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A More Contemporary Voice: A. M. Klein's Original and Revised Translations of the Hebrew Poems of Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik

LAWRENCE KAPLAN

THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, the distinguished Montreal Jewish poet Abraham M. Klein was concerned with both the theory and the practice of translation. Perhaps the fullest expression of Klein's theory of translation is to be found in his review of *Thirty-One Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Ludwig Lewisohn (Klein 1987: 251–55). In the review, Klein rather tendentiously contrasts two types of translations of Rilke and, by extension, of poetry in general. He condemns those translations of Rilke that make “an ideal of verbal and linear exactness” (ibid.: 252), as a consequence of which, Klein acerbically notes, “the rhymes and meters upon which Rilke obviously laboured, disappear . . . and what is left is a dictionary word-for-word rendition, much in the style of the classical cribs” (ibid.). To be contrasted to this type of pseudo-translation is that type of translation of Rilke that, while manifesting a “faithful adherence to the letter of the original poems” (ibid.: 254–55), at the same time “gives us poems, complete poems . . . where the rhymes, the meter, the pattern, the form, come to life again . . . where the translation read[s] like an original” (ibid.: 253). Klein praises Lewisohn for his success in carrying out this second type of translation, and it is obvious that this second type represents Klein's ideal as well. Indeed,

Klein concludes his review with the ringing claim that “[t]hese translations of Lewisohn . . . demonstrate once more that only he can translate another’s poetry who is himself a poet” (ibid.: 254). A poet, no doubt, like A. M. Klein.

In 1936–37, Klein, in perhaps his most ambitious attempt to put this theory into practice, translated into English thirteen poems of the great twentieth-century Hebrew poet Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, including his mighty epic (or, perhaps, anti-epic)¹ poem about the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, “Be‘ir hahareigah” (In the city of slaughter).² Some twenty years later, from 1953 to 1955, just before his breakdown and final silence and when he had already stopped writing original poetry, Klein retranslated four of Bialik’s poems that he had translated in the 1930s, including part of “Be‘ir hahareigah,” as well as translated for the first time Bialik’s 1901 poem “Kokhavim metsitsim vekhavim” (Stars flicker and fall in the sky).³

It is always a significant literary event when one major poet translates the poetry of another major poet, and these translations of Klein have not gone unnoticed. In particular, Klein’s 1936–37 translation of “Be‘ir hahareigah” has garnered high praise from Bialik scholars. Thus, Alan Mintz has written, “The English version [of “Be‘ir hahareigah”] by the Canadian poet A. M. Klein can stand on its own as a poetic composition. Klein has happily succeeded in conveying Bialik’s juxtaposition of a high biblical diction with restraint and austerity in description” (Mintz 1984: 131–32).⁴

Klein scholars have naturally taken due note of and accorded due praise to these translations. It is striking that the editors of Klein’s *Selected Poems* conclude the work with Klein’s translations from the 1950s of three of Bialik’s poems. They write in their textual note (appended to their introduction): “These translations, apart from being fine poems in their own right, provide a unique insight into Klein’s life when he had entirely ceased to write original poetry” (Klein 1997: xx). Moreover, in their introduction proper, the editors comment that “these new translations of Bialik [that Klein produced in the 1950s] are among the most moving poems he ever wrote, far superior to the translations of the 30s” (ibid.: xviii), though they offer no reason for their judgment.

Zailig Pollock, in his important study *A. M. Klein: The Story of a Poet*, in line with his biographical and socio-psychological approach to Klein's poetry as a reflection of his person, resorts to a biographical explanation in order to account for that superiority. Thus Pollock compares how Klein translated the line *kardomi ba be'ets rikkavon*—literally, “My axe struck rotted wood”—from Bialik's 1910 poem “Hozeh, lekh berah” (Seer, go flee), in the version from the 1930s and the revised version from the 1950s. In the 1930s version, Klein translated the line weakly: “Wood that was rotten took my sharp axe in.” In the revised 1950s version, the translation is much harsher and stronger: “My axe struck punk.” Pollock comments: “Years of brooding over the bitterness of rejection separate the contemptuous violence of ‘My axe struck punk’ from the blandness of the version of the late 1930s: ‘Wood that was rotten took my sharp axe in’” (Pollock 1994: 254). But, as I shall immediately argue, a comparison of the two versions in their entirety indicates that the differences between them would appear to be more a matter of poetics than psychology or pathology.

This essay has two tasks. First, I wish to understand and account for the differences in style between Klein's translations of Bialik done in the 1930s and the revised translations done in the 1950s and to offer a literary reason for the general superiority of the latter translations over the former. Second, I wish to show that Klein's revised translation of “Be'ir hahareigah” is an exception to this general superiority and to offer a possible reason as to why this is so.

In order to accomplish the first task, we must take note of the general evolution of Klein's poetics. As many Klein scholars have noted, there is a clear stylistic difference between Klein's early poetry of the 1930s and his later poetry beginning in the 1940s, the later poetry being unquestionably superior to the earlier. Thus, as early as 1950, the well-known Canadian poet, critic, editor, and friend and colleague of Klein, Louis Dudek, observed:

The form and diction of [Klein's] early poetry is hardly commendable. The chief influence is that of Shakespeare, but there is also a little

Keats, a little Byron, some Heine . . . ; add nursery rhymes and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The archaic rhetoric of Shakespeare which Klein adopted is intended to suggest the Jewishness of his themes. . . . [B]ut this language experiment of Klein's . . . cannot be called a success. (Dudek 1970: 70)

By contrast, Dudek goes on to say:

The latest and most complex stage of Klein's poetical development began in the early 40s. . . . What Klein is working towards in his recent poetry seems to be a greater expertness in the use of varied poetical tools, especially the techniques of modernism; greater complexity of ideas and sharpness of images; and in general an artistic sophistication of attitude somewhat new in Canada. (ibid.: 71–72)

In a similar vein, the editors of Klein's *Selected Poems*, writing in 1997, contend:

By the early 40s Klein had come to terms with modern poetry more fully than he had ever done before, and had developed a more contemporary voice — tougher, more colloquial, more ironic — which was less immediately accessible than in the past, but almost entirely free of the poeticisms and overwrought rhetoric that had blunted the impact of much of his earlier verse. (Klein 1997: xv)

Regarding the precise nature of the modernism of Klein's mature poetry, perhaps the most illuminating comments have been made by the Canadian critic and editor John Sutherland. In a review of Klein's 1949 book of poems, *The Rocking Chair*, Sutherland suggests that “[i]n the early 40s Klein was associated with the Montreal *Preview* group, and his new poems reflect their blending of Auden and Thomas” (Sutherland 1970: 60). Examining selected passages from

The Rocking Chair, Sutherland shows how Klein takes “from Auden the identity of individual and his surroundings, reduced to intellectual order; [and] from Thomas the identity felt and experienced in intimate, physical terms.” But, as Sutherland concludes, “Thomas’ influence is less direct than Auden’s and neither is left unabsorbed in the poetry as a whole. Auden and Thomas serve as midwives enabling Klein to fuse the sometimes-disparate intellectual and sensuous aspects of his work . . . [and] achieve a new, more intense lyricism fortified by sophistication and a tough logic” (ibid.: 60–62).

I would suggest, then, that precisely this stylistic change of voice, this shift in poetics that is manifest in Klein’s writing of original poetry accounts for the differences in style between Klein’s translations of Bialik done in the 1930s and the revised translations done in the 1950s and for the general literary superiority of the latter over the former. The poetic voice of the 1930s translations is subject to the failures of poeticisms, overwrought archaic Elizabethan rhetoric, elevated diction, and the like. The poetic voice of the 1950s translations, by contrast, is a more contemporary voice—tougher, more colloquial, more ironic; the poems’ images are sharper and more sensuous.

To return to Klein’s translations of the line *kardomi ba be’ets rikkavon* from the poem “Hozeh, lekh berah” in the 1930s version and the revised 1950s version: as we saw, in the 1930s version Klein translated the line weakly: “Wood that was rotten took my sharp axe in,” while in the revised 1950s version, he translated it much more strongly, sharply, and harshly: “My axe struck punk.” My fundamental contention, then, is that we should look first and foremost to the change in Klein’s poetic voice in order to account for the literary superiority of the translation of the 1950s over that of the 1930s, rather than resorting to Pollock’s biographical explanation that “the contemptuous violence [of the revised version of the 1950s as opposed to] the blandness of the version of the late 30s” resulted from Klein’s “[y]ears of brooding over the bitterness of rejection.”

We may corroborate this contention by setting Klein’s two translations of “Hozeh, lekh berah” over against the original Hebrew poem (Bialik 1926: 221–22) and examining them in their entirety.

חֹזֶה, לֶךְ בָּרַח

[עמוס ז, יב]

”לֶךְ בָּרַח?” – לֹא יִבְרַח אִישׁ כְּמוֹנִי!

הַלֹּוֹךְ בְּלֹאט לְמִדְנֵי בְקָרִי,

גַּם דִּבֵּר כֵּן לֹא לְמִדָּה לְשׁוֹנֵי

וּכְקָרְדִם כְּבֵד יִפֹּל דְבָרִי.

וְאִם־זִכְחֵי תַם לְרִיק – לֹא־פִשְׁעֵי,

חַטָּאתְכֶם הִיא וּשְׂאוֹ הָעֵוֹן!

לֹא־מִצָּא תַחֲתָיו סֶדֶן פְּטִישֵׁי,

קַרְדָּמֵי בָּא בְּעֵץ וְקַבּוּן.

אִין דְּבָר! אֲשָׁלִים עִם גֹּוְרָלִי:

אֶת־כְּלֵי אֶקְשׁוֹר לְחַגוּרְתִי,

וּשְׂכִיר הַיּוֹם בְּלִי שְׂכָר פְּעָלִי

אֲשׁוּבָה לִי בְּלֹאט כְּשִׁבְאַתִּי.

אֶל־נְוֵי אֲשׁוּב וְאֶל־עַמְקֵי

וְאֶכְרַת בְּרִית עִם שְׂקָמֵי יַעַר;

וְאֶתֶם – אֶתֶם מְסוּס וְרַקֵּב

וּמְחָר יִשְׂאָר כְּלַכֶּם סַעַר.

Seer, Begone [Version 1] c. 1936/1937

‘Seer, begone!’ One of my kind flees not!

Slowly to walk, this I have learned from my herds.

Nor has my tongue learned phrases finely wrought:

Like the heavy blows of an axe, so fall my words.

And if my strength is spent—’tis not mine the fault!

Yours is the guilt and you must bear the sin.

My hammer found no anvil to cry halt;

Wood that was rotten took my sharp axe in.

'Tis nothing. I make my peace with this my fate.
 I gird in my belt the rude tools of my art,
 A day-labourer, unpaid his wage and rate,
 Quietly as I came, I now depart.

Unto my valley and my tent I go.
 I make a covenant with trees this day.
 And as for you, who are corruption, know
 To-morrow the storm carries you away.

O Thou Seer, Go Flee Thee—Away
[Version 2 of 'Seer Begone'] c. 1953–55

'Fly! Run away!' Not such as I do run.
 I followed cattle, they taught me to walk slow.
 Slow comes my speech, my words come one by one
 The strokes of an axe they come down, blow by blow.

The strokes fell false? . . . Not mine, not mine the blunder.
 Yours was the fault the strokes were falsely sunk:
 My hammer struck and found no anvil under;
 My axe struck punk.

No matter; I accept my fate, retire,
 And gird my gear about my loins once more:
 A hired man, but cheated of his hire
 I will return—at my pace—to my door;

And there, in the deep forest, will take root
 With the great sycamore, and there hold firm;
 But unto you,—rot, fungus, trodden fruit—
 I prophesy—the whirlwind and the storm!

A comparison of the two translations clearly shows that the earlier translation (Klein 1990: 755–56) is marred both by poeticisms and “fine” elevated dicta, while the language of the later translation (ibid.: 756–57), by contrast, is more spare and direct. Compare such poeticisms in the earlier translation as “’tis not mine the fault!” (line 5) and “’tis nothing” (line 9) with their equivalents in the later translation, “Not mine, not mine the blunder” and “No matter.” Or, again, compare such an “elevated” line found in the earlier translation as “My hammer found no anvil to cry halt” (line 7) with its equivalent in the later translation, “My hammer struck and found no anvil under”; or the affected phrase “the rude tools of my art” (line 10) of the earlier translation with its simple and effective equivalent in the later translation, “my gear.”⁵

Of course, at times the power of the later translation is purchased at the cost of a certain unfaithfulness. Thus, the poem’s last line, *umaḥar yissa khulkhem sa‘ar*, literally translated would be, “And tomorrow all of you will be carried away by the storm.” In the earlier translation, the line is accurately translated, “Tomorrow the storm carries you away.” The later translation, by contrast, concludes, “I prophesy—the whirlwind and the storm!” This is very powerful, but there is no mention of prophecy in the Hebrew, unless we assume that the reference to “tomorrow” in the Hebrew is a type of prophecy, which is something of a stretch. Having said this, the superiority of the later translation over the earlier translation is clear, as is the presence in that later translation of Klein’s tough, contemporary, colloquial voice, and the editors of Klein’s *Selected Poems* did well to include this later translation in their collection.

A comparison of Klein’s translations of Bialik’s poems “Lamenatseah ‘al hameḥolot” (“Dance of Despair”), and “Ḥalefah ‘al panai” (“There Passed over My Face”), done in the 1930s with the revised translations of those poems done in the 1950s, will provide only additional support for my argument.

The superiority of Klein’s revised translations of the poems “Ḥozeh, lekh berah,” “Lamenatseah ‘al hameḥolot,” and “Ḥalefah ‘al panai,” done in the 1950s, over the original translations of those poems done in the 1930s, is clear; however, matters are considerably more ambiguous when it comes to the different

versions of Klein's translation of "Be'ir hahareigah" (Bialik 1926: 168–74). As Pollock notes, this "is Klein's longest translation by far, and it clearly had a special significance for him: he returned to it again and again, producing at least seventeen whole or partial versions of it" (Pollock 1994: 86).⁶ Of course, most of these versions are just slight modifications or reworkings of earlier versions. Here I will use as my base texts the two versions printed in *Complete Poems*, the complete 1936–37 translation of the poem (Klein 1990: 733–43) and the partial 1953 translation (*ibid.*: 744–49), and will focus upon Klein's translations of lines 1–30 and 68–75 of the poem (= lines 1–37 and 90–102 of Klein's version 1, and lines 1–40 and 94–109 of his version 2). First, let us look at Klein's translations of lines 1–30.

City of Slaughter [Version 1] 1936–37

Arise and go now to the city of slaughter;
 Into its courtyards wend thy way;
 There with thine own hand touch, and with the eyes of thine head,
 Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay,
 The splattered blood and dried brains of the dead.
 Proceed thence to the ruins, the split walls reach,
 Where wider grows the hollow, and greater grows the breach;
 Pass over the shattered hearth, attain the broken wall
 Whose burnt and barren brick, whose charred stones reveal
 The open mouths of such wounds, that no mending
 Shall ever mend, nor healing ever heal.

There will thy feet in feathers sink, and stumble
 On wreckage doubly wrecked, scroll heaped on manuscript,
 Fragments again fragmented—

Pause not upon this havoc; go thy way.
 The perfumes will be wafted from the acacia bud
 And half its blossoms will be feathers,
 Whose smell is the smell of blood!

And, spiting thee, strange incense they will bring —
 Banish thy loathing— all the beauty of the spring,
 The thousand golden arrows of the sun
 Will flash upon thy malison;
 The sevenfold rays of broken glass
 Over thy sorrow joyously will pass,
 For God called up the slaughter and the spring together,—
 The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and it was sunny weather!

Then wilt thou flee to a yard, observe its mound.
 Upon the mound lie two, and both are headless —
 A Jew and his hound.
 The self-same axe struck both, and both were flung
 Unto the self-same heap where swine seek dung;
 Tomorrow the rain will wash their mingled blood
 Into the runnels, and it will be lost
 In rubbish heap, in stagnant pool, in mud.
 Its cry will not be heard.
 It will descend into the deep, or warm the cockle-burr.
 And all things will be as they ever were.

In the City of Slaughter [Version 2] 1953

(In memoriam: The Martyrs of the Kishineff pogrom)

Arise, and go now— go to the city of slaughter!
 Into its inner courtyards make your way.
 There with your own hands, touch, with your own eyes see —
 On brick, on tree, on fence, on stone, on clay,
 The clotted blood and spilled brains of the dead!

Proceed thence through the sacked city, the split walls reach,
 Where wider grows the hollow and greater grows the breach:
 Pass over the shattered hearths . . . these broken walls . . .

Burnt brick . . . and stripped foundations . . . O, these reveal

The open mouths of such wounds as no mending
 Shall ever mend, nor healing ever heal!

Litter of feathers . . . bed-clothes . . . rubble . . . shards . . .
 Wrecked household ware . . . torn parchment . . . trodden tome . . .
 (What hopes lie tattered here! Scattered what garnered hordes!)
 Breakage and fracture . . . fragments again fragmented.

Pause not upon this havoc. Go your way.

 Though half their blossoms will be bloodied feathers,
 Though all their fragrance be the smell of blood,
 Still will the trees about you stand bright with sprig and spray . . .
 Their scent will stink in your nostrils, but
 Put down disgust, for, surely, not
 All things here are polluted . . . still
 Do the golden shafts of sunlight spill
 Their sunshine on whatever's ill.
 The prisms of the broken glass
 Still gaily bid your anguish pass —

For God called up the slaughter and the spring together:
 The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and it was sunny weather!

 You will fly this scene; you will come to a yard: observe
 its mound.

Upon the mound lie (headless) 2:

A dog, a Jew.

 The one axe struck both down, and both were cast
 On to this common midden.
 To-night the pigs will root here at their strange new mast!
 To-morrow the rains into the runnels will
 Dissolve this mingled flux to make one flood
 With feculence and swill.

Not ever will be heard the voice that blood!

It will descend into the earth, will warm the cockle-burr.

And all things will be as they were before . . .

As though they never were.

In a certain respect, we find in the revised version of the 1950s the more contemporary, tougher, more spare, and direct poetic voice that we saw in the revised version of “*Ḥozeh, lekh beraḥ*.” Note the shift from “thee,” “thine,” “thy,” and “thou” in the version of the 1930s to “you” and “your” in the version of the 1950s. Also note such changes as from “wend thy way” to “make your way,” or from “with the eyes of thine head behold” to “with your own eyes see,” or from “The self-same axe struck both” to “The one axe struck both down.”

At the same time, Mintz’s praise of Klein’s translation of “*Be’ir hahareigah*” as “happily succeed[ing] in conveying Bialik’s juxtaposition of a high biblical diction with restraint and austerity in description” applies only to the 1930s and not to the 1950s version. What is striking about Bialik’s poem is that his unremitting and unflinching modernist vision of death and horror, his fierce sardonic burlesque, and his powerful use of the absurd and the grotesque are not only expressed in high biblical diction but also in long stately rhyming couplets of almost unvarying meter that never forfeit their decorum. These features, as Mintz correctly notes, are also to be found, with some modifications, of course, in Klein’s 1930s version.⁷ However, in his 1950s version, Klein, contrary to Bialik’s own style, writes in a distinctively modernist voice—not just harsh, bitter, and ironic, but jagged, splintered, and fragmented. Note how sparing Bialik is with dashes and ellipses, as is Klein in the 1930s version. In the 1950s version, by contrast, dashes and ellipses are strewn all over, with wild abandon, precisely to achieve the desired jagged and fragmented effect. Note, too, the much greater shift in line length present in the 1950s version as compared with the 1930s version.

Two examples from lines 1–30 of the Hebrew original will suffice to show the greater license that Klein’s 1950s version takes with the poem, precisely in order to achieve that jagged, fragmented effect to which we just referred. Klein’s 1930s version of lines 11–12 sticks close to the original:

There will thy feet in feathers sink, and stumble
 On wreckage doubly wrecked, scroll heaped on manuscript,
 Fragments again fragmented—

Contrast Klein's radically different and infinitely freer version of the 50s:

Litter of feathers . . . bed-clothes . . . rubble . . . shards . . .
 Wrecked household ware . . . torn parchment . . . trodden tome . . .
 (What hopes lie tattered here! Scattered what garnered hordes!)
 Breakage and fracture . . . fragments again fragmented.

The subject and the verbs have disappeared entirely, and the passage itself has been shattered into the “broken splinters” and the “fragments again fragmented” described in the text. The poetic effect may be brilliant, but it is not Bialik. Or take Bialik's brilliant and chilling rhyme in lines 23–24: *gal bo* and *vekhhalbo*. Klein's 1930s version captures the effect of the rhyme perfectly:

Then wilt thou flee to a yard, observe its mound.
 Upon the mound lie two, and both are headless—
 A Jew and his hound.

Klein's 1950s version aims for a much more staccato effect and takes the liberty of substituting an entirely original rhyme:

You will fly this scene; you will come to a yard: observe
 its mound.
 Upon the mound lie (headless) 2:
 A dog, a Jew.

Again, the effect is brilliant, perhaps even more shocking than the original, but, again, it is not Bialik.

Let us now turn our attention to Klein's translations of Bialik's famous and stinging attack in lines 68–75 of the poem on the cowardly and impotent male onlookers. Klein's 1930s translation, while naturally not strictly literal, is generally faithful to the original:

Note also, do not fail to note
 In that dark corner, and behind that cask
 Crouched husbands, bridegrooms, brothers, peering from the cracks,
 Watching the sacred bodies struggling underneath
 The bestial breath,
 Stifled in filth, and swallowing their blood!
 Watching from the darkness and its mesh
 The lecherous rabble portioning for booty
 Their kindred and their flesh!
 Crushed in their shame, they saw it all;
 They did not stir nor move;
 They did not pluck their eyes out; they
 Beat not their brains against the wall!

Klein here tries to keep some of the rhyme scheme and at the same time remain true to the force and power of the sequence. He keeps the phrase *geviyyot kedoshot*, “sacred bodies,” though he softens the phrase *besar hamorim*, “asses' flesh,” to “the bestial breath,” perhaps in order to partially rhyme with the previous line. In particular, Klein's translation of line 73, “The lecherous rabble portioning for booty / Their kindred and their flesh!” is faithful, powerful, and poetically effective. However, in his translation of the 1950s, Klein plays fast and loose with the text:

But the cream of the spectacle! . . . In that dark corner,
 Beneath the empty mortar, and from behind
 The broken staves of that cask, there crouched and watched
 Husbands . . . bridegrooms . . . brothers . . .

Watching

Sister . . . sweetheart . . . wife

Each struggling, fighting, fluttering . . . debauch'd!

These — men — were — not — struck — blind!

Saw shame, reaped rape, but, cautious, held their cry,

Safe-silent, whimpered not, nor whined. . . .

Debased, dishonor'd, they saw it all;

Self-hushed they lay though racked;

They did not move, nor stir, but stared

Unseeing at the fact;

They did not pluck their eyes out; they

Preserved their minds intact.

The opening phrase, “But the cream of the spectacle!” is, of course, Klein’s original creation. Again, he is promiscuous with dashes and ellipses: “Husbands . . . bridegrooms . . . brothers. . . .” Even more problematic, he completely omits the “sacred bodies” of the original, substituting in its place “Sister . . . sweetheart . . . wife,” again complete with ellipses, in order to correspond to “Husbands . . . bridegrooms . . . brothers. . . .” The “asses’ flesh” or even “bestial breath” of the Gentiles disappears entirely, as do the lines “The lecherous rabble portioning for booty / Their kindred and their flesh!”—perhaps in order not to draw attention away from the struggling women and cowardly men. Finally, the line “These — men — were — not — struck — blind!” is a Klein original, each word separated by a dash, in order to indicate Bialik’s—or is it Klein’s?—horror and disbelief.

At the same time, it should be noted that Klein’s translation of the end of the passage, while slightly expanded, is absolutely brilliant: faithful to the original and rhythmically and dramatically effective:

Debased, dishonor'd, they saw it all;

Self-hushed they lay though racked;

They did not move, nor stir, but stared

Unseeing at the fact;
 They did not pluck their eyes out; they
 Preserved their minds intact.

In sum, despite brilliant local effects and despite the skilful use of a more spare and colloquial diction, the version of the 1950s falls short of the version of the 1930s. The earlier version, as we saw, preserved “the restraint and austerity” of Bialik’s diction. Not so the later one: it is too free, too jagged, too exaggerated.

How are we to account for the fact that Klein in his 1950s version, contrary to his own pronouncement, neither faithfully adheres “to the letter of the original poem” nor gives us a poem “where the rhymes, the meter, the pattern, the form, come to life again”? And (a related question, as we shall see) how are we to account for the fact that Klein retranslated only the poem’s first 114 lines, a little over a third of the poem, and that, indeed, the revised translation abruptly stops in mid-sentence?

I would suggest that the exaggerated, strained, and fervid diction of the 1950s version, its jagged, splintered, and fragmented style, may constitute an attempt on the part of Klein to come to terms with and work through the atrocities of the Holocaust. To state the matter more sharply: perhaps we should view Klein’s 1950s version as an attempt to rewrite “Be’ir hahareigah” as a Holocaust poem.

This is not the place for a full examination of the place of the Holocaust in Klein’s writings, both prose and poetry, a theme that, in any event, has been amply discussed in the scholarly literature. But even a brief listing of Klein’s major works on that subject should prove instructive: “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” (1938), a description of the plight of German Jewry desperately seeking refuge (Klein 1990: 475–80); “*In Re: Solomon Warshawer*” (1940), generally adjudged to be one of the finest and most powerful of Klein’s poems and his first to confront the murder of European Jewry directly (ibid.: 493–98); *The Hitleriad* (1942–43), a long satiric mock-epic poem of almost 800 lines directed against Hitler and his accomplices, section 26 of which is a dignified and moving evocation of their victims (ibid.: 581–606); “Meditation upon Survival” (1946), in

which Klein gives bitter expression to survivor's guilt (ibid.: 663–64); “Elegy” (1947), a lengthy moving lament for his “sundered cindered kin” (ibid.: 672–78); “A Jew in the Sistine Chapel” (1950), a stunning essay written in an exceptionally rich, intricate, and poetic prose, where Klein, in a brilliant and audacious tour de force, interprets (or, perhaps better, deliberately misinterprets) Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as an allegory of the Holocaust and the return to Zion (Klein 2000: 71–78); and finally *The Second Scroll* (1949–50), Klein's only novel, one in which the Holocaust plays a central critical role.

Of particular relevance to seeing Klein's revised translation of “Be'ir hahareigah” as a Holocaust poem is the following chronological juxtaposition. The first installment of that translation appeared in the May 1, 1953, issue of the Canadian *Jewish Chronicle*.⁸ Some two months earlier, in a number of issues of the *Chronicle* from January and February 1953, Klein published in a series of installments his important essay “In Praise of the Diaspora (An Undelivered Memorial Address).” In that essay, he refers to “the six million of our kith and kin, heroes and martyrs perished for the sanctification of the Name,” and poignantly asks: “Who can descry . . . the true measure of this vast anonymous loss? Who can weigh the genius that has been stifled, the goodness that was snuffed out before it could act, or even speak, the thousands upon thousands of the humble and obscure . . . whose breathing was made cyanide and death?” He concludes the essay by lauding the generation of the Holocaust as the last of the generations of the Diaspora Jew, that Jew who “is vindicated at the hour of his death . . . [and] is seen in his true light: exemplar, model, inspiration” (Klein 1982: 463–77). It is clear, then, that when Klein published the first installment of his revised translation of “Be'ir hahareigah” in the May 1, 1953, issue of the *Chronicle*, the Holocaust and the victims of the Holocaust were uppermost in his mind.

Allow me, then, to suggest the following reconstruction of events. In early 1953, Abraham M. Klein, already suffering from the first stages of the mysterious mental illness that by the end of 1955 would silence him completely, while continuing to write both fictional and nonfictional prose, did not feel that he had it within him to write original poetry. In order to satisfy his poetic muse, he therefore turned to translation and revision, whether original translations or

revisions of earlier translations or whether revisions of his original poetry. Not surprisingly, he turned to one of his old favorites, the poetry of Bialik.

The first task that Klein undertook in this connection was to revise his translation of Bialik's "Dance of Despair." Perhaps he felt that this very sophisticated pseudo-folk poem, with its deeply pessimistic strain, its sense of grotesque, and its mood of wild abandon, would resonate with particular force to his own post-Holocaust generation. Moreover, it is almost certain that the reference in line 29 of the poem to "Kith and kin, comrades, friends—they are gone, there are none" blended in Klein's mind with "the six million of our kith and kin, heroes and martyrs perished for the sanctification of the Name," to whom he had referred just a few months earlier in his essay "In Praise of the Diaspora."

Klein's revised translation of "Dance of Despair" appeared in the April 24, 1953, edition of the *Chronicle*. He then turned to the much more ambitious and, as we shall see, much more problematic project of revising his translation of "Be'ir hahareigah," and published, as a first installment, his revised translation of the first fifty-nine lines of the poem (lines 1–81 of version 2) in the following issue.

Why did Klein undertake this revised translation? Certainly, to again cite Pollock, the translation of "Be'ir hahareigah" "clearly had a special significance for [Klein]." Klein viewed "Be'ir hahareigah" as being perhaps Bialik's greatest poem, as a genuine poetic masterpiece. In a time of declining but far from extinguished poetic powers, Klein must have relished the sheer challenge posed by his attempting a substantially revised translation of the poem.

But Klein, we would suggest, must have felt equally challenged by the task of retranslating the poem so as to make it into a type of Holocaust poem—that is, a poem that would convey not only the horror of the Kishinev pogrom but also, by extension, the horror of the Holocaust itself. Perhaps, so Klein may have thought, he would be able to attain this goal if he used "the varied poetical tools, especially the techniques of modernism" (Dudek 1970: 72) that he had honed in his more recent poetry to fashion a modernist jagged, splintered, and fragmented style, one that would drive home the sense, the feeling, the texture of grit, of blood, "of nostrils skewered . . . skull smashed; lives out-snuffed . . . of slit throats, dangling from the beams." True, by doing so he would be violating the

poem's decorum and restraint, but in the wake of the Holocaust, so Klein may further have thought, such decorum and restraint were no longer in place.

But precisely here, Klein confronted what turned out to be an insuperable problem. For, as Klein knew full well, "Be'ir hahareigah" constitutes, as I noted earlier, a stinging attack on the memory of the victims of Kishinev. As Klein writes in an article on Bialik from 1937, "It was [Bialik] who, when Jews displayed during the massacres of Kishineff a cowardice unworthy of the descendants of the Maccabees, poured forth the vials of his wrath upon these creatures from whom the ghetto had stolen their manliness" (Klein 1987: 18). And again in 1940, when he republished his 1930s translation of "Be'ir hahareigah" in the *Chronicle*, he describes the poem as a "searing indictment . . . of the passivity and nonresistance of [the pogrom's] victims" (Klein 1990: 1032). Yet again, in an essay on Bialik from 1942, he lauds the poem as a "bitter condemnation . . . against those who passively submitted to the attackers, [as] one of the noblest pieces of invective in our literature" (Klein 1987: 33). And as Klein also knew full well, the very last thing that Jews were ready for in the aftermath of the Holocaust was a poetic attack on Jewish pogrom victims for their cowardice, passivity, and nonresistance, even an attack penned by Bialik himself. Indeed, since the readers of Klein's revised translation of the poem would most likely identify the victims of Kishinev with the victims of the Holocaust, the poem would—heaven forefend—be taken not only as a "searing indictment . . . of the passivity and nonresistance of the victims" of Kishinev but, again by extension, as a "searing indictment . . . of the passivity and nonresistance of the victims" of the Holocaust!

Indeed, as has recently been noted, in the immediate wake of the Holocaust there was a distinct tendency on the part of writers to rewrite their works so as to soften or eliminate entirely accusatory themes and to inject or strengthen consolatory ones. Thus David Roskies, basing himself on the research of Yechiel Szeintuch, has shown that after the war, Abraham Sutzkever systematically revised his ghetto poems "and deleted that which might offend the memory of the dead," while Isaiah Spiegel systematically revised his ghetto short stories "to

stress the redemptive details . . . and temper each tale of horror with idealized portraits of the victims" (Roskies 1984: 252).

I believe that this dilemma confronting Klein accounts for the subheading that Klein added to the revised translation: "In Memoriam: The Martyrs of the Kishineff Pogrom," a subheading not added to the earlier translation. This subheading is not found in Klein's clean manuscript of the revised translation, and it would appear that Klein inserted it into the proofs of the *Chronicle* at the very last moment before publication as a kind of sop for his readership. That is, it was intended to ensure that the readers would take the poem to be not an indictment of "The Martyrs of the Kishineff Pogrom" (which it, of course, was) but rather an elegy and lament on their behalf—and, by extension, on behalf of the six million martyrs of the Holocaust.

This reconstruction allows us to account for Klein's retranslating only the poem's first 114 lines, a little over a third of the poem, and abruptly stopping in mid-sentence. Perhaps, some will say, Klein simply ran out of steam. Perhaps, but it is doubtful. Consider that after Klein broke off his retranslation of "Be'ir hahareigah," he had enough energy left to retranslate "Hozeh, lekh berah," and "Halefah 'al panai," as well as to undertake an original translation of "Kokhavam metsitsim vekhavim." He also had enough energy left to return sometime between late 1953 and early 1955 to "*In Re: Solomon Warshawer*" and extensively revise and expand it (Klein 1990: 498–504).

But more. As we saw, Klein published the first installment of his revised translation of "Be'ir hahareigah" in the May 1, 1953, issue. It contained his retranslation of the first fifty-nine lines of the poem, concluding with "The world is as it was, the sun still shines, / It is a day like any other day." The installment ends with "(to be continued)." Similarly, in the manuscript, which contains Klein's translation of all 114 lines, after the translation of line 59 we find, as is to be expected, "(to be continued)." We then find a clean sheet, indicating the beginning of the second installment, containing Klein's translation of lines 60–114 of the poem (lines 82–158 of version 2), and preceded, as also is to be expected, by "(continued from last week)."⁹ Whatever the reason(s) for Klein's abruptly stopping his retranslation, why didn't he publish as a second installment,

say, his retranslation of lines 60–98, ending with “You weep? You cannot suffer this, nor stay? / Gnash your teeth, O son of man, and melt away!”¹⁰

The subheading, I believe, provides the clue. As I suggested, the last-minute addition of the subheading indicates that Klein (who himself knew better) wished his readers to take the poem to be a memorial for “The Martyrs of the Kishineff Pogrom.” To be sure, a careful reader of even the fifty-nine lines of the first installment could already see that the poem was far from being a simple memorial. Certainly, it would be difficult, to say the least, to read the following lines as some sort of elegy:

The spirits of the martyrs are these souls
 Made small with fear . . . huddled together . . .
 Beneath these eaves in their ignoble holes!
 The hatchet found them here, and to this place they come
 To seal with a last look
 Their death, its shame; their life, its odium!

Yet these lines constitute just one small section of the first installment of Klein’s revised translation, and it might be possible to overlook it and its significance. The bulk of lines 1–59, by contrast, describes the horrific murder and suffering of the victims, telling a tale

Of the spared babe found warm at its mother’s teat,
 The mother, speared, still feeding it . . .
 Of how a dagger halved a child’s last word;
 Its *ma-* was heard, its *mama* never heard.¹¹

So it would be possible for most readers of this first installment, their reading guided and influenced by the subheading, to view it primarily as a powerful, moving poetic lament.

Not so with regard to the proposed second installment. We surmise that Klein upon reaching line 114 of that proposed installment stopped in mid-

sentence and reviewed the lines he had just translated. He reread his revised translation of that famous stinging passage:

These — men — were — not — struck — blind!
 Saw shame, reaped rape, but, cautious, held their cry,
 Safe-silent, whimpered not, nor whined . . .
 Debased, dishonor'd, they saw it all;
 Self-hushed they lay though racked;
 They did not move, nor stir, but stared
 Unseeing at the fact;
 They did not pluck their eyes out; they
 Preserved their minds intact.

And as he reread it, he realized what I suspect he had always known but had somehow temporarily managed to suppress: that there was no way in the world that his revised translation of “Be‘ir hahareigah” could be taken by any reader as an elegy in memory of the victims of Kishinev and, by extension, in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. Even were he to insert his subheading “In Memoriam: The Martyrs of the Kishineff Pogrom” at the beginning of the second and all succeeding installments, it would make no difference. The poem remained what it always had been and would always be: an indictment of the victims of Kishinev—and it would be understood as such. Indeed, by publishing his revised translation of the poem, so Klein may have come to believe, he would unwittingly be contributing to the very negation of the Diaspora (*shelilat bagolah*) that he had combated so forcefully and so eloquently both in his novel *The Second Scroll* (2000: 52) and, even more recently, in his essay “In Praise of the Diaspora.” So Klein, having broken off his translation in mid-sentence, dropped it completely and consigned the unpublished part of his translation to the privacy of his manuscript. Thus it happened that the readers of the May 8 issue of the *Chronicle*, in place of the promised second installment of “Be‘ir hahareigah,” found a typically erudite and witty but essentially uncontroversial—indeed, innocuous—essay by Klein on Hebrew calligraphy (Klein 1987: 85–87).

In the same May 1 issue of the *Chronicle* in which Klein published the first installment of his revised translation of “Be‘ir hahareigah,” he also published an editorial, “The Case of Jascha Heifetz,” criticizing the distinguished violinist for attempting to play the music of Richard Strauss, “the gauleiter of harmonics of the Third German Reich,” in Israel so soon after the Holocaust (ibid.: 199–200). Given the inevitable associations that Strauss’s music would give rise to in its listeners, Klein contended that “this was not music to soothe the savage breast; this was music to agonize the human soul.” It would seem that one week later, Klein concluded that his readers might find a complete revised translation of “Be‘ir hahareigah” to be poetry to “agonize human soul.”

Subsequent to dropping his revised translation of “Be‘ir hahareigah,” Klein dealt poetically with the theme of the Holocaust by, as indicated above, returning to “*In Re: Solomon Warshawer*” and extensively revising and expanding it. Indeed, Pollock describes a long passage that Klein added to the poem as “perhaps the single most impressive revision from the period” (Pollock 1994: 253).¹²

As for the three remaining poems of Bialik to which Klein subsequently turned—“Hozeh, lekh beraḥ,” “Halefah ‘al panai,” and “Kokhavim metsitsim vekhavim,” they are all very personal poems of despair. He substantially revised his earlier translations of the first two poems and undertook an original translation of the third poem. His translations of these poems are minor masterpieces that meet Klein’s own criteria of what constitutes a good translation. That is, they faithfully adhere “to the letter of the original poem,” and “the rhymes, the meter, the pattern, the form [of the original poem] come to life again.” Most important, the translations admirably capture the powerfully and movingly expressed sense of weariness and darkness that pervades the original poems. Can it be that Klein’s success here derived in some measure from the fact that that sense of weariness and darkness met with an echoing and empathetic response from his own heart?

NOTES

- I would like to thank Dan Laor and, in particular, Alan Mintz and David Roskies, for their very helpful and insightful comments and suggestions. A preliminary version of this essay was presented at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Jewish Studies in Quebec City, spring 2001. It was my first foray into the field of Canadian Jewish studies and was a very memorable experience.
- 1 The characterization of “Be’ir hahareigah” as an “anti-epic poem” is taken from Mintz (1984: 147).
 - 2 Klein 1990: “Beneath the Burden,” 725; “The Chastisement of God,” 726–27; “Come, Gird Ye Your Loins, and in Might Robe Yourselves,” 727–28; “God Grant My Part and Portion Be . . .,” 728–30; “The Lord Has Not Revealed,” 730–32; “On My Returning,” 732–33; “In the City of Slaughter” (version 1), 733–43; “The Dance of Despair” (version 1), 749–52; “Seer, Begone” (version 1), 755–56; “When the Days Shall Grow Long,” 757–59; “The Word,” 759–60; “Thy Breath, O Lord, Passed Over and Enkindled Me” (version 1), 760–61; and “Upon the Slaughter,” 763–64.
 - 3 Klein 1990: “In the City of Slaughter” (version 2), 744–49; “The Dance of Despair” (version 2), 752–55; “O Thou Seer, Go Flee—Away” (version 2 of “Seer, Begone”), 756–57; “A Spirit Passed before Me” (version 2 of “Thy Breath, O Lord, Passed Over and Enkindled Me”), 761–63; and “Stars Flicker and Fall in the Sky,” 764.
 - 4 Note, as well, Michael Stanislawski’s more hesitant praise of “Klein’s masterful if far from perfect translation” (Stanislawski 2001: 192).
 - 5 Klein’s title for version 2, “O Thou Seer, Go Flee Thee—Away,” with its deliberately elevated diction, would appear to be at odds with the spare and direct language that he adopts for the body of the translation. But, of course, the title is the utterance of the haughty and arrogant individual addressing the poet-seer. The elevated diction of the title, then, serves to highlight the spare and direct language of the poet-seer’s response, constituting the body of the poem. In this respect, Klein is imitating the biblical text that served as the inspiration for Bialik’s poem. Contrast the lordly diction of Amaziah’s address to Amos in Amos 7:12–13 with the direct, impassioned, and harsh diction of Amos’s response in Amos 7:14–17.
 - 6 For the bibliographical information concerning the seventeen versions, see Klein 1990: 927–28.

- 7 It should be noted, though, that in both versions, Klein, while often employing the rhyming couplets that Bialik used in the poem, varies the rhyme scheme considerably, to the extent of using lines that do not rhyme at all.
- 8 Klein was the editor of the *Chronicle* from 1938 to 1955.
- 9 To be more precise, the clean page begins with “In the City of Slaughter / H. N. Bialik / trans. A. M. Klein / (continued from last week).” This indicates that the published version of this second installment was intended to be directly set from the manuscript.
- 10 The textual information regarding version 2 of “Be’ir hahareigah” can be found in Klein 1990: 927–28. I have also examined on microfilm the manuscript of version 2 at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa.
- 11 Klein’s translation here, “Its *ma* was heard, its *mama* never heard” (in version 1, the translation is almost exactly the same: “Its *ma* was heard, its *mama* never heard”), is based upon Bialik’s Yiddish version of his poem, *a halber ‘ma . . . !’ un ‘mama’ nit ge’endikt*. This despite the fact that Klein once wrote that “the Yiddish version lacks both the technique and fire of the original Hebrew” (1990: 1032). But in this instance, Klein probably felt—and justly so—that there was no way any translation could capture the brilliant allusion to the account of the martyrdom of R. Akiva in Berakhot 60a, *yatse’ab nishmato be’ehad*, contained in Bialik’s original Hebrew version, *yatse’ab nishmato be’immi!*
- 12 At about the same time, Klein also revised “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” (1990: 480–85).