienation," "sense of failure") brought on by the virus of contemporary life, the failure of the Judeo-Christian humanist project, the Holocaust being chief evidence of the disease. But perhaps the "ironic twist" (3) is not, after all, that Klein's work continues to be read in spite of his alleged "self-imposed withdrawal from society" (2), but that it is either skimmed or discussed in limited, vacuous ways while the fictionalizing of Klein, the (failed-poet) "Father," continues as a main enterprise. I suspect that Klein himself would doff the patriarchal label, preferring instead to be identified, if at all in epithetical terms, as a member of a large club of modernist writers, unavoidably *shaped* by the past as much as fixed on shaping the present. We need only refer to Klein's reviews of E.J. Pratt, A.J.M. Smith, and Irving Layton's work in the 'forties to appreciate the degree to which he valued their poetry for its participation in a wider field of literary discourse. Thus, in

Pratt's "Dunkirk," Klein finds favourable comparison with British antecedents, Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon, among others;⁴ in Smith's *News of the Phoenix*, he correctly hears Donne and elevates Smith's craft to the level of Rilke's;⁵ and in Layton's *Here and Now*, Klein rediscovers Marlowe.⁶ Whenever called upon to provide an audience with an epithet — whether "Jewish" or "Canadian" writer — Klein would deliberately avoid the temptation to slap a tag permanently on his lapel, albeit an avoidance deliberately marked by his customary rhetorical bravado.⁷ Like other modernists with whom he was most comfortable, notably the early Eliot, the French *Sym bolistes*, and Karl Shapiro, among so many others,⁸ Klein preferred to keep company with the literary "big shots," like Dante and Chaucer, Milton, Hopkins, Baudelaire, and Eliot himself over provincial or ethnocentric scribblers lost to the wider world.⁹

It is this wider modernist allegiance above all which Brenner's work virtually ignores, opting instead to view Klein as the sire of a new line of continuity in Canadian letters, as if he weren't born yesterday and his poetic scions didn't have more than one father. Although insistent about Klein's critical humanism and his struggle to brace his tough poetic choices with its affirming universality, Brenner's study provides only a passing indication of from whence such a position sprung, and then merely as a reiteration of the commonplace that Klein's identity was rooted in his Jewish heritage. So it is that for the most part *A.M. Klein: The Father of Canadian Jewish Literature* retreats from reading Klein in any but new or creative ways, and, instead, moves, after the second chapter, in rather rushed method from one published poem to another and on through to *The Second Scroll*. The effect is wearing, especially since Brenner's new critical treatment scarcely alludes to Klein's formal and almost always conservative poetic choices, preferring to foreground already familiar thematic content. This is all the more disappointing in view of the recently published, monumental *Complete Poems* edited by Zailig Pollock which, even at a glance, reveals how much of Klein actually remains to be read.¹⁰ Finally, along these lines, it is difficult not to be let down after the offering of a promising thesis in the second chapter, "The Poet at Historical and Cultural Crossroads," a thesis which is never fully developed or explored in this study.

Brenner's contention that the realization of the Zionist ideal in the formation of the State of Israel actually occasioned a crisis for Klein, who had always promoted the vitality of the Diaspora, is borne out by cogent references to his editorials of the 'forties. Here Brenner opens a window of insight onto the paradox of Israel's existence. The political manifestation of a centuries-old dream threatened to annihilate the very passionate, creative, and fruitful quest that fuelled the dream in the first place. Moreover, as Brenner's argument partly implies, Klein was not likely to abandon fully his commitment to the community of the world *outside* Israel, a community defined variously as religious, urban, Canadian, and, above all, vigorously modern. It is curious, then, that this thesis remains undeveloped in the concluding chapter on *The Second Scroll* where it might be expected to illuminate at least some of what Brenner, borrowing from Kristeva, et al, refers to as the novel's "intertextuality" (137ff.).

That said, it should be noted that Brenner's chapter on *The Second Scroll*, "The Poetics of the Humanist Regeneration," while avoiding a full working out of the novel as a "tissue of quotations," as Barthes once described texts to be,¹¹ still invites opportunities to reflect on surprisingly neglected features of the work. Considering how frequently *The Second Scroll* continues to be taught in university Canadian Literature courses across the country, it is remarkable that no extended written treatment of the novel has been published.¹² Intentionally or not, *A.M. Klein: The Father of Canadian Jewish Literature* leaves us with the overriding impression that much work remains to be done

Notes

1. Ludwig Lewisohn, "Foreward" to *Hath Not a Jew* reprinted in *A.M. Klein: Collected Poems*, ed. Miriam Waddington Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), 350-52. [\[back\]](#)
2. In spite of her overstating the view that Klein was defeated by failed dreams of fame, Brenner wisely refers to D.M.R. Bentley's "important" reading of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" (86 n.13), which points to the complexly constructive ways in which Klein considers the problem of "fame." See *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 28 (Spring 1984): 1-46. Likewise, Usher Caplan's consequential biography, *Like One That Dreamed: A Portrait of A.M. Klein* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1982), probes the question of Klein's struggle with public attention in far more sophisticated ways than Brenner implies readers have done. [\[back\]](#)
3. Recall the sixth and final section of Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape": "Therefore he seeds illusions," Klein writes of his struggling poet figure, a remarkably ambiguous utterance both in its homonymous freeplay (see Bentley, pp. 33-34) and its unavoidable invalidation of the poet's creative power (Brenner, p. 90). [\[back\]](#)
4. *A.M. Klein, Literary Essays and Reviews*, eds. Usher Caplan and M.W. Steinberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 206. [\[back\]](#)
5. *Ibid.*, p. 210. [\[back\]](#)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 213-14. [\[back\]](#)
7. *Ibid.*, "Writing in Canada: A Reply to a Questionnaire," pp. 216-21. See also Klein's Letter to A.J.M. Smith, 21 January 1943, in *The A.M. Klein Symposium*, ed. Seymour Mayne, Reappraisals: Canadian Writers (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975), p. 3. [\[back\]](#)
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8. See Noreen Golfinan, *A.M. Klein and His Works* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1990), for a fuller discussion of Klein's modernist allegiances. Also as "A.M. Klein," in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*, eds. Robert Locker, et al (Toronto: ECW Press, 1990). [\[back\]](#)
9. *A.M. Klein: Literary Essays and Reviews*, p. 218. [\[back\]](#)
10. *A.M. Klein: Complete Poems*, ed. Zailig Pollock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). [\[back\]](#)
11. See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), in which Barthes attempts to loosen the grip of the Author from the text. [\[back\]](#)
12. A fresh, annotated edition of *The Second Scroll* is expected soon from the A.M. Klein Research and Publication Committee. [\[back\]](#)

