

# The Book Becomes A Living Thing

A.M. Klein, *Complete Poems: Part 1, Original Poems, 1926-1934; Part 2, Original Poems, 1937-1955, and Poetry Translations*, ed. Zailig Pollock. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990. li + 1115 pp.

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Zailig Pollock's edition of A.M. Klein's *Complete Poems* is a highly important contribution to Canadian scholarship and a very worthy addition to the existing volumes in *The Collected Works of A.M. Klein — Beyond Sambation* (1982), *Short Stories* (1983), and *Literary Essays and Reviews* (1987). Divided into two parts by chronology and supplemented by Klein's translations from Aramaic, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Latin, the *Complete Poems* runs to well over a thousand pages, approximately a third of which is editorial apparatus. Although expensive at \$150 (and therefore very unlikely to find its way into classrooms), it will be a necessary and welcome addition to the libraries of most institutions and many individuals with an interest in Canadian and Jewish writing. Ably introduced and meticulously researched by Pollock and attractively designed and sturdily bound by the University of Toronto Press, the *Complete Poems* of A.M. Klein will stand forever as a proud monument to its editor, to its publisher, and to the writer whose poems and translations it carries forward to present and future generations. All credit, too, to the various granting agencies — the SSHRCC, the CFH, the Canada Council, and the Ontario Arts Council — for what must have been their generous support of the A.M. Klein Research and Publication Committee and the University of Toronto Press.

In his lucid and candid discussion of "Editorial Procedures" (I, xl-xlv), Pollock explains in detail the principles that he has followed in his selections of materials and copy texts for the *Complete Poems*. It is obvious that he has struggled mightily to match his editorial ideals, not merely with the Klein *oeuvre*, but also with the practical and financial constraints surrounding the production of a scholarly edition in present circumstances. With his eye on economics and his audience, he has rejected the "option of listing all variants, accidentals as well as substantives, . . . because it would have at least tripled the current list and would have had the effect of swamping important information in a mass of data of relatively little interest" (I, xli-xlii). (For scholars who might be interested in such data, "photocopies of all collated texts and a complete record of variants have been deposited in the Public Archives of Canada" (I, xlii].) Only on three points discussed in the "Editorial Procedures" am I inclined to question the principles governing the *Complete Poems*. The first of these is the decision to omit the "occasional verses, which Klein produced on demand for members of the Montreal Jewish community, mostly the Bronfmans, to commemorate birthdays, bar mitzvahs, weddings, retirements, etc." (I, ixl). This seems unfortunate for two reasons: (1) the amount of material involved appears to be relatively small (less than twenty manuscript pages) and surely would not have increased significantly the bulk and cost of the *Complete Poems*, and (2) the orientation and tone of Klein's "occasional verses . . . for members of the Jewish community" could be of considerable importance for our understanding of a writer who,

Pollock tells us in his valuable "Introduction," "almost never directly confronts his relationship with his community" and, instead, allowed "[t]he world he knew best, Jewish Montreal of the twenties, thirties, and forties, [to remain]. . . virtually absent from his work" (I, xvii). If only because it was apparently troubling to the poet himself — he included and then excluded references to it in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"<sup>1</sup> — Klein's relationship with the Bronfmans has special interest.

My second reservation arising from Pollock's statement of "Editorial Procedures" concerns the decision to "regularize certain categories of accidentals" — notably, "ellipsis points (triple throughout)" — in accordance with "the 'house' style of the University of Toronto Press" (I, xii). As Pollock correctly points out, the accidentals in "a small number of published texts . . . do not reflect Klein's intentions. For example, the poems in *The Second Scroll* are set in a 'house' style which is uncharacteristic of Klein . . ." (I, ix). But is this not an argument *against* superimposing another homogenizing house style on the poems, a style that may be equally "uncharacteristic of Klein?" And are there no consequences in meaning involved, for example, in replacing the four points with which "Grain Elevator" terminates (closes?) in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* with the three points demanded by the Toronto house style? My third and final reservation about the "Editorial Procedures" in the *Complete Poems* concerns the decision to use as a copy text "for published poems . . . the latest published version, even when later unpublished versions exist" (I, ix), for this seems somewhat at odds with other guiding principles articulated by Pollock — a respect for Klein's (final?) "intentions" and a preference for the "latest" text of "unpublished poems" (I, xi). Some discussion of the reasons for ignoring final intentions in the case of published poems (examples to follow in a moment) would have been welcome, not least because the matter of intention, final or otherwise, has become such a vexed issue in textual criticism in recent years.

Pollock's "Textual Notes" and "Explanatory Notes" are very good indeed. Once the conventions and abbreviations operating in the former have been assimilated, the notes themselves are easy to understand and — thanks to the decision to limit the lists of variants — far from overwhelming. There is much to learn here about Klein's habits of composition and revision. In the notes to "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," for instance, it is interesting to discover that the curious word "merkin" in *The Rocking Chair* version of the poem became "ego's" in a revised manuscript and in the unpublished "Selected Poems" (1955) and that in the same places Klein altered the punctuation at the end of the poem from "sea." (*Rocking Chair*) to "sea. . . ." (revised manuscript) and to "sea . . ." ("Selected Poems"). (In accordance with the principles stated in "Editorial Procedures" the readings of the *Complete Poems* are, of course, "merkin" and "sea." [II, 639].) While the "primary function" of the "Explanatory Notes" is "to gloss obscure terms and references," Pollock has generously included material necessary "for informed interpretation" — information about "the literary traditions within which Klein worked" and about "Klein's life and times," as well as "parallels . . . with his other writings . . ." (I, xliii). Wisely he avoids intrusive interpretation, leaving the reader with a great wealth of contexts and quotations as keys to the poems. Here is part of Klein's comment on "The Rocking Chair" as transcribed in Pollock's

notes: "I seek to find. . . a symbol which will at once illustrate a continued preoccupation and will also point to the nature of the psychology [of French Canada] . . . , ties to this continent, and nostalgic memories of the old continent" (II, 1005). And here is part of his comment on "Bread": "[t]hose of us who would like to rise and mount and soar into the high altitudes empyrean and think of ourselves not only as lesser but almost close to the angels, always are brought back by this basic element, the element of our humanity, of our necessity to lean one upon the other. It is of these feelings that the poem. . . speaks" (II, 997). As these examples must serve to illustrate, Pollock's "Explanatory Notes" are almost continuously instructive and delightful; over and over again, students of Klein at every level, including the undergraduate, will come away from them enriched with insights and questions. A piece of good fortune — the discovery of Klein's own notes to "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"<sup>2</sup> — gives me special pleasure in seeing these take their place among Pollock's other notes to the poem, particularly the poet's sketchy outline of the "Czech-born Jewish writer" Hans Natonek, the author of *In Search of Myself* (1943; shades of Grove?) and a telling concluding comment: "I want more than discrete isolated visions, I want yet to see the world as a photographer on Mars, focussing all of the sunlit [*sic*] in the camera glimpse" (II, 1001). The Klein who resisted the addition to his poems of explanatory notes ("I am no Eliot nor was meant to be, providing poems to illustrate a footnote" [II, 1004]) might have been appalled — or, at least, amused — by the hundreds of pages of notes in the *Complete Poems*. Most other readers will react more positively to Pollock's immensely valuable annotations, however, and marvel gratefully at the wealth of the scholarship that they contain. Here as elsewhere in his work on Klein, Pollock furnishes us with the contexts that are necessary for an informed appreciation and analysis of one of the more complex, if not "difficult," Canadian writers.

The extent of the "Editorial Notes" in the *Complete Poems* is one of the features of Pollock's edition that mark it off from Miriam Waddington's *Collected Poems of A.M. Klein*, which was first published in 1974 and is now out of print. Another is textual accuracy. In 1982, Pollock pointed out the "Errors in *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein*,"<sup>3</sup> some of which were quite minor matters of spelling and punctuation, but many of which were much more significant (and especially regrettable in that they must have led a generation of teachers and students into a mistaken understanding of portions of Klein's poems). No such errors characterize the *Complete Poems*. I found only a few mistakes in Pollock's editorial apparatus, none of them serious ("the examples in our literature — Swinburne's, Kipling, Sir Philip Sidney . . ." [II, 1012]), and none at all in the poems themselves. This in itself is an extraordinary achievement in an edition of this magnitude, and, once again, Pollock and his collaborators are to be congratulated. In both its apparatus and in its accuracy, then, the *Complete Poems* of 1990 marks a distinct advance on the *Collected Poems* of 1974. But does Pollock's edition fully supersede Waddington's compilation, or, at least, make it redundant to the degree that a reprinting of it with corrections (and, perhaps, additions) would be entirely pointless?

The answer, I think, is no, if only for one reason: Waddington and Pollock offer quite different readings of Klein in their

of arrangement, but whereas, within this, Waddington respects the "authorially sanctioned ordering" of *Hath Not a Jew . . .* (1940), *Poems* (1944), and *The Rocking Chair* (1948) and presents the poems in these volumes in the order in which they were originally published,<sup>4</sup> Pollock bypasses this procedure in favour of an arrangement based as much as possible on the "dates of composition of original poems," making an exception only for "poems which Klein himself arranged in sets, for example, *XII Sonnets*" (I, xxxi-xxxii). The chief difficulty with this, as my emphasis on "sets" aims to highlight, is that the notion of a set is a slippery one that need not be restricted to poems grouped together under a title like "XII Sonnets." Indeed, Pollock himself seems to be prepared to extend the limitations of a "set" when he observes of such obvious aggregates as "Design for a Medieval Tapestry" that "[t]hese works, like many others written at this time, consist of a variety of smaller poems, carefully grouped together to imply a deeper unity," adding that "[t]his reflects, on a formal level, Klein's ambition to identify and celebrate the underlying principles which have the power to transform the diverse elements of a community into a unified whole, to seek, as he was to say years later, 'the thing that makes them one, if one' ('The Provinces')" (I, xv; emphasis added). Are not the seven Robinsonian character portraits in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* — "M. Bertrand," "The Notary," "Monsieur Gaston," "Librairie Delorme," "Sire Alexandre Grandmaison," "Hormisdas Arcand," and "Les Filles Majeures" (Waddington, pp. 324-329; Pollock, 11,651,656-657, 689-690, 684-685, 696-697, 681, 683-684) — a "set" or linked series of poems very like "Design for a Medieval Tapestry" and just as obviously "grouped together" by "Klein himself" "to imply a deeper unity" — the unity of a diverse community drawn together by shared "preoccupation[s]" and a common "psychology"? Are not "Winter Night: Mount Royal" and "Lookout: Mount Royal" ("Waddington, pp. 318-319; Pollock, 11,698-699,686-687) a pair of poems that belong together as certainly as Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" or Swinburne's "Ballad of Life" and "Ballad of Death"? Indeed, is not *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (and this applies also to Klein's earlier volumes) a "set" composed of several groups of linked and interacting poems, a "plotless narrative"<sup>5</sup> that is set in motion by "The Rocking Chair" and brought to a conclusion — albeit a centrifugal and even an open-ended one — by "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"?<sup>6</sup> Does it not, in fact, do considerable violence to Klein's "intentions" to disregard the logic and architectonics of the books that he himself assembled?

Of course, the "fundamental assumption of such [questions] . . . is that the decisions poets make about the presentation of their works play a meaningful role in the poetic process and, hence, ought to figure in the reading process."<sup>7</sup> "[F]or him who reads with reflection," wrote Wordsworth in the "Preface" to his *Poems* (1815), "the arrangement [of the collection] will serve as a commentary unostentatiously directing his attention to my purposes, both particular and general."<sup>8</sup> And as Neil Fraistat says in elaborating these perceptions. "Because reading is a process of patterning, to read an individual poem in isolation or outside of its original volume is not only to lose the large retroactive sweep of the book as a whole — with its attendant dynamics and significance — but also to risk losing the meanings within the poem itself that are foregrounded or activated by the context of the book."<sup>9</sup> In order to gauge better the

losses and the gains (for, assuredly, there are the latter) in the chronological arrangement of Klein's *Complete Poems*, the example of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is handy and revealing.

According to Pollock's chronology and arrangement, "Portrait" was written in "c. 1944/1945" (more of such designations in due course) and, thus, before all but a few of the other poems in *The Rocking Chair* volume. It is on the basis of this chronological placement that Pollock makes the following comments in his "Introduction": (1) "Klein's . . . major poetic statement [of his dialectical vision] is 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,' the poem to which, in retrospect, all of Klein's poetry of the early 'forties can be seen to have led, and out of which all of the poetry of the late 'forties can be seen to have proceeded" (I, xxiv); and (2) "[w]ith hindsight, we cannot help but think of the close of the poem . . . as a tragic foreshadowing of the unnegateable negation that was to overtake Klein in ten years. However, the immediate effect of 'Portrait' [in c. 1944/1945] was undoubtedly a liberating one. Having established the poet's role . . . he then set out to fulfil this program. . . in the poems of the next few years which went to make up *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948)" (I, xxvi). As even the phrases "in retrospect" and "[w]ith hindsight" indicate, a chronological (biographical, historical) approach to Klein's poems superimposes upon them a logic, a pattern, and a *telos* — a "retroactive sweep" — that are quite different from those which, on the evidence of the arrangement of the poems in *The Rocking Chair* volume, were envisaged by the poet himself. Probably this discrepancy would be less striking if a chronological arrangement were not precisely the organization that Klein avoided in his books, perhaps because of its implication of self-centredness (think of the egotistical poets of the third section of "Portrait" who "live for themselves, / Or for each other, but for nobody else. . ." [II, 637]). "The Essence of Klein's theme," as Pollock rightly observes, "is community. . . . The poet's primary relationship is not with God, or with a beloved, or even with his art, but with a community" (I, xii). Like the Joyce of *Dubliners*, Klein evidently arranged his individual works so as to enhance the theme of community and the place of the individual in it — to display, in the case of *The Rocking Chair* especially, what Pollock calls the "dialectical" relationship of the "poet . . . to society" (I, xxiv). To judge by its terminal position in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems*, Klein envisaged "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" as neither a point of departure nor as the mid-point of a process but as a climactic statement that ends — and I quote the *First Statement* version of the poem — in an achieved "synthesis olympic" (II, 911), a "tentatively" (I, xxiv) positive vision of the poet's relationship to his community. It is this perception of the poem's place in Klein's thought and canon that is lost, or, at least, jeopardized, by the disregard for "authorially sanctioned ordering"<sup>10</sup> in *Complete Poems*. Thankfully, Pollock reproduces the tables of contents of Klein's published collections in an Appendix to his edition as an aid "to those readers interested in the . . . arrangements" of *Hath Not a Jew. . . , Poems*, and *The Rocking Chair*. But, of course, the reader who wishes to get a full and easy sense of the complex interplay between and among the poems in these books will have to turn either to first editions or to Waddington's *Collected Poems*.

Yet there are many benefits to be gained from being able to see and read a poet's works in the chronological order of their

composition. The *Complete Poems* clearly substantiates Pollock's claim that "Klein's career as a poet is largely the record of a continuous inner struggle, through periods of silence as well as ones of intense productivity," a "struggle which culminates in the great achievements of his maturity, and, then, in the bleak silence of his final years" (I, xi-xii). And, indeed, it should now be "possible, for the first time, to trace Klein's development in detail" (I, xxxi), an undertaking of unquestionable interest and validity for which F.W. Bateson provides a succinct and cogent justification in the "Note by the General Editor" in the Longmans Annotated English Poets series: "Since the essential clues to an author's intentions in any one poem are provided, on the one hand, by what he has already written (the stage reached in his literary evolution) and, on the other hand, by what he will write later (the direction of his progress), an editor will print the poems as far as possible in the order in which they were composed."<sup>11</sup> Now the warning light here is the phrase "as far as possible," for not all poets are as helpful as their chronologically-oriented editors desire. Some date their poems imprecisely, sporadically, or not at all, and leave little, if any, external evidence to assist an editor in doing so. Some work on a particular poem at different times over a period of weeks, months, or even years. Some work on two or more poems simultaneously, particularly during periods of "intense productivity." Some do all of these things, and thereby compound the problems of editors bent on arranging their poems by chronological order of composition. One such poet was Klein, and the consequence is that, despite the best efforts of our best Klein scholars, it has been possible for many pieces in the *Complete Poems* to assign only "a date of composition within a fairly narrow range . . ." (I, xxxiii). In Pollock's words, "[e]stablishing the dating for Klein's poems has been the most challenging task of this edition, since Klein rarely dated his poems, except, curiously, at the very beginning and at the very end of his career" (I, xxxiii).

There can be no doubt that Pollock has done everything possible as a scholar to date Klein's poems precisely, to present them chronologically, and to facilitate the study of the poet's "development in detail." But the lack of evidence and the sequential nature of the printed word have caused problems and necessitated compromises. The first of these is forthrightly outlined by Pollock in his note on "Textual Chronology": "while the arrangement of the poems is based on their dates of composition, it is the *latest* versions (latest published versions in the case of the published poems) which have been used as copy-texts. As a result, the version printed may sometimes differ from the version which Klein actually wrote at the stage of his career suggested by the chronological arrangement. In most cases when there are differences they are slight, and the original version can be easily reconstructed from the textual notes. In the relatively few cases when the differences are substantial — too substantial to be conveniently indicated in the notes — the original and revised versions are printed together" (I, xxxii). This is a creditable response to a difficult problem and it goes a considerable way towards mitigating the fact that, in many instances, the reader of the *Complete Poems* confronts the last (or nearly the last) version of a poem where and when he or she is expecting the first<sup>12</sup> and, moreover, may have to make quite extensive use of a list of "Textual Variants" to sort the matter out. Thanks to the accessibility of Pollock's "Textual Notes," this is not an onerous

task, but it can lead to the placement of many words, as it were, under erasure and so detract from the straightforward pleasure of the text. "Then it was spring. Or, no:/then winter was ending. . . . "

The second compromise precipitated by the choice of a chronological arrangement for Klein's poems stems from the lack of precise dates of composition for many of them. The consequence of this is that in a large number of cases, poems are merely arranged in alphabetical order within a rough time frame. For instance, in the section headed "c. 1945/1946" — meaning that the poems were written "*probably* no earlier than [1945] and *certainly* no later than [1946]" (I, xxxii) — nine poems from *The Rocking Chair* volume appear in alphabetical rather than chronological order, beginning with "Air Map" and ending with "The Sugaring." An even more frustrating instance for a reader interested in Klein's development is the section headed "c. 1942/c. 1944" ("*probably* no earlier than [1942] and *probably* no later than [1944]" [I, xxxii]), for here eight poems, including two versions of one poem, appear in alphabetical order within a temporal category that is both wide and vague. And what is the reader who seeks evidence of "literary evolution" and "direction of . . . progress" to make of the fact that the one poem in the section following "c. 1942/c. 1944" — "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" — can only be dated as "probably no earlier than 1944 and *certainly* no later than [1945]" ("c. 1944/1945")? Could "Portrait," in fact, have been composed in whole or in part before some of the pieces in the previous section? Indeed, could it have been composed in whole or in part in the period covered by the section prior to the previous section: "c. 1944/1944" ("probably no earlier than [1944] and *certainly* no later" [I, xxxii])? Or, bearing in mind the fact that it appeared initially in the June-July, 1945 issue of *First Statement*, could "Portrait" have been largely composed early in 1945 — that is, after, or at the same time as, some of the poems in the two ensuing sections, both of which carry "c. 1945" ("*probably* no earlier than 1945") as their starting point? Unquestionably, Pollock has risen to the "challenging task" entailed by the decision to arrange Klein's poems "chronologically, according to their dates of composition" (I, xxx). Indubitably, his chronological categories are informed by the most thorough understanding possible of Klein's life and works. But I cannot help but think that he could have saved himself both problems and compromises if he had opted, like Waddington, for an arrangement that worked with and around Klein's own careful ordering of his poems.

A great strength of the *Complete Poems* is that it prompts the reader to ponder anew such matters as the arrangement of works in a volume and its relation to such issues as authorial intention and bibliographical necessity. Zailig Pollock has brought the highest standards to the editing of A.M. Klein's poems, and in his "Introduction," "Textual Notes," and "Explanatory Notes," he has set down countless stepping stones for present and future students and scholars. In giving a new shape to Klein's canon, he has supplemented the patterns provided by the poet and his earlier editor, and enriched our understanding of one of Canada's very finest writers. We owe him a large debt of gratitude.

1. For a brief discussion of these inclusions and exclusions, see Miriam Waddington, *A.M. Klein*, *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Copp Clark; Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1970), pp. 121-122. [\[back\]](#)
2. See my "A Nightmare Ordered: A.M. Klein's 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,'" *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 28 (Spring, 1984), pp. 1-45 and "The Notes Suggested by Klein Himself to 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,'" *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 40 (Spring, 1990), pp. 153-155. [\[back\]](#)
3. This article appears in *Canadian Poetry*, 10 (Spring/Summer, 1982), pp. 91-99. See also Robert Still's review of the *Collected Poems* in *Canadian Poetry*, 1 (Fall/Winter, 1977), pp. 91-92. [\[back\]](#)
4. See *The Collected Poems of A.M Klein*, comp., and with an Introduction, by Miriam Waddington (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), p. viii for Waddington's rationale for her arrangement. [\[back\]](#)
5. This phrase is drawn from Earl Miner, "Some Issues for Study of Integrated Collections," in *Poems in Their Place: the Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. Neil Fraistat (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 18-43. [\[back\]](#)
6. I have argued the case for the coherence of *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* in "Klein, Montreal, and Mankind," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 19 (Summer, 1984), pp. 34-57. See also Rachel Feldhay Brenner, "A.M. Klein's *The Rocking Chair*: Towards the Redefinition of the Poet's Function," in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 15.1 (1990), pp. 94-116 and Linda Rozmovits, "History and the Poetic Construct: the Modernism of A.M. Klein," *Canadian Literature*, 126 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 87-102. [\[back\]](#)
7. Fraistat, "Introduction: the Place of the Book and the Book as Place," *Poems in Their Place*, p. 5 [\[back\]](#)
8. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 7. [\[back\]](#)
9. *Ibid.*, p. 8. [\[back\]](#)
10. *Ibid.*, p. 9. [\[back\]](#)
11. *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longmans, Green, 1969), p. xi. [\[back\]](#)
12. This point is made by Ed Jewinski in his review of *The Collected Poems of Charles G.D. Roberts* in *Canadian Poetry* 19 (Fall/Winter, 1986), pp. 105-108. See also my contribution to "The Achievement of Charles G.D. Roberts: an Assessment Panel" in *The Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium*, ed. Glenn Clever, *Reappraisals: Canadian Writers* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984), pp. 213-218 and my review of Roberts' *Collected Poems* in *Canadian Literature*, 112 (Spring, 1987), pp. 133-136. [\[back\]](#)