

The Lost A. M. Klein Guggenheim Application

Edited and Introduced by Harold Heft

Details of A.M. Klein's interactions with the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation¹ are confusingly reported by Usher Caplan in *Like One That Dreamed*. According to Caplan, Klein was encouraged by A.J.M. Smith in 1942, "to apply for a Guggenheim fellowship to spend a year on the translation of Bialik's poetry" (123). In the same paragraph, Caplan asserts that, "Finally, [Klein] submitted an application in October 1943, listing Smith, [E.J.] Pratt, and [E.K.] Brown among his references," and was, "deeply disappointed, though not surprised, to be told early in 1944 that his request had been turned down" (123). Caplan then concludes the paragraph by claiming that Brown consoled Klein with the suggestion that the committee was "not very favourable to creative projects'" (123).

No background information is required to recognize the serious flaws in the logic of this paragraph. While Smith may very well have encouraged Klein to apply for a grant to fund his Bialik translations, it does not necessarily follow that an application submitted one year later would find Klein pursuing the same project, though the structure of Caplan's paragraph does suggest this connection. Moreover, why would Brown have consoled Klein with information of the committee's attitude toward "creative projects," when the undertaking in question, it seems, was a series of translations? Caplan's error is in his attempt to construct a thin narrative from three individual pieces of information where no such narrative exists. He does so, it should be noted, not to discuss Klein's writing, but to introduce his foray into politics, and quotes Klein as saying, soon after, that his "political commitment tell it not in Gath was partly a rebound from the Guggenheim rebuff" (125). In thus treating Klein's Guggenheim application merely as a point to mark his transition from writer to politician, Caplan misses the opportunity not only to report the facts correctly, but also to integrate into his biography new and unexplored information in Klein scholarship.² Had he contacted the Guggenheim Foundation, he would have discovered that Klein, in the 1943-44 application, was applying not for a grant to translate Bialik, but for funding to write a new and ambitious volume of poetry. It is this document which has now, almost fifty years after it was written and submitted, finally surfaced.

The fact that Klein appealed to the Guggenheim Foundation for a grant in 1943-44 is of little importance in itself. His constant struggle to free himself financially so that he might dedicate himself fully to his literary pursuits is well documented, and this application simply represents one more instance of his attempt to escape the "routine economic obligations."³ Instead, the value of the document may be found in the information that it contains, and in the character of the poet that is suddenly and surprisingly revealed in the sometimes humble, sometimes lofty presentation of that

information. The contents of the application present a striking contrast to Klein's typical reticence in discussing himself as writer, which is best seen in the now-legendary response to Smith's request for an autobiographical note for *The Book of Canadian Poetry*:

I do not intend to give you "a brief statement of my attitude towards my art, etc." I am surprised that you ask it. You know that such questions elicit only the sheerest of arrogant balderdash. What shall I say in reply: "I sing because I must!" -- How phoney! Or that I wish to improve the world with my rhyme! -- How ridiculous! Or that I seek to express the standards of my age, etc. Me, I will have none of that cant. Simply expressed, I write poetry only to reveal my civilization, my sensitivities, my craftsmanship. This, however, is not to be quoted. (Caplan 219)⁴

In his quest for Guggenheim funding, Klein proved quite willing to provide an answer such as the one Smith solicited. Moreover, the personal statement in the final paragraph of the application is neither "arrogant" nor "ridiculous," but honest and wholly consistent with the best of Klein's poetry. It is difficult to ignore the resemblances between the statement, "to express manking [sic]; myself in time, as centre-point between ancestry and posterity; and in Space, myself in relation to my environment, animate and inanimate, seen and Unseen," and Klein's poetic masterpiece "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape":

Therefore he seeds illusions. Look, he is
the nth Adam taking a green inventory
in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising, the
flowering flats in the meadow, the
syllabled fur, stars aspirate, the pollen
whose sweet collusion sounds eternally.
For to praise

the world -- he, solitary man -- is breath to him.
Until it has been praised, that part
has not been. Item by exciting item -- (638-39)

Zailig Pollock's "c. 1944/1945" dating of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,"⁵ which would almost immediately have followed the writing and rejection of the application, only serves to increase the significance of this connection.

The association between Klein's insight into his poetic "purpose" and the content of his poetry represents only one of the significances of the application. The openness of his plea for funding enables the reader to understand Klein as poet, scholar and human being more clearly than in almost any other of his autobiographical statements, and there are many previously unresolved enigmas of his life and career that are addressed in the application. For example, while it has been unclear, until now, why Klein did not fight in the Second World War, in the application he explains that it was a "military exemption" which prevented him "from now visiting, liberated Europe and Palestine." Where Klein's attitudes toward leaving Montreal have always been vague,⁶ in the application he describes his desire "to work both in New York and Chicago, the one chosen . . . for its

libraries, general and Hebraic, and the other because Poetry Magazine -- and its group -- are there located."⁷ More importantly, the application was written at a pivotal moment in Klein's career, and thus provides clues in understanding his intellectual and creative development. According to Pollock, "Most of [Klein's] poetry was written in two periods from the mid-twenties to the early thirties, and from the late thirties to the mid-forties" (xi), and, as we have already seen, Klein himself equated his "political commitment" (an obvious deviation from his poetry) with his rebound from "the Guggenheim rebuff" (Caplan 125). On the basis of these two pieces of information, we may recognize that the application, written immediately prior to "the mid-forties," represents an apex of Klein's poetic commitment, and that its rejection embodies the beginning-of-the-end of his last great poetic period. His interests at that instant therefore take on added importance. For instance, his obsession with the writings of James Joyce, which has puzzled scholars for years, is in the application brought to a new level of intensity, in that Klein's desire to integrate Joycean techniques into a long poem of homage to Joyce represents an instant of original critical and creative insight never again equalled in his years of writing Joyce criticism.⁸ Moreover, his admission of integrating Joycean techniques into "Variations on a Theme," greatly enhances our understanding of that poem.⁹ Klein's attitudes toward the legal profession, previously obscure, are made slightly more evident by the fact that he planned to write a six hundred line "satiric poem" on the subject. Perhaps nowhere is Klein more ambitious than in his plan to write "an emendation of the fourth act of Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice,'" and few of his responses to Nazi atrocities seem as poignant as his projected poem reviving the golem myth. Klein's anticipation of his trip to "Liberated Europe, and Palestine" indicates that he had, before the end of the war and eight years before the publication of *The Second Scroll*, already contemplated the theme and allusive structure of his novel, which itself was based on world events that hadn't yet occurred. Each item of the application tells a different story of a poet on the verge of attaining new heights in his craft. That the application was rejected and the poems never written is regrettable. A new understanding of the poet and his ambition, however, is partial compensation.

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The Guggenheim Foundation archivists caution that what remains of Klein's application is a transcript of the original, copied some time between the application's rejection and the present. It is unclear whether the application suffered any transformation in the process of transcription. To the reader familiar with Klein's prose style, the existing application appears consistent with his other writings, and there are no obvious gaps in the remaining text. It therefore seems likely that, if the document was altered at all, that alteration took the form of omitting full sections of the application, and not of editing or shortening any of the remaining sentences or paragraphs. In addition, the fact that the application appears complete (the proposed project discussed by Klein possesses a certain preconceived order that does not seem disrupted at any point) suggests that the foundation's archivists may be mistaken, and that the application is actually the original.

Only the "PLANS FOR WORK" section of the application will be presented here. Omitted are the autobiographical information given by Klein (name, address, occupation, etc.), and the list of his "ACCOMPLISHMENTS" provided for the judges. Klein introduced the second of these sections with the statement that, "The record of my entire career as a writer can be best spoken for by my published work, and by the reactions which that work has provoked," and proceeded to list the awards his work had received, the translation projects he had completed and a series of critical responses to his poetry. Included among the list of "reactions" are excerpts from reviews by W. E. Collin, A. J. M. Smith, Leon Edel, Libby Benedict, Israel Knox, Ludwig Lewison, Leo W. Schwarz, John Cournos and E. K. Brown.¹⁰ The full texts of these statements are available for interested readers in other publications.¹¹

The "PLANS FOR WORK" section of the application has been copied here exactly as it appears in the Guggenheim Foundation file. I am grateful to the Guggenheim Foundation for making the record of all their interactions with Klein available to me. I must also thank Klein's sons, Colman and Sandor Klein, for permission to see and then to publish the application.

Notes

1. Though it is common knowledge that Klein applied to the Guggenheim Foundation for funding in 1943-44, the nature of that application has long been misunderstood by scholars, and neither the Guggenheim archivists nor Klein's sons have indicated any knowledge of anyone viewing the document until now. [\[back\]](#)
2. In Caplan's defence, it should be understood that his pioneering biography is based primarily upon interviews with Klein's colleagues and on findings in the papers of Klein's personal holdings. The only documented interaction with the Guggenheim Foundation contained in these papers is a letter from Klein to Henry Allan Moe (then-President of the Guggenheim Foundation), written in 1948. This letter asked Moe for financial aid to enable Klein to complete a book of criticism on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Since Klein's 1948 letter was a personal appeal, and not a proper application, it was never processed and the current Guggenheim Foundation administration has no knowledge of it. The fact that we now know Klein wrote a proper application five years earlier (thus proving that he fully understood the application procedure), lends new significance to the 1948 letter, in that he was probably using a personal appeal to avoid further disappointment. There is no proof that the letter was ever sent by Klein, or that Moe replied. [\[back\]](#)
3. This quotation is from the first paragraph of the "PLANS FOR WORK" section of the application. Though Caplan describes Klein's financial struggle in great detail in *Like One That Dreamed*, that struggle is best seen in Klein's own writing, as in the poem "Heirloom," and in a passage from an unpublished letter written to Ellsworth Mason on December 8, 1948, in which he writes that "again and again I am interrupted by having to make a living, not only for myself, but my wife, my three children, and my dog. 0

that my father had left me an estate!" [\[back\]](#)

4. Ironically, despite the final request of this response, the letter has been quoted in many different publications, including Caplan's *Like One That Dreamed*, and Gary Geddes' *15 Canadian Poets X2* (Toronto, Oxford UP, 1990). [\[back\]](#)
5. In *Collected Poems*, 639. It should be noted that in his review of *Collected Poems*, D.M.R. Bentley expresses reservations about Pollock's system for dating Klein's poems, arguing that "the choice of a chronological arrangement for Klein's poems stems from the lack of precise dates of composition for many of them." Bentley lists "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," as one of the poems for which Pollock's dating is suspect (91). [\[back\]](#)
6. See Caplan's description of Klein's home-sickness for Montreal in *Like One That Dreamed*, 74. [\[back\]](#)
7. It is difficult to determine whether Klein, in some instances, was attempting to anticipate the preferences of the Foundation's committee. In this instance, he may have been writing under the suspicion that the Guggenheim Foundation favoured American applicants. Regardless, this remark should shed new light on Klein's attitude toward the United States, and on his various interactions with *Poetry Magazine*. [\[back\]](#)
8. This assertion is based upon my discovery that the original ideas for all three of Klein's published essays on Joyce's *Ulysses* were first suggested unwittingly by Ellsworth Mason, with whom he corresponded frequently in the late-forties. The insight into Joyce's technique discussed in this application, formulated years before the correspondence with Mason began, therefore represents a more original reading in Joyce than may be found in the essays themselves. This finding is further outlined in the first chapter of my doctoral dissertation entitled, *The Presence of James Joyce in the Poetry and Prose of A.M. Klein*. [\[back\]](#)
9. This aspect of the application is consistent with the letter Klein wrote to James Laughlin of *New Directions* (which is quoted by Pollock in Klein's *Complete Poems*), in which Klein indicates that not only "Variations on a Theme," but also "Sennet of Gheel," "Song Without Music," and "Spring Exhibit," were "influenced by *Finnegans Wake*" 976. [\[back\]](#)
10. It should be noted as well that following the "PLANS FOR WORK" section of the application, Klein lists E.K. Brown of Cornell University, W.E. Collin of The University of Western Ontario, E.J. Pratt of the University of Toronto, A.J.M. Smith of Michigan State College and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise as his references. In Caplan's discussion of the 1943-44 application, only Smith, Pratt and Brown are listed as references (123). The Guggenheim Foundation claims to have the letters written by these referees on file, and will make them available to any interested reader with the consent of Klein's estate. [\[back\]](#)
11. These publications include Collin's *White Savannahs* (1936), Smith's *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), Edel's article in *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse* (April 1941), Benedict's review in *Menorah*

Journal (Summer 1940), Knox's review in *The Call* (December 1940), Lewison's "Forward" to *Hath Not a Jew* (1940), and Brown's article in *Poetry Magazine* (April 1941). Klein does not specify the publications in which the review by Schwarz and Cournos appeared, but they are both from reviews of *Hath Not a Jew*, and were probably published in local (Montreal) journals. [\[back\]](#)

Works Cited

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PLANS FOR WORK:

Unless one is in a position to undertake the writing of a XXth century "Paradise Lost", or of a contemporary "Inferno", it is presumptuous for a poet to speak of his intended creative enterprise as a "Project". All that I can undertake to do, should I be awarded a Guggenheim Scholarship, is, for the period of its tenure, to devote myself exclusively to the composition of verse. Beyond the singleness and cohesion which my work may manifest as emanating from a single personality, it will not, I must admit, constitute a single and cohesive project. Moreover, no one poem that I presently contemplate will take an entire year in the writing. There are, however, a number of themes which have been clamouring in me for utterance; these, for want of time and lack of that peace which comes only after the routine economic obligations have been fulfilled, I have hitherto been unable to attempt.

Thus, I would like undisturbed to focus my imagination and skill upon the following items:

a. A long poem of homage to James Joyce, rhymed, and employing the linguistic technique of "Finnegan's [sic] Wake." I believe that Joyce, having invented the contrapuntal literary method -- productive of effects hitherto known only to music -- was misguided in seeking, over a period of seventeen years, to apply it to what was essentially a narrative or expository task. Joyce's paragraphs of double-and-triple entendre, taken separately and without relation to the whole book, would make a splendid anthology of original verse. His method is primarily a poetic one. I would now like to pour his unconventional language into conventional forms; and already I have attempted this technique in "Variations on a Theme", published in *Preview* (Montreal) and to be re-published in the forthcoming *New Directions Annual*.

- b. A satiric poem (approximately 600 lines) An Essay on Law.
- c. An emendation of the fourth act of Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice", with additional dialogue, supplied by an additional character : a contemporary lineal descendant of Shylock, viewing and interrupting the trial scene from amidst the audience.
- d. A poetic one-act play, set in Prague at the time of the Nazi invasion, and revolving about latter-day attempts, both by scientific effort and religious incantation, to revive, so that he may fight the foe, the golem, according to legend still resting in the "Old Synagogue". The attempts, needless to say, prove futile. The duty of contemporary society is to destroy the golem, not to resuscitate competitors for him. An exercise in symbolism.
- e. An Askenazate Anthology a series of poems, portraits of anonymous Jews -- a cross-section of Jewish life.
- f. Poems, divers and sundry, unknown and unspecifiable, born as the spirit moveth.

On these self-assigned tasks, I would prefer to work both in New York and Chicago, the one chosen, among other reasons, for its libraries, general and Hebraic, and the other because Poetry Magazine -- and its group -- are there located. Should the war end, and should the rules of the Guggenheim Foundation permit it, I would like to visit then, as military exemption prevents me from now visiting, liberated Europe, and Palestine. Perhaps the contemporary "Inferno" and "Paradise Regained" will there materialize.

As to my plans for publication of my work, I presume that what has happened in the past with reference thereto, will occur again publication in periodicals, followed by publication in a single volume.

My ultimate purpose as a writer?

To express myself; and thus, being in all essential things, save in expression, like my fellows, to express mankind [sic]; myself in Time, as centre-point between ancestry and posterity; and in Space, myself in relation to my environment, animate and inanimate, seen and Unseen. More particularly, I have sought to bring to the well of English that mineral content the wrath of righteousness which is my heritage from by [sic] biblical forefathers.