Intimations of Wordsworth in A.M. Klein's "Autobiographical"

By Kerry McSweeney

A.M. Klein is said to have "hated" Wordsworth "from the very first" (CP 984n).[1] His bias is patent in his article "A Definition of Poetry?" (1946) which begins by trashing the famous statement in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." Concerning "spontaneous," Klein writes with evident disdain that "the adjective, in fact, is a typical piece of romanticism. Its implications are vatic — they evoke the picture of the poet as a chosen but helpless vessel, selected by powers above him, for the communication of wisdom which the said powers have at last decided to make privy to man." His animadversions conclude with a shrug and a gratuitous allusion to another famous Wordsworthian text: "And you want a definition from me, who never enjoyed intimations of immortality" (LER 177-78).

The primary context in which these views should be placed is the literary-historical. Klein was obviously influenced by the modernist caricature of Romantic poetry in general and of Wordsworth in particular. The dismissive references to "vatic" implications and a higher "wisdom," for example, derive from T.E. Hulme's description of Romanticism as "spilt religion" (118). And like T.S. Eliot in his Preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*, Klein has wrongly taken "emotion recollected in tranquillity" to be Wordsworth's definition of poetry despite the fact that in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* the phrase is clearly used to describe the origin of poetic composition or the mood in which "successful composition generally begins." And he has equally failed to realize that the overflowing feelings are not those of the recollected emotion (though they are "kindred" to it), but rather refer to the creative activity of the mind during the composition of the poem.

A related explanatory context is suggested by Klein's poem

"Autobiographical" (CP 564-67), which was written in the early 1940s and contains another reference to Wordsworth's tranquilly recollected emotion. The allusion is, I suggest, prima facie evidence of influence anxiety, of Klein's fear of being (or of being found to be) "Romantic." Despite the enormous influence of Eliot on his poetry and poetics, Klein was, as Noreen Golfman has shown, "a cautious modernist," whose "formal choices" are perhaps the most "telling sign of [his] allegiance to a more Romantic verse tradition" (128). Certainly it is this tradition that supplies the formal and generic coordinates for "Autobiographical," which is an elegiac recollection of the lost world of intense childhood experience in the manner of numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century poems, including Coleridge's "Sonnet: To the River Otter," Thomas Hood's "I Remember, I Remember," Longfellow's "My Lost Youth," Charles G.D. Roberts's "The Tantramar Revisited," and Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill." Klein can hardly have been unaware that this kind of poem was antithetical to modernist principles and prejudices, and that Eliot had himself anathematized the "sort of poetry which is reminiscent of childhood and its imagined radiance":

> We all know the mood; and we can all, if we choose to relax to that extent, indulge in the luxury of reminiscence of childhood; but if we are at all mature and conscious, we refuse to indulge this weakness to the point of writing and poetizing about it; we know that it is something to be buried and done with, though the corpse will from time to time find its way up to the surface. ("Silurist" 260-61)

The greatest and most influential Romantic poem on the subject of the loss of childhood radiance is of course Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." On the thematic level, it is this poem, rather than any of those named above, that "Autobiographical" most resembles. In fact, the poem even supplies evidence that, despite the disclaimer of "A Definition of Poetry?," Klein had experienced intimations of immortality. To be sure, the cultural reference points of "Autobiographical" are Jewish rather than Platonic and Christian, and its setting is the historically contingent Montreal Jewish ghetto in the early decades of the twentieth century rather than the more timeless-seeming meadows, groves, streams, rainbows, and shepherd-boys of the English Lake District. But the subject and theme of Klein's poem, especially the analysis of loss in its final two stanzas, are closely similar to those of the Intimations Ode, a poem that Klein knew well, as two non-derogatory citations of it elsewhere in his critical prose attest (LER 21, 154).

The first two stanzas of "Autobiographical" are full of specific detail evoking a particular time and place: the "Sabbath-goy," a gentile hired to add coal to the stove on cold Friday nights by families whose Sabbath observance precluded the lighting of fires; the oats in the gutter dropped from the feedbags of horses; the "eastern notes" of "Hebrew violins" that were a feature of Jewish wedding music; the neighborhood candy and grocery stores into which impecunious Jewish widows converted the front part of their parlours. The vividness and inclusiveness of the childhood sensorium are instanced in the first seven lines of the second stanza, which contain notations of all five senses: sight (the "navel'd bellies of black bread," the "candy-poled" lintels of the barber-shop, the gold letters on the big synagogue door); hearing (the little bells attached to store doors); smell (the spice cellar, the "warm fresh-smelling bakery"); taste (the sweet nuggets); and touch (the sweaty cent that was the price of the candy). And in the first stanza (as in Coleridge's River Otter sonnet) there is an additional density of texture in that remembered particulars of the childhood world ("sparrows rising from / The gutter-scattered oats," the "sadness sweet of synagogal hum," and the "sobbing delight" of the wedding violins) themselves supply the images and figures to describe the rising of memories in the consciousness of the adult poet.

The next four stanzas continue the pungent evocation of the childhood world: the older sisters dressing to go out while "Humming the evening's imminent fox-trot"; the mother blessing candles and looking "Queenly in her Warsovian perruque"; the father "pickabacking me to bed" and letting the child curl his beard; the week in the country (wild strawberries, the smell of dogrose and yellowing hay, "the cow-tinkling peace of pastureland"); and the "games / Confederate" (to use a phrase from the Prelude [1805; i 461-62] that is called to mind by the Wordsworthian blank verse of the sixth stanza):

> the shouting boys
> Oblivious of mothers on the stoops
> Playing the robust robbers and police,
> The corn-cob battle, — all high-spirited noise
> Competitive among the lot-drawn groups.

In the last two stanzas, the poet breaks off his catalogue to reflect on the difference between then and now and to speak of possible compensation for loss:

> Immortal days of the picture-calendar

Dear to me always with the virgin joy
Of the first flowering of senses five,
Discovering birds, or textures, or a star,
Or tastes sweet, sour, acid, those that cloy;
And perfumes. Never was I more alive.
All days thereafter are a dying-off,
A wandering away
From home and the familiar. The years doff
Their innocence.
No other day is ever like that day.

I am no old man fatuously intent
On memoirs, but in memory I seek
The strength and vividness of nonage days,
Not tranquil recollection of event.
It is a fabled city that I seek;
It stands in Space's vapours and Time's haze;
Thence comes my sadness in remembered joy
Constrictive of the throat;
Thence do I hear, as heard by a Jewboy
The Hebrew violins,
Delighting in the sobbed oriental note.

For the retrospective poet of "Autobiographical," there was a time when the quality of perceptual experience was overwhelmingly intense; never was he more alive than in childhood. But the "shades of the prison-house" (Wordsworth's phrase) of diminished perceptual intensity eventually close upon the growing boy. There is a "dying-off," an inevitable "wandering away / From home and the familiar," and a painful realization of the irrecoverability of what has been lost. Wordsworth says that nothing can "bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower"; Klein is equally insistent that "no other day" is ever like the day that seemed "immortal" because of the perceptual intensity of "the first flowering of senses five."

The last stanza of "Autobiographical" is concerned with a possible recompense for the loss of these childhood intensities. Klein (1909-1972) was no old man fatuously intent on reminiscence when he wrote the poem: he was in his early thirties, the same age as Wordsworth was when he wrote the Intimations Ode. The speakers of both poems confront the inexorable realities of the life cycle, and both eventually find essentially the same consolation (though what is rhetorically explicit in Wordsworth's ode is subtly implicit in Klein's recollection): recompense for the loss of early freshness is found in the recovery through memory of

a felt sense of "What was so fugitive" (Wordsworth's phrase) — the perceptually intense experiences "of nonage days."

What is sought in "Autobiographical" seems transcendent: a fabled city standing at the extreme limits of the spatial and temporal boundaries of human experience. But while that fabulous place may seem to be located up there in the beyond or out there in the future, the poem's ending intimates that it is actually to be found back there in the childhood vision of a "pleasant Bible-land." The recompense for loss at the end of Klein's poem is not the finding of a "fabled city" but the recovered sense of the longing of the ghetto Jewboy for a Biblical *there*. To borrow a phrase from another Klein poem, it is a "preterite eternity" ("And in That Drowning Instant" CP 608). The remembered childhood experience brings a felt sadness "Constrictive of the throat"; but this emotional fullness can exist in the present only because it has previously existed in the past, the joy-sadness mixture having first been experienced by the boy in the oxymoronic sweet-sadness and delighted-sobbing of the religious music that is re-experienced in the recollection, spontaneous or otherwise, of the adult poet.[2]

Notes

1. I am grateful to Harold Heft of the University of Western Ontario and the two anonymous readers of the manuscript of this article for their most helpful comments. [back]

2. I have oversimplified the argument of the closing sections of the Intimations Ode, which includes another compensation for the loss of the perceptual intensity of childhood. It is "the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering" that come with the "years that bring the philosophic mind." In essence, a human bond comes in time to compensate for the loss of the earlier bond between the child and the objects of his perception. While this compensation is not found in autobiographical," it may be said to be present in Klein's later poetry on French-Canadian themes, which shows an increasing breadth of human sympathy. One example is his poem "Montreal" (CP 621-23), which has structural and thematic similarities to "Autobiographical." In this poem, the "Pasture of memory" is not the city's Jewish ghetto: spatially it is all the "quartiers" that surround Mount Royal ("my spirit's mother, / Almative, poitrinate"); temporally it includes the original inhabitants of Hochelaga and the coureurs de bois as well as

their English, Scotch, and French-Canadian successors. [back]

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