A.M. KLEIN'S *THE ROCKING CHAIR:* TOWARD THE REDEFINITION OF THE POET'S FUNCTION

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> To find a new function for the *déclassé* craft
> . . . to make a new thing
> . . . . . .
> . . . bring
> new forms to life
> ("Portrait of the Poet as Landscape")[1]

Some critics appraised *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948), A.M. Klein's last book of poetry, as his best poetic achievement, but on the whole, the reception of the volume was qualified. The reviews focused, to a large extent, on Klein's Jewish origins. It would seem that for some critics the Jewish poet's deliberate immersion into the French Canadian environment was quite difficult to accept.[2] Others portrayed Klein's treatment of Quebec as a representation of the humanist ideal which transcends ethnic differentiations. D.M.R. Bentley, for instance, sees *The Rocking Chair* as "a civil art" which enacts the "humanist (and socialistic) commitment to engaging all of us one with another, and with mankind as a whole" (*JCS*, 56).[3] Still others wished to highlight Klein's attraction to Christian symbolism.[4]

Whether favourably inclined or disapproving, the critics tend to conflate the volume's artistic achievement and its ideological message of a Jew responding to the existential problematics of the Catholic French Canadian environment. In that sense, they concur with Klein's own explicitly ideological statement concerning his "Quebec poetry." In an introductory letter to the poems, Klein explained that, as a Jew, he chose to "look upon the French Canadian" because of the common "minority position; ancient memories; and a desire for group survival" (Caplan 149). Indeed, in her discussion "*The Rocking*

Chair: Portrait of the Poet as Province," Linda Luft Ferguson subscribes to Klein's rationale, suggesting that "Klein's portrait of his province . . . represents a remarkable act of empathy, a projection of his own culture, rather than a concentrated effort to understand the culture of Québec *per se*" (58).

To enclose a literary text within the parameters of an ideological agenda, even the author's own, amounts to a categorization, in Roland Barthes' terms, of "the work-as-product" rather than "as production." If adhered to, the ideological approach to the poems appropriates the text "as a repository of objective signification" (37), providing a norm to discern between the "good" and the "weak" poems, judging them by the extent to which they fit the prescribed pattern. The ideologically-oriented interpretation canonizes the text, turning it into a spokespiece of its world view.

My reading of Klein's "Quebec poems" suggests that *The Rocking Chair* presents an example of a text as "production" rather than a "product" in that it defies the stasis of an ideological signification. Klein's selection and organization of the volume challenges its designation as the vehicle of humanist trust in the brotherhood of men. D.H. Lawrence's famous dictum "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" seems a useful reminder that the complex voice of art often refutes ideological simplifications. Michel Foucault's definition of "the author-function" as "plurality of self" (152-153) draws attention to the variety of voices we, the readers, should account for in a literary discourse. We are advised not only to examine carefully the advocated intent of the work, but to attend to the text's implied properties.

The critical intention to define the volume as an "apt image of humanistic community . . . a tolerantly inclusive circle of wide circumference with responsible man at its centre" (Bentley *JCS* 35) notwithstanding, Klein's "Quebec Poems" emit voices which belie such ideological reading. Indeed, as the volume unfolds, its tone becomes increasingly satirical and embittered. In the final ten poems, not even one offers a promise of a brighter future in the reality of unrelieved social inequality, materialism and bigotry. In general, the optimistic poems which carry the humanistic message are few, clustered mainly in the beginning of the volume; in the mid-section a few lyrical poems about the natural environment of Montreal

portray its beauty and commemorate the city as the site of the poet's idealized childhood.

The final poem, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," generates the most pertinent doubt about the "humanist" reading of *The Rocking Chair*. Most of the critics who have commented on the poem highlight its theme of the artist's isolation, or, conversely, find it to be an autobiographical representation of all Canadians, and even, at a personal level, the harbinger of Klein's later mental breakdown.[5] In his detailed rhetorical analysis of "Portrait," Bentley presents the poem as the poet's progression toward maturity, a development which reflects "Klein's hassidic conviction that God (and therefore order) is deeply present in the world" (*ECW* 8). Perceived in this way, the poem reinforces Bentley's reading of *The Rocking Chair* as "an image of humanistic community."

None of the critics, however, has treated the poem's significance as the signature of *The Rocking Chair*. Yet both the inclusion of the poem in the collection and its particular placement are by no means arbitrary. The poem was first published in the early forties, originally entitled "Portrait of the Poet as a Nobody" (Caplan 181). Klein renamed and revised the poem before including it in *The Rocking Chair* (Waddington 12-13). His deliberate decision to conclude the book with a meta-poetic piece suggests a sub-text which questions the propagated ideological intent.

Thematically, "Portrait" resists critical efforts to see the text as "the finished 'fabric,'" a disguise which conceals "the real message" (Barnes 39) which should be sought in the author's religious or ethnic identity. In fact, the poem represents authorial self-elimination from the text. The thematics of the silent poet brings forth the paradoxical notion of the volume as a production of a silenced author. Such incongruity signals a poetic perspective which extends beyond the "normative" trajectory of critical search for meaning. It seems of crucial importance that the volume ends with a world picture in which the "lost" poet sings of his effacement. The abstraction of anonymity invalidates ideological readings, which presuppose the concreteness of social existence; rather, it presents the text as the poet's reckoning with the meaninglessness of his poetic function. "Portrait of the Poet as

Landscape" thus projects *The Rocking Chair* as the poet's quest for self-redefinition in today's world.

In that sense, therefore, the critic is invited to look for sense not behind the "fabric" of the text, but rather at the "fabric of its texture, in the interlacing of codes, formulae and signifiers" (Barthes 39). Klein's text is a "production" rather than a "product" because its shifting linguistic patterns, organization, and sequence disclose "nervousness" and instability which defy the stasis of a finalized "meaning." The thematically disjoined arrangement of the poems establishes associative, rather than linear, connections as the organization principle of *The Rocking Chair*. Once concluded, the act of reading must recommence, since it is "Portrait," the final statement in the volume, that refers the reader back to the text to reconsider a "production" of a silent poet.

"Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" begins by staking out its intertextual territory from James Joyce to John Milton. Klein's choice of Milton and Joyce is by no means fortuitous. Klein was an ardent Joycean scholar and the relevance of Milton emerges in Klein's other works, such as *The Hitleriad* and *The Second Scroll*. Here, the poem's title echoes *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, while "the shelved Lycidas" in the second line refers to Milton's famous monody. The intertextual network extending from Joyce's vision of the writer's growth to Milton's mourning of the poet's death foregrounds the parodic element in Klein's portrayal of his poet's social irrelevance.

Syntactically, the title, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," signals a departure from Joyce in its omission of indefinite articles. The repetition of the article in Joyce's title, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, implies infinite possibilities of the young artist's growth, thus precluding the sense of finality and dead end. At the same time, the grammatical denotation of "a" as "one" highlights the uniqueness of every young artist. The absence of the article in Klein's title dispels the notion of both diversity and uniqueness; moreover, "landscape" implies obscurity and stasis. Whereas Joyce's "portrait" promises to show the artist in his future-oriented, inspired youth, Klein's "portrait" pictures the artist in the finite stage of indistinctness.

The allusion to "Lycidas" interconnects Joyce and Milton through the mythological intertext of the drowned artist.

Milton's Lycidas is compared to Orpheus, the Muse's "enchanting son" who "down the stream was sent, / Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore" (359). Joyce, on the other hand, invokes Icarus's eventual fall into the sea: Stephen Dedalus's epiphany of the prophecy in "his strange name" is followed by a vision of "a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air" (169).

The mythological framework underscores the archetypal function of the artist who both re-calls and re-presents man's intrinsic desire for beauty and perfection. Traditionally, the poet is an outstanding member of society since he embodies the centrality of art in social discourse. Though the poet's song may be tragically severed and the birth of poetic vision may require painful sacrifices, neither Milton nor Joyce questions the supreme value of art in society. Furthermore, the reflexive form of their works, which thematize the artist and his craft, signifies the fusion of the artist and his art. The impetus of inspired creativity ineluctably takes over and shapes the individual as an artist: the immense force of creativity projects the indivisibility of the story and his life-story.

Klein's intertextual construct thus focuses on the ages-old poet's self-image as the maker of civilization and culture. At the same time, Klein's derogatory designation of the poet as "the *shelved* Lycidas" and "landscape" (emphasis mine) signals self-directed irony which dissociates today's poet from the traditional notion of poetry. By relating to the mythological origins of art, both Joyce and Milton place the poet on a mythical rather than historical plane: as a descendant of such figures as Orpheus and Icarus, the artist imparts a universal, timeless truth. Klein's parodic rewriting of his predecessors de-mythologizes the poetic function in that it invalidates the poet's elevated social status.

In contrast with Lycidas, "the Genius of the shore" (363), and Stephen, who will "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race," (253), Klein's poet "see[s] himself as throwback, relict, freak" cheated out of his role and position (331-32). Other social figures have replaced him as guides and teachers of humanity: the tycoon, the politician, the rich popular artist, the scientist and his deadly inventions (334).

The deposition of the poet has resulted in self-fragmentation; fully conscious of his situation, he realizes that his poetic self and his social self are no longer conterminous. Such realization entails a recognition that, in contrast with the traditional view of its universality, poetry has become subject to relativism, determined by historical evolution and social change. The poet, the selected enunciator of the universal truth, has been reduced to "a number, an x" in "our real society" (331).

The division between the "poetic" self and the "social" self engenders an incapacitating sense of disorientation and alienation. The split identity has inflicted a psychological injury manifest in the desire to compensate for the sense of wholeness which has been irrevocably lost. The poet's "stark infelicity," expressed in imagined acts of desperation (334), is exacerbated by the memory of lost affinity with the language of poetry. The sexual allusions in Klein's description of the poet's lost oneness with the language highlight the intensity of his frustration:

> Then he will remember his travels over that body—
> the torso verb, the beautiful face of the noun,
> and all those shaped and warm auxiliaries!
> A first love it was, the recognition of his own.
> .....
> And then remember how this made a change in him
> affecting for always the glow and growth of his being
> (332)

The explicit sexual terminology in the description of the poetic act prefigures, in a sense, Barthes' notion of *jouissance*. Barthes observes that "'[s]ignificance' . . . puts the (writing or reading) subject into the text . . . whence its identification with 'jouissance': it is through the concept of 'significance' that the text becomes erotic" (38). Klein's text implies that in order to achieve life-enhancing "significance" a meeting between the text and the world must take place. A failure of such meeting renders poetic intercourse with language barren.

As the poem's last section demonstrates, when such intercourse does take place, the evolution of "the-text-as-production" resumes: the poet's conjunction with the language becomes the moment of conception, of planting a new life:

> Therefore he seeds illusions . . . he is
> the nth Adam taking a green inventory
> in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising,
> . . . . . .
> . . . Until it has been praised, that part
> has not been. Item by exciting item—
> air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart—
> they are pulsated, and breathed, until they map,
> not the world's, but his own body's chart!
> (334-35)

Klein's poet, a divine maker who recreates the world with the breath of his word, echoes Stephen Dedalus's vision of himself as "a symbol of the artist forging anew . . . out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being" (169). At the same time, Klein's depiction of the poetic act as "illusions" invalidates the poet as a godlike maker and questions the concept of poetry as an imitation of the divine act of creation. The ironic gap between the observation of the illusory nature of poetry and the poet's passionate, physical sense of affinity with the language of poetry outlines a dramatic shift in the poetic function in today's reality.

In her discussion of post-modernism, Linda Hutcheon claims that "in the postmodern [the] self-consciousness of art as *art* is paradoxically made the means to a new engagement with the social and the historical world, and . . . this is done in such a way as to challenge . . . our traditional humanist beliefs about the function of art in society" (1-2). Though it is doubtful whether, writing in the 1940s, Klein was prescient of the forthcoming new literary trends, his intuitive awareness of the changing perception of poetry emerges clearly in his intertextual use of Joyce, the master of modernism. The world regenerated through the 'jouissance' that arises in the act of writing and which, subsequently, infuses pleasure into the act of reading has ceased to exist; as a result, the notion of the poet's indispensability to the world no longer makes sense.

The intertext of "Lycidas" enables Klein to illustrate the superfluousness of the poet in the modern world. As Milton sees it, Lycidas "is not dead, / sunk though he be beneath the watery floor." A Christlike figure, the poet continues to live in the poetry he inspires: as a poetic work, the monody itself eternalizes the poet. Klein's inversion of the Miltonic perspective reduces the poet to a mock saint whose "status as

zero" becomes "a halo of his anonymity" (335). The image of poetry encompassing the universe has shrunk to the boundaries of the poet's private, internal world that interrelates at no point with the world at large. An ignored outsider, the poet must redefine his function in a society which has lost interest in an inspired guide of humanity.

The world, then, continues to both inspire and preoccupy the poet. The purpose of this interest, however, has been transformed. Now the poet explores a world which has banished poetry.

Frank Kermode maintains that the disclosure of truth in the text is contingent upon the interpreter's position vis-à-vis the text: "it is the very fact that one is *outside* that makes possible the revelation of truth or meaning; being *inside* is like being in Plato's cave" (39). Klein's poet consciously positions himself on the outside to examine and record the text of an artless world:

> And now in imagination he has climbed
> another planet, the better to look
> with single camera view upon this earth—
> its total scope, and each afflated tick
> its talk, its trick, its tracklessness—and this,
> this, he would like to write down in a book!
> (335)

It is no longer Lycidas, the poet-saint, who affirms eternity in art; neither is it Stephen, the poet-rebel, who wishes to recreate the human race through art. Now it is the invisible poet whose isolated position informs his parodic self-image of a spy from outer space, surreptitiously documenting the foibles, triviality, and purposelessness of the earth's inhabitants. The repetitiveness of monosyllabic alliterations—"tick," "talk," "trick"—imitates the mechanical clicking of the camera; the final trisyllabic hissing sound of "tracklessness," however, reveals the "photographer's" judgement directed at the object of his ethical investigation: his pictures portray a world which has lost its sense of purpose.

The poem which proposes to write a book composed of the poet's observations of the world has, in fact, been placed at the conclusion of such an attempt: the text of *The Rocking Chair*—a seemingly random collection of poetic vignettes—actualizes the poet's desire

> To find a new function for the *déclassé* craft
> archaic like the fletcher's; make a new thing;
> to say the word that will become sixth sense;
> perhaps by necessity and indirection bring
> new forms to life, anonymously, new creeds
> (335)

The poet's insistence on anonymity recognizes the world's unwillingness to face itself in poetry. Withdrawn, he continues to look over the world as the undefinable "sixth sense," the intuitive aspect which underlies and transcends the concrete properties of the five senses. The exclusion of the poet has outlined the strata of knowledge and truth that the world would prefer to obliterate altogether.

At the psychological level, forgetfulness reaffirms the existence of the ignored object. As Marie Jaanus Kurik observes, "[c]onsciousness deletes or forgets . . . but the unconscious always remembers and seeks to circumvent, incapacitate, disqualify, shatter, and unhinge consciousness and its sham deletions and amnesia" (206). Thus, by declaring his intention to bring "new creeds" at the very end of his book, the poet proceeds by "indirection," like the unconscious in its attempts to maneuver consciousness into self-recognition. The book about the world which "forgot" poetry confronts the world with its suppressed consciousness.

By writing the poet *out*, the world, paradoxically, writes its anonymous poet *in* as its "sixth sense," its ignored self-knowledge. Klein's notion of the excluded poet calls into question Northrop Frye's definition of the ironic protagonist as the excluded individual, the *pharmakos* "selected at random or by lot, and no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be" (41). In Klein's view, the poet's exclusion has rather defined him as his society's unconscious. He is the image and the recorder of the world's suppressed emotional landscape and as such he "lives alone, and in his secret shines / like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea " (335).

"Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" thus offers the key to the text of *The Rocking Chair* as an evolving metaphoric quest: in light of "Portrait," the volume's poetic representations mark the poet's progression toward self-redefinition through the exploration and exposure of the "forgotten" layers of social consciousness. Under the poet's scrutinizing lenses, Quebec

becomes the metonomy of the world which has estranged itself from its poetic self. Thus, the poet, unobtrusively and "by indirection," achieves his end: the intrigued reader reviews the text to confront the "forgotten" truth.

In his discussion of Barthes' notion "Exit Author," Brian McHale insists that while the post-moderns deny the author his or her existence, "they actually *preserve* the author in a displaced form . . . the author persists under the camouflage of 'transcendental anonymity'" (200). Interestingly, Klein's random structure of *The Rocking Chair* exhibits the poet's absence as an organizing principle in the volume. The structural tactics of unrelated images, vignettes, and glimpses illustrate what Barthes calls "secondary meanings" defined as "connotations-meanings," "associations," or "relations, resulting from a linking of two points in the text, which are sometimes apart" (136). Indeed, with the theme of the absent poet, *The Rocking Chair* foregrounds a network of allusions, associations, analogies and spatial relations which constitute the "voices out of which the text is woven" (Barthes 134).

The poems "Air-Map" and "The Break-Up" register the scope of the poet's spatial insights gained from his position of an outsider. In "Air-Map" Klein explodes Quebec's illusion of innocence:

> How private and comfortable it once was,
> our white mansard beneath the continent's gables!
> But now, evicted, and still there—
> a wind blew off the roof?—
> we see our fears and our featherbeds plumped white
> on the world's crossroads.
>
> (310)

As the first person plural persona signals, the poet identifies with the pain of destroyed intimacy which has eliminated the sense of communal togetherness. He knows, however, that clinging to tradition can no longer whitewash anxieties and fears breaking through the façade of complacency and self-deceit. From his vantage position of a secret observer, he outlines his community's unrelieved unhappiness and disorientation.

In "The Break-Up" the malaise of suppressed desperation ironizes the notion of natural revival. As the calendars show, the end of winter "is shouted red / from all the Aprils hanging

on the walls," and the ice on the St. Lawrence is about to break up. This time from his under-water post, the poet views the city's concealed anguish which transforms the hope of spring into the reality of despair:

> But it [the break-up] will come! . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . [it] will melt its muscle-bound tides
> and raise from their iced tomb
> the pyramided fish, the unlockered ships,
> and last year's blue and bloated suicides.
> (314)

The outer-space and under-water standpoints of the persona in both poems thus establish the poet as the distanced observer of society. The all-encompassing and all-penetrating "camera" vision of the world implies the seriousness of the social theme. As their titles indicate, the poems "map out" the "break-up" of traditions sanctified by the seemingly immutable social order.

Assuming the voice of his community's unconscious, the poet places the province on the plane of the collective psyche. Using the example of Quebec, *The Rocking Chair* tells about the disintegration of culture and tradition in a reality typified by growing self-centredness, materialism, and hypocrisy. As metaphoric representations of surfacing awareness, the poems bring forth memories and epiphanies onto the conscious level.

The associative, rather than analogical or chronological, concept of arrangement foregrounds an ambivalent attitude toward both past and present. Neither the idealization of the past, nor the ruthless efficiency of the present provides the desired social model: the ingenuousness of the traditional way of life highlights the mendacity of social interrelationships today; at the same time, the increasing alienation of the individual exposes the growing ineffectuality of tradition as a unifying social factor.

The notion of a reality whose past and present parody each other is perhaps best represented in the contrastive social pictures placed each at an end of the text: the title poem, "The Rocking Chair," and the penultimate poem, "Annual Banquet: Chambre de Commerce." "The Rocking Chair" is actually governed by the "white mansard" motif which, as "Air-Map" demonstrates, has lost its original significance. The poem

glorifies the unchanging rhythm of tradition. The significance of the rocking chair is emphatically spelled out; it "is tradition. It is act / and symbol, symbol of this static folk" (296).

The solid syntactic structure reinforces the patterns of the unchanging tradition: the sentences unfold evenly and slowly; the poem's symmetrical structure of four eight-line stanzas enhances the sense of security instilled by life's predictability. The sense of strong identity emerges in the final comparison of the rocking chair to "some Anjou ballad, all refrain." The consciousness of the ancestral French origins evokes nostalgic longing for the past whose remoteness "make[s] a pleasure out of repeated pain," solidifying the sense of ethnic identity in the recollection of the land of origin as "a first love" (296).

"Annual Banquet: Chambre de Commerce" precedes "Portrait" and thus actually concludes the "Quebec poems." Its placement does not seem arbitrary: the text's final statement about Quebec represents a parodic transformation of its opening statement. Its title, "Annual Banquet," in its denotation of "business time" measured by annual social events, undercuts the notion of "life time" measured by the eternal cycles of youth, maturity, and old age, as implied in the symbol of the rocking chair. Furthermore, the destiny of the centuries-old Quebec farming is no longer determined under the "white mansard" of the ancient family house, but rather in the city's financial centre, its "Chambre de Commerce."

The volume's final comment on Quebec devalues the idealized aspects of the province: the perspective of the province as an object of financial gain parodies its traditional, unworldly life style as an easy prey of exploitation. In both its form and language, the poem places the province within the universal context of the exploiters and the exploited of the corporate world:

> *Quebec: The place for industry*
> *Cheap power. Cheap labour.*
> *No taxes (first three years).*
> *No isms (forever).*
>
> (330)

This perception of the mainstays of Quebec's traditional rich family life turns it into an economic force which makes the province an attractive investment area. Ironically, the loving

family relationships in "The Rocking Chair" contribute to the extinction of the tradition they seek to perpetuate. As presented in "Annual Banquet," "love which moves the stars and factories," produces cheap labour, promoting alienation and exploitation rather than a sense of communal togetherness and meaningful coexistence.

The discrepancy of content, tone, and form between the first and the last Quebec poem traces a twofold paradigm of social and cultural disintegration which eventually culminates in "Portrait." With the disintegration of age-old tradition comes the decline of the poetic-prophetic stature. The disparity between the completeness and clarity of the language in "The Rocking Chair" and the fragmented, italicized journalese in "Annual Banquet" marks the poet's growing uncertainty and disillusion. The discourse between the poet and society breaks up in a reality which has rendered tradition meaningless.

The disorientation incurred by the disappearing cultural and ethical mainstays of community life is manifest in the recurring displacement of poetic conventions. In the poetic narrative of *The Rocking Chair*, images are undone; visions are promptly invalidated; memories and hopes are exposed as illusions. The key to this strategy resides in the matrix of Klein's language: his use of the familiar and its subversion signifies not only a world in transition, but also the increasing social dysfunction of the poet.

The constantly reappearing motif of exploitation communicates the poet's recognition of the futility of the attempt to recall the past as a corrective of the present. "The Spinning Wheel" starts as a poem dedicated to the rich Quebec folklore. Like the rocking chair, the spinning wheel denotes tradition. But the symbol of the past has become a parody of its traditional role, used only "for picturesqueness . . . to preserve romance, the rites" (308). It is also an ironic witness of the continuing exploitation of the Quebec farmer by today's "incorporate seigneur."

The theme of farming in "The Spinning Wheel" evokes the magnificent picture of the Canadian prairie as the world feeder in "Grain Elevator." Here bread is portrayed as the archetypal common denominator for "all the coloured faces of mankind," and the prairie, "rolled like a rug of a thick gold

and golden thread," (301) promises to nurture mankind. This image of wheat as gold shared by humanity at large acquires an altogether different significance in "The Spinning Wheel" where the golden wheat is portrayed as the object of greed and the root of oppression, the farmer's "golden daughters made banality" (309).

Exploitation, the manipulation of one's fellow men for economic profit or political gain, is the decisive factor in the destruction of the humanist ideal. Contrary to the critical appreciation of *The Rocking Chair* as a programmatic humanist text, the image that emerges is that of deceit and greed for power which undermine the humanist foundations of equality and tolerance.

The poem, "Political Meeting," ironically dedicated to Camillien Houde, who sympathized with the fascists and fought against conscription (Caplan 82), presents a case of political manipulation of racist intolerance. Hatred of English Canadians is instigated through skillful demagogic exploitation of the values which structure the backbone of French Canadian tradition; the French Mayor

> praises the virtue of being *Canadien,*
> of being at peace, of faith, of family,
> and suddenly his other voice: *Where are your sons?*
> .....
> The whole street wears one face,
> shadowed and grim; and in the darkness rises
> the body-odour of race.
>
> (307-308)

Ironically, the insidious political game unfolds against the backdrop of "the agonized Y" of the crucifixion (308). To fully understand Klein's condemnation of Houde's willful distortion of Christianity, we should reread "The Sugaring," dedicated to Guy Sylvestre. Here Klein returns to the world of tradition and, in a complex metaphor, transforms the agony of Christian martyrdom into the joy of communal celebration. The maple trees, suffering of cold as the tortured Christian saints, undergo, through the old custom of syrup making, "a sugared metamorphosis" (303).

The confluence of a guileless ritual and a genuine expression of faith is perhaps even more poignantly manifest in "The Cripples." Certain of the possibility of a miracle, the sick

and the handicapped who climb Oratoire de St. Joseph believe that "they [will] stand whole again" (299). The believers do not realize that in their unshaken faith and sense of togetherness they *do* "stand whole," if not in body, then in spirit. The poet, whose disillusion separates him from his own community, senses his isolation as an emotional handicap:

> And I who in my own faith once had faith like this,
> but have not now, am crippled more than they.
> (299)

The poet's realization of his crippling incompleteness is rooted in the humanist notion of the need to connect. As an expression of such need, religious faith is not only a mainstay of tradition which holds a particular group together, but also an element common to humanity which promotes affinity among diverse races and religions. In "The Cripples," the poet mourns the loss of such closeness: his remoteness which allows his "camera" to take in the full picture of the pilgrims and the cathedral, complete with its dome and the ninety-nine steps, represents, in fact, his inability to engage in an inspired discourse with the ineffable. All he can do is observe and denounce the ways in which basic religious concepts of humaneness are abused by such racists as Houde and such anti-semitic hate-mongers as Armand Arcand, an ardent supporter of Hitler and the leader of Quebec's facist movement:

> *Et, pour vrai dire,* what more political
> is there to say after you have said:
> *A bas les maudits Juifs!*
> (*"Hormisdas Arand"* 328)

The poet, however, does not dwell on injustice committed in particular against his own ethnic group; grieving the collapse of the humanist ideal, he identifies his own plight with another poignant instance of ethnic persecution. In "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga," Klein deplores the destruction of the Indian culture and tradition:

> This is a grassy ghetto, and no home.
> And these are fauna in a *museum* kept.
> The better hunters have prevailed. The game,
> losing its blood, now makes these grounds its *crypt.*
> (304-305, italics mine)

The referential context of the poem's imagery brings forth the degree of emotional identification of the Jew with the Indian. In "Meditations Upon Survival" (*Poems* 1941-1947), probably Klein's most profound response to the Holocaust, the poet mourns the lifelessness of his existence in the wake of the national destruction as

> one who, though watched and isolate, does go—
> the last point of a diminished race—
> the way of the *fletched buffalo.*
> .....
> What else, therefore, to do
> but leave these bones that are not ash to fill—
> O not my father's vault—but the glass-case
> some proud *museum* catalogues *Last Jew.*
> (289, italics mine)

Ethnic, historical, and religious distinctions between Jews and Indians notwithstanding, the interrelating imagery in the two poems outlines the common fate of people whose cultural distinctness has been destroyed in an act of dehumanization. Klein's poetic vision highlights the motif of reification and therefore the end of the humanist ideal. The desire to destroy peoples and their traditions in a ruthless, hateful pursuit of profit and power has reduced the "others" to lifeless artifacts.

An example of a world united in the very recognition of cultural diversity emerges in the poem "Montreal." The passionate, sweeping variety of languages and nationalities interfuse, yet remain distinct, in a metaphoric vision of the metropolis as an embodiment of the humanist idea. For a moment, the poet seems to regain his stature of an inspired teacher of humanity conjuring up a vision of multi-racial social intercourse. Significantly, the Indian, the English, and the French are "all present" in the city's past, all equally "[populating] the pupils of [the poet's] eyes": the proud Indian "with tabac of [his] peace enfumes the air"; the adventurous *coureur de bois* with his pelts and the dignified seigneur "within his candled manoir"; the resourceful "Scot / Ambulant through his bank" (316). And the Jewish poet unites them all in his poetry, paying homage to his native city which "formed [his] fate": he is the bard and troubadour who unifies its diverse languages in the music of his song (317).

The implausibility of such vision emerges in its linguistic hyperbole the effusion of which seems to underscore the tenousness of the humanist dream. The contrived linguistic combinations, seemingly intended as an illustration of harmonious unity, signal, in their extravagant diction and exalted tone, a sense of doubt which requires such a grandiloquent act of self-persuasion: the ideal undercuts itself in the intensity of the desire to convince. The response of disbelief is further reinforced in the poem's theme of ethnic harmony clashing in an ironic contrast with the book's dominant theme of exploitation. Against the book's trenchant criticism of the world ruled by rampant systems of exploitation, be they ideological or economic, the poetic idealized vision in "Montreal" signals the poet's own obsoleteness, while his hyperbolic imagery marks his poetry as, indeed, a "*déclassé* craft" (335).

Hence the roots of frustration become noticeable in the tendency to escape into idyllic representations of Montreal. Klein's sense of bonding with the city is extremely powerful. In "Montreal" he calls it "my spirit's mother,/ Almative, poitrinate!" (317), and in another poem, "The Mountain," the city emerges as a landscape which blends the poet's formative experience with the universal experience of humanity at large:

> In layers of mountains the history of mankind,
> and in Mount Royal
> which daily in a streetcar I surround
> my youth, my childhood
>
> (320)

The recurring image of the city as the archetypal mother figure which unifies and supports in love manifests the intensity of Klein's emotional attachment to Montreal and its multi-ethnic population. "For the Sisters of the Hotel Dieu," one of his first poems in *The Rocking Chair*, is an expression of gratitude to the motherly nuns, who took care of him in sickness when he was a child.

Human kindness and grace prevail over religious and racial differences. The sense of affinity grounded in the universality of compassionate love for another human being engenders a response of love: many years later, the Jewish poet, drawing upon the Franciscan bird symbol of loving-kindness, commemorates the nuns in his song of praise. At the same time,

his preoccupation with humanity compels him to explore the emotional framework which makes a selfless act of love possible. As he sees it, the solicitude extended to the Jewish boy is deeply rooted in a sense of emotional wholeness which seems to originate in the nuns' harmonious social setting; it is the deep sense of security and togetherness that enables them to devote themselves to others:

> In pairs,
> as if to illustrate their sisterhood,
> the sisters pace the hospital garden walks.
> In their robes black and white immaculate hoods
> they are like birds
>
> (300)

The picture of mutually enriching relationships is proven void of meaning in one of the concluding poems, "Les Filles Majeures." The initial image of togetherness, almost identical to that of the nuns, is instantly twisted into an emblematic representation of social alienation:

> Evenings, they walk arm in arm, in pairs,—
> as if to emphasize their incompleteness,—
> and friendly together make an ambiguous form,
> like a folded loneliness,
> or like mirrors that reflect only each other.
>
> (328)

In "Sisters," the bird image amplifies the notion of good deeds; like birds which can reach everywhere, the nuns' acts of kindness permeate every segment of society. In "Filles," on the other hand, the sisters' twinship signals duplication: interchangeable, the sisters become redundant. Whereas the nuns' sameness corroborates the distinct social function that they fulfill, the sisters lose identity in the self-perpetuating cycles of alikeness. Cut off from meaningful social roles, they circulate in the orbit of enforced alienation and sterility.

The contrasting treatment of the motif of resemblance outlines the polarity of social attitudes in Klein's world view. The poignant, quiet desperation of the sisters, identical in their isolation, supersedes the idyllic memory of the saintly nuns. Similarly to "The Cripples," which raises the poet's consciousness of social maladjustment, the association with the nuns in the context of "Filles" heightens the notion of purposelessness and isolation. The pictures of past fulfillment

trigger the notion of present dissatisfaction, whereas the increasing sense of fragmentation in the concluding poems intensifies against the earlier representations of the happier past.

Klein's manipulation of similar images bound together in a network of associations reflects the poet's vacillations between the desire to regress to the traditional poetic act of "praising the world" and the intensifying realization of the new poetic function to explore the sense of inexorable displacement in today's world. The concluding stanza of "Les Filles Majeures" extends an associative thread to "Portrait," manifesting the poet's identification with the sterility which pervades the sisters' world:

> For them, for them the world lacks symmetry!
> And they themselves seem to themselves
> like vases broken in half, the halves perversely
> stood upon shelves
> unfinished, and rich with flowers never to be.
> (329)

As an image of the unfulfilled promise of motherhood, the unnecessary, empty, shelved vases invoke the poet's image as "the shelved Lycidas" who "makes of his status as zero a rich garland, / a halo of his anonymity."

The empty, meaningless world of spinsterhood, therefore, becomes a metaphoric representation of spiritually and culturally depleted rigid society which dooms to loneliness and despair those who do not conform. The unloved who in vain wait to be socially recognized cannot possibly create new life and/or art, since both must be conceived in a sense of wholeness and harmony brought forth by love.

The banished poet, suspended, in his imagination, above the planet earth knows why he is not missed. The function of the poet as the teacher of humanity has been usurped by a new visionary: the notary has become "the true poet functional of this place" (324). "The Notary" presents the image of the undisputed ruler of society whose beliefs, customs, and life style have become subject to contractual arrangements. The poetry that permeates and shapes society today is the text of the legal document: in a sense, the notary has become the maker, renaming the world through the language of his legalistic, by no means "*déclassé*," craft.

In "Portrait," the forgotten poet dreams about renewing his poetic function by bringing "new forms to life." In a sense, the dream in its parodic form has been realized by the notary, the poet's grotesque double. "The Notary," as one of the most poignant insights into social interrelations, confronts society with a picture of its ethical and aesthetic deterioration. The new forms that he brings to life underscore the lifelessness of today's existence where even love is governed by money.

In his discussion of language usage as social activity, Ludwig Wittgenstein maintains that the multiplicity of linguistic forms "is not something fixed, given once for all; . . . new types of language, new language-games . . . come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten" because language "is part of an activity, or a form of life" (I, 23). This view of language as not merely a tool of communication, but, as the embodiment of the continuously evolving social intercourse, elucidates the perception of poetry as a medium which brings "new forms" to life. "The Notary" highlights Klein's preoccupation with the function of the emerging "language-games" once the former discourse of artists such as Milton and Joyce has been expunged. The manipulative legal contract, the racist political oratory, the profit-oriented business talk are new forms of life shaped by new "language-games."

The "new function" of poetry seems to materialize in its interpretation of new social edifices erected upon the discarded ideals of the past. The poetic consciousness buried "at the bottom" of the sea illuminates a reality the significance of which has not been acknowledged. Perhaps the most extreme illustration of today's social landscape emerges at the centre of the volume, in "Pawnshop." The emblem of society as the house of death, the pawnshop portrays man as the architect of his own spiritual demise. The pawnshop, echoing Dantesque hell, pawns individuals in that it reifies them, divests them of their pride, translates their despondency into its profit: these unhappy souls

> . . . . pause before its brass-bound doors,
> look right and left, in shame,
> enter, and price, and ticket their despairs.
> (311)

The shop is also the burial place of culture, religion, and ethics, turning the world into a moral waste land:

> This is our era's state-fair parthenon,
> the pyramid of a pharaonic time,
> our little cathedral, our platonic cave,
> our childhood's house that Jack built. Synonym
> of all building, our house, it owns us; even
> when free from it, our dialectic grave.
> .....
> Our own gomorrah house,
> the sodom that merely to look at makes one salt?
> (312)

Like the biblical Lot, the poet has been excluded from his immoral environment, and like Lot's wife, he looks back from his solitary post at the city which raised him and then rejected him. Unlike Sodom and Gomorrah, however, the poet's city is not burning; in its perpetuating sinfulness and corruption, it still waits to be redeemed. The poet can no longer assume the role of a prophetic social reformer; neither can he continue to sing in praise of human beings who have abused humanism. The unheeded poet can strive for no more than an "air-map" outline of mankind's "break-up" of humanistic values, or an occasional in-depth glimpse of the repressed social consciousness.

As a quest for the poet's self-redefinition in face of the moral collapse of today's world, *The Rocking Chair* emerges as "production" rather than a finalized "product." The text's vacillations between the idealized fantasy of the past and the satiric vision of the present recall beauty and hope in a world which has divested itself of poetry. The text comes to life in the acknowledgement of its own anxiety, "nervousness," and disorientation. Indeed, the poetic exploration of poetry's vulnerability amounts to a new function of the "*déclassé* craft": its multiple voices of the past and of the present searching to penetrate social obtuseness reassert the validity of the ignored voice of humanism.

NOTES

[1] The references to *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* are from *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein.*

[2] See Sutherland 62-65; Dudek 72-73; Wilson 93.

[3] Also see Waddington 133; Marshall xiii; Matthews 146.

[4] Fiamengo 70.

[5] See Sutherland 59; Wilson 95-97; Matthews 146-147; Waddington 119-120; Caplan 181.

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