"Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens": A.M. Klein as Wordsmith
by Linda Hutcheon and Alain Goldschlager

The critical attention that has been devoted to the poetry of A.M. Klein over the years has been largely thematic in orientation, whether the aim be an exposition of Klein’s Jewish traditionalism or a reclaiming of a more secular context for his work. Some critics, it is true, have mentioned in passing Klein’s distinctive diction and his often dazzling virtuosity with poetic forms. Others have traced image patterns in his poetry as a whole, but very little work has been done on the formal explication of individual poems. In some ways, this would appear rather odd, given the relative obscurity and complexity of Klein’s verse. After the symposium on Klein in May 1974, Ralph Gustafson complained that he had heard “too little of Klein as a wordsmith making out of experience ... verbal poems.” That Klein was a deliberate and skilled craftsman with words is clear to any reader. What is less obvious, but no less true, is that he was a master of larger poetic structures, intricate structures which themselves developed and indeed actually illustrated the thematic content of the individual poems.

The early series of verses on Spinoza, “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens”, serves as an example of this process of generating meaning through form. There are nine closely knit poems here (and not “ten loosely related poemlets” as Miriam Waddington would have it), echoing perhaps the nine basic definitions at the core of Spinoza’s philosophy as expounded in the only work published under his own name during his lifetime, the Principles of Descartes’s Philosophy. Gretl Fischer has suggested a thematically based structure for the Klein verse series: V presents the core of Spinoza’s philosophy; I and IX are biographical; II and VI are “public poetry”; III and VII, “personal poetry”; IV and VIII are each described as being poems of “argument”—between religion and philosophy. While this thematic structure is useful and certainly defensible, there seem to be at least two others based on the form of the series itself. One of these formal patterns links the first and last (IX) poems, the second and eighth, the third and seventh, the fourth and sixth, with the literal centre of these concentric circles being that crucial section V. Yet another more traditional patterning is visible on a more linear level, as the language of each section recalls that of an earlier poem or points to that of a subsequent one. Here again, however, sec-
tion V remains the formal core, and as we shall see, it therefore becomes the thematic core as well of the work as a whole.

The series opens with an angry section introducing the fate of Spinoza, officially cursed and ostracized by his fellow Jews in Amsterdam for his scientific philosophical speculations; but it ends with a poem of peaceful affirmation of the philosopher’s beliefs. The noisy “maculate streets” of Amsterdam in I are traded for the quiet “garden of Mynheer” in IX. The anger of what the poet first calls “theology” and then, more accurately, “anathema” in the first poem is, in the end, transcended by the tulip-plucking Spinoza, busy as he is with “the thought of the Adored.” The dogma of the orthodox could see in Spinoza’s ideas only “false doctrine,” “scabrous heresies,” as the first poem reveals. Yet, in the same century, many of these same kinds of scorners were taken in by Shabbathai Zvi, a false messiah—a role to which the humble Spinoza never aspired. Section IX sets up this implicit and explicit contrast. Shabbathai Zvi had been considered dangerous as well—but by the Turks, not by his own people. Falsely he had taken “to himself the Torah for a wife,” that is, made himself its guardian. Spinoza, on the other hand, remained the “ever-unwedded lover of the Lord”—a less overtly legal but more faithful role, since (when captured by the Turks) the mystic Kabbalist had become a Moslem to avoid death. As a reward for his devotion Spinoza, however, was formally cursed in terms whose violence Klein seems to echo in his opening virulence against the “paunchy sons of Abraham.”

This first poem is of crucial importance to both the circular and linear patterns of this series, for it is here that the basic opposition that will structure the work is introduced. The poet, with heavy sarcasm, notes what “sacred prose” there is in anathema, “Winnowing the fact from the suppose.” But the irony does not hide the fact that there actually is “sacred prose” in this series of poems—section V—and that it does indeed serve to separate the “fact” (Spinoza’s philosophy of Nature and God in poems VI to IX) from the “suppose” (institutionalized dogmatic religion as presented in poems I to IV). Klein himself was only twenty-two when he wrote this work and it seems clear that he had found, at least in the more positive of Spinoza’s beliefs, a way of dealing with his own doubts, a way of reconciling his religious beliefs and the dictates of his intellect. It was in the Jewish philosopher’s writings—for instance, in the Ethics (Part I, Prop. XIV) which claims that “Besides God no substance can be granted or conceived”—that Klein found a way of reconciling faith and science, that is, man’s relationship to God and to Nature. Spinoza’s totalizing conception of the deity permitted the marriage of the two into a single and unique expression of lived reality for which poetry and mathematics become the natural languages.

Sections II and VIII of Klein’s series here form a pair of poems which further expand on this now almost non-existent opposition between faith and science, religion and philosophy. The formal prose form of VIII unites faith—the language of the Bible (echoes of the Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon)—and science, that is, the geometrically organized philosophy of Spinoza. In other words, the language or the form in itself effects the reconciliation which is the content: Spinoza is no heretic. While this religion/philosophy opposition dissolves, another one reappears in these same two
poems, the earlier one between the “fact” and the “suppose” of poem I. Section II is concerned with the “suppose,” represented in Klein’s view by organized dogmatic religion, be it Christian or Jewish. The subject of the poem is another unfortunate contemporary of Spinoza—Uriel da Costa. At first unable to decide between what he saw as the limitations of formal religion as manifested by the Catholic Church on the one hand, and the Jewish faith on the other, the deeply religious da Costa committed suicide after a public flagellation marking his reintegration into the Jewish community. His earlier “glib paternoster” is echoed in the lilting verse of the poem, which works to undercut both da Costa’s fate and his religious “schism.” Da Costa had been condemned by the Jews as a renegade, but had been offered the chance to repent and return to the fold. Spinoza, on the other hand, had been excommunicated in vituperative and final terms—a fate which, compared to that of da Costa or even Shabbathai Zvi, seems an inordinately harsh punishment to be visited upon the gentle philosopher by his own people.

The formal tonal contrast of section II with VIII could not be more dramatic, but in the later poem we have moved from the doctrinal “suppose” which separates the two different but equally dogmatic religions, as did the society of the renegade da Costa, to the “fact” of both Spinoza’s philosophy and Klein’s language—both of which seek to unite them. As the rhyme suggests, there is no room for “schism” or dogmatic “catechism” here. God is everywhere—in the Jewish Holy Land of the “almond-trees,” but no less in the Christian “babe in swaddling clothes” and in the “rose” and the “lily” that are the “blood and flesh” of the philosopher, as of Christ. Not only are scripture and reason not contradictory in either the form or the content here, but religious differences also appear to be resolved.

The paired eight-line poems in Spinoza’s own voice—III and VII—renew and share an oppositional structure, however. Poem III is addressed, by the philosopher, to his own heart, exhorting it in strongly worded imperatives to abjure the doubt, the fear, and the temptations brought about by the “suppose” of the previous sections. The natural but repulsive images of scorpions and vermin are left behind in VII as Spinoza’s simple lyric of faith in the beauty of Nature contains no demands to his heart, for he is now “nothing at all.” It merely celebrates the wind, a star, the sun, the “song of a bird”—all “miracles” of “fact.”

The same opposition is most clearly seen in the two poems framing the central reconciling section V. Spinoza’s own voice again addresses us. In IV, the “suppose” is attacked, with great colloquial satirical verve. Its form is still that of institutionalized religion—both Christian and Jewish, once again. Poem VI, however, is a formal Te Deum to the intellect, to the discoverer of the “other Law” of “fact” of poem IV. The ironically treated “loud hosannas” of God’s helpful angels in IV are silenced by this “loud Te Deum.” The Jehovah of the earlier poem may be “factotum of the rabbis” but here in VI we must cry “Suzerain” to the intellect of man as a manifestation of the divine, and indirectly perhaps, to what Klein has just called the “passion intellectual of God” (in V), as the supreme form of divine knowledge, uniting as it does the mind and heart of man.

That poem VI is a variant on the Shakespearean sonnet form (with couplets) offers a possible hint of how to approach the enigmatic prose of section
V. Although she admits finding iambic pentameter and rhyme, Gretl Fischer claims that Klein here "abandoned all ostentations of poetic technique." However, quite the contrary seems true. In this central Spinozan philosophical section, the one that literally winnows the “fact” (VI to IX) from the “suppose” (I to IV), the “sacred prose” mentioned in part I of the poem is ironically revealed to be poetry. In fact, it is a rhymed sonnet (abba cddc effe gg), a mixture of Petrarchan rhyme scheme (abba) and formal divisions into octave and sestet (as marked by the two “prose” paragraphs) and the Shakespearean form with its final thematically summarizing couplet:

Reducing providence to theorems,
the horrible atheist compiled such lore
that proved, like proving two and two make four,
that in the crown of God we all are gems.
From glass and dust of glass he brought to light,
out of the pulver and the polished lens,
the prism and the flying mote; and hence
the infinitesimal and infinite.
Is it a marvel, then, that he forsook
the abracadabra of the synagogue,
and holding with timelessness a duologue,
derciphered a new scripture in the book?
Is it a marvel that he left old fraud
for passion intellectual of God?

The sonnet form was an early favourite of Klein. Among the poems included in the 1927-1937 section of his Collected Poems are twenty-seven which are sonnets or variants; Hath Not a Jew... contained fourteen, not counting sections V and VI here. In fact, shortly after writing this Spinozan series of poems, Klein composed seven sonnets, the "Talisman in Seven Shreds."

In line 12 of this sonnet (V) the poet remarks on the “new scripture in the book” as deciphered by Spinoza, perhaps hinting to the reader the need to do the same deciphering work here. The opposition between the “fact and the suppose” is obliterated in a sense by Spinoza’s ability to reduce “providence to theorems.” A new structuring metaphor is here added to that of the above separation or “Winnowing” and this is the image of the macrocosm and the microcosm, the whole and the part, God and man: “in the crown of God we all are gems.” It is around this image that the sonnet organizes itself and as a result, its formal structure actually creates its meaning. This can be seen by a study of the second half of the octave which is the most structurally intricate part of the poem:

From glass and dust of glass he brought to light,
out of the pulver and the polished lens,
the prism and the flying mote; and hence
the infinitesimal and infinite.

The complex chiasmic structure of parallels now perceived by the sonnet reader (as set up by the verse itself) takes on this form:
In addition, Klein begins the macro/microcosm structure of images with the concrete (glass) and what is needed to compose it literally (dust of glass) and progresses step by step to the most abstract (infinite) and what, in Spinoza’s mind, is needed to compose it (infinitesimal). Out of Klein’s rhetorical poetic structure grows Spinoza’s philosophical theory of the infinite (that is, of God) and of man’s relations to it, just as out of Spinoza’s craft of lens grinding come Klein’s images. The “sacred prose”—or verse—separates “theorems” (“the fact”) from “the abracadabra of the synagogue” (“the suppose”). The “passion intellectual of God” replaces, as the rhyming couplet underlines, “old fraud.”

Just as the opposition between “fact” and “suppose” of section I established the structure of the verse series as a whole, so the macrocosm/microcosm imagery of V sets up the main metaphoric structure of poems VI to IX. These two patterns suggest a second possible one, this time a linear one in which each section is not only linked to its corresponding thematic and formal opposite (I and IX, II and VIII, III and VII, IV and VI) but is also joined with great care and skill to many of the other poems, both preceding and following it. We have already seen, for instance, the Christian and Jewish “schism” metaphor worked out formally and thematically in II, IV, and IX, and finally resolved in the language and philosophy both of VIII. The image of the suicide, the “Ghost of da Costa” from poem II, threatens to haunt Spinoza in III, and then, along with Nietzsche, literally haunts the theme (as Hamlet haunts the language) of IV: “Synods tell God to be or not to be.”

The macrocosm/microcosm image, complexly developed in the second half of the octave of poem V, as we have seen, forms the basis of what might even be called a kind of post-metaphysical conceit in VI. The “crown of God” in which “we all are gems” in V here is related by implied verbal play to the Godhead and its manifestation in the human “jewelled brain” and the “crown of bone” which we are asked to worship. The “heart” of Spinoza, exhorted in III, is here assisted by the “proud skull” which (again punningly) grows “heady with strong epithets,” as the poem’s language moves to reconcile Christian images (the Te Deum, genuflection, echoes of Ecclesiastes) with those of the Kabbala (“O cirque of the Cabalist”) and alchemy (“O crucible”).11 But in the end silence reigns. The last two lines point ahead in both language and tone to section VIII in which the intellect, here so revered, does effect the reconciliation of the “Macrocose” (of the Godhead) and man, through nature.

The final line of VI, “Ye have been singularly dumb”, is also explained in VII, a poem whose simplicity of form underlines its theme of the limits of even the recently exalted reason: “I go to my knees, at length / Before the song of a bird.” The real “fact” is here revealed to be natural “miracles” before which the philosopher effaces himself, at least temporarily. In VIII, he will find his own voice again, and the same wind, sun, stars, the “turtle-dove
twittering,” will be seen as manifestations of the divine in which the philosopher can partake, finding instead of losing himself: “I behold thee in all things, and in all things: lo, it is myself.” The culmination of the macro/microcosm imagery comes in the “petty words” that Spinoza offers as “hallelujahs”: “unto perfection a fragment makes his prayer.” God is the “blossom” and the philosopher is “its flowering petal.” The lily and rose imagery of VIII in a sense prepares the reader for the Dutch tulip-plucking Spinoza of the next section, as his “hallelujahs” here recall both the ironic angels’ “hosannas” of IV and the Te Deum to the intellect of VI. Spinoza’s own profession of lens grinding—that concrete seminal image at the core of poem V—is picked up here in VIII through the mention of a fellow scientist: “with thee Kopernik holds communion through a lens.” The great and the small come together in God: “Even as the stars in the firmament move, so does my inward heart.” No longer need Spinoza exhort his heart (III), for he has found the source of strength.

The final poem of the series asks the reader, then, to think of Spinoza, not as the “horrible atheist” (V), nor as a public messianic figure. Rejecting all institutionalized creeds as his own people had rejected him, the philosopher turns to nature—the tulips in the “garden of Mynheer” “in the Holland sun” and to his own intellect, to “the thought of the Adored” (our italics). Klein’s rhyming of “sun” with “the One” unites not just Nature and God, but man as well, since in VIII we recall Spinoza’s words: “at the rising of the sun I behold thy countenance.” The “soldier of God” who threatened in the first poem, the one who would use “as rod the irrefutable stiletto,” turns out to be the poet, whose bilingually punning “stiletto” or pen does not bring the feared death, but new life. It creates a new “creed,” “that other Law” which Spinoza urged us to seek in poem IV.

Spinoza’s somewhat mystic yet rationalist philosophy does not just provide the young Klein with the material for a literary exercise. That it was, at this stage, deeply and personally felt seems clear. Perhaps too, the geometric structure of axioms, propositions, proofs, and corollaries of Spinoza’s Ethics might have inspired Klein to attempt the intricate but logical verbal structuration of this series of poems. But form and content in “out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens” are so closely interrelated that it is possible to say that the structures of the work—its recurring images and language patterns—actually bring about the themes. The content is the form, just as in Spinoza’s view the identity of the “Macrocosm, sinew-shut” is one with both nature and the intellect of man—its forms or manifestations in the universe.
Notes


3. See Dorothy Livesay's "The Polished Lens: Poetic Techniques of Pratt and Klein", *Canadian Literature*, 25 (Summer 1965), pp. 33-42. The analysis of two lines from "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is marred somewhat by the fact that the lines quoted are not from this poem at all.


5. "Informal Reflections on the Klein Symposium" in the above volume edited by S. Mayne, p. 84, his italics.


9. Given the opening, it would not seem to be a *Te Deum* "in praise of divine creation" in general, as Fischer suggests in *In Search of Jerusalem*, p. 43.


12. One is reminded here of the twelve precious stones symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel on the arms of Solomon. Though the philosopher was formally excommunicated, his imaginative allegiance never strayed far from his people and his faith. Nor did Klein's.

13. Structurally, it is hard to agree with Fischer who feels that this section proves that language is inadequate to divine creation "and Klein was probably acutely aware of it. The grandiloquence of the lines stifles their emotional content." *In Search of Jerusalem*, p. 44.

14. It is hard to agree here with John Sutherland (art. cit., p. 43) that "Klein is not the poet to express a serious idea or even a serious emotion."