A. M. KLEIN AND MODERNISM

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Department of English, McGill University, Montreal, March 1988.

ABSTRACT

A. M. Klein's work--journalism, poetry, and fiction--is dominated by historical imperatives. Attracted by the artistic independence of modernism, he is simultaneously repelled by its élite and authoritarian tendencies. Thus, Klein's career is paradoxically that of a leading Canadian modernist on the one hand, and that of a major spokesman for traditional Jewish values on the other. Klein's ambivalent attitude toward modernism is evident, in his poetry, through a use of old poetic forms, which at once recalls and rejects the Poundian view of tradition and modernity. As a novelist, in *The Second Scroll*, Klein considers the relationship between narrative and history, testing the hypothesis that to write one's own narrative is to be the master of one's destiny.

RESUME

L'oeuvre de A. M. Klein--journalisme, poésie, et fiction--est dominée par des necessités d'ordre historique. Attiré par l'indépendance artistique qu'offre le modernisme, Klein est en même temps rebuté par son élitisme et ses tendences autoritaires. Donc, paradoxalement, la carrière de Klein se présente simultanément comme celle d'un moderniste canadien de premier plan, et celle d'un porte-parole important des valeurs juives traditionnelles. L'ambivalence que ressent Klein envers le modernisme est mise en évidence dans sa poésie par l'usage d'anciennes formes poétiques, qui tout à la fois évoquent et renient l'attitude de Pound envers la tradition et la modernité. En temps que romancier, Klein, dans *The Second Scroll*, s'adresse à la relation entre la narration et l'histoire, mettant a l'épreuve l'hypothèse qui veut qu'écrire sa propre narration équivaut a être maître de sa propre destinée.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of individuals who participated in the preparation of this thesis. Lorraine York and Esther Frank read my work and offered their valuable criticisms. Julia Borossa and Stewart Cooke provided me with their much needed technical expertise. Judith Nefsky, David Rome and the staff of the Canadian Jewish Congress Archives were endlessly helpful over the course of my research. I am especially grateful to Ruth Wisse for her guidance and for introducing me to the field of Jewish modernism.

My most enduring debt is to Zailig Pollock, who taught me how to read and write.

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CHAPTER ONE

TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Abraham Moses Klein was one of Canada's leading modernists. He was also a leading spokesman for traditional Jewish values. Thus poised between tradition and modernity, Klein's career stands as one of the most complex in all of Canadian literature. The difficulties involved in approaching such a career are evident in the fact that Klein's critics have tended to address one or the other of these two competing strains in his work, generating incomplete and, at times, gravely distorted views of his situation. One virtually never encounters a discussion which seeks to reconcile Klein's traditional Jewishness and his modernity or, indeed, to provide a context that would simultaneously accommodate the two. It is the contention of this study that only by recovering such a context, in effect by re-situating Klein, his Jewishness and his modernity, that we may redress this critical fragmentation and begin to piece together an understanding of his career.

Any truly responsive study of Klein must recognize history, not simply as background, but as a dynamic and interactive element relentlessly at the forefront of Klein's consciousness. While every artistic movement is in part a product of its socio-historic circumstances, literary modernism is simply incomprehensible apart from modern history.[1] Sharply reflecting the uncertainty of the age, modern writers brought a new personal

[1] For the profoundly historicist character of modernism see Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism," *Modernism*, ed. Bradbury and McFarlane (New York: Penguin, 1967): 19-55.

and political self-consciousness about their work to their roles within society and to the world of art. Similarly, the idea of traditionalism as it exists within a Jewish context is incomprehensible in ahistorical terms, for what is Jewish traditionalism if it is not a response to Jewish history? Let us begin then by considering modernism as it figures in the career of A. M. Klein.

I

Modernism is a cultural phenomenon that may be broadly situated historically between the Industrial Revolution and the end of the Second World War. The modern literature relevant to this discussion is that which was prevalent during the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. Specifically, I refer to the work of writers whom Stephen Spender distinguished aesthetically and ideologically from their "Contemporaries"--Shaw, Wells, and Bennett for example ("Struggle" 71-78)--and whom Frank Kermode distinguished temporally from their Neo-Modern post-war followers (66-92). Of specific importance to Klein in this regard were writers like Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Rilke, Kafka, and Thomas Mann.

The task of defining modernism is formidable as the movement is by definition one which resists homogeneous description. In addition to being international and interdisciplinary in scope, modernism comprises dozens of individual movements each having its own set of aesthetic and social principles and objectives. This difficulty being noted, however, it is possible to describe

some general tendencies of modernism that are more or less widely recognized.

Perhaps the most commonly noted characteristic of modernism is its essentially catastrophic nature. Modern literature is a literature of violent upheaval. Critical considerations of modernism, despite the attempt to avoid hyperbole, frequently gravitate toward the notion of apocalypse, and one need only consider the modern historical moment to see how apt and unexaggerated this notion is. Modern writers had to contend not only with the immense social upheaval of mass industrialization, the Russian Revolution, and two world wars, but also with the social aftermath of Darwin and the intellectual revolutions of Marx, Freud, Heisenberg, and Einstein. In light of these changes it is therefore not surprising that modern literature is challenged on two fronts by a sense of radical discontinuity. On the one hand the moderns were faced with the formidable void left by the shift in intellectual perspective. On the other, they were faced with what they themselves had created in seeking to fill that void, namely, the aesthetic and social rubble which was the immediate product of their own violent anti-traditionalism.

Seeking to define the new aesthetic, the moderns found themselves facing a dilemma. While it was clear that the guiding principles of art could hardly be derived from what they perceived to be an alienating and morally chaotic society, it was equally clear that neither could they take the form of a unified anti-social style. To develop such a style would be, by implication, to acknowledge traditional authority, and the point was not to respond but to categorically reject. Moreover, any

unified response would have made the artistic community vulnerable to the possibility of its anti-social stance, like other radical gestures of the past, itself becoming fashionable. As a result, the moderns adopted a strategy of every man for himself. The only possible response to the rapid outward expansion and increasing soullessness of industrial society could be a turning inward, a commitment to the development of individually determined aesthetics and highly personal forms of art. Art becomes obscure and inaccessible, moving away from realism and omniscience toward the deliberate difficulties of surrealism, interior monologue and *vers libre*. Thus we see the dehumanization of art mirroring the dehumanization of life.[2]

While modernism held, at least in principle, to an absolute dichotomy between compliance with the social and artistic dictates of society and truthful isolation in one's own inimitable art, several factors suggest that at its heart lay something other than a tendency toward isolation for isolation's sake. One such factor was the existence of a strong artistic counter-culture which provided the moderns, many of whom were in reality exiles or expatriates, with a community of the avant-garde. While not a typical community, that is, one respecting geographic, ethnic, or even disciplinary boundaries, the global community of artists offered at least psychological refuge from the absolutes of utter compliance or utter isolation. A second factor revealing the movement's tendency to escape its own

[2] The phrase is from Harry Levin, "What was Modernism?", *Varieties of Literary Experience*, ed. Stanley Burnshaw (New York: New York UP, 1962): 322, but, of course, refers to José Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968).

foundations is the modern attraction to authoritarianism. Many of the movement's practitioners allied themselves with authoritarian philosophies, whether of the right or the left, clearly indicating that for them the rejection of old authority was a means and not an end in itself. Finally, there is the modern idealism about history. Modern insistence on a clean break with the past meant a break with the immediate past but not with history itself. While the moderns were anxious to dissociate themselves from the moral obsolescence of the nineteenth century, they were equally anxious to re-establish some sort of positive historical continuity. Thus we encounter an atavistic longing for the golden age from which modern society has been distanced by technological progress, a longing epitomized by Eliot's preference for Dante over Shakespeare and Pound's affinity for the Provençal poets. A corollary to this is the moderns' sense of themselves as artists and their role as such in the unfolding of history. If what they seek is a renewed connection with the true spirit of the past, the artists themselves are naturally cast as the prophets of this connection. "In a world full of the panic of change, the artist's role is to make himself a symbol of tradition, a sentinel or witness to the genuine continuity in human life ... " (Frye 81-82). To varying degrees they saw their role as emancipatory, perhaps even redemptive, suggesting that for the individual, as with history or aesthetics, the discontinuity of personal isolation could ultimately be transformed into something else.

While implicit idealism may have been one of modernism's fertile ambiguities it also directs our attention to the

movement's darker and less fertile side. Every positive and liberating aspect of the modern revolution seems to carry within it a corresponding aspect of rather a darker character. The line between self-awareness and self-consciousness, between questioning authority and distrust of one's own perceptions, and between deliberate non-compliance and paralyzed silence is often difficult to discern. The modernist movement which contributed so significantly to Western culture also produced its share of insanity, resignation and despair.

Comparing Canada's historical situation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with that of Europe or even of the United States, it is clear that any assessment of modernism in Canada requires a certain adjustment of perspective. One could hardly expect the phenomenon to assume the same order of magnitude it had in Europe--where the movement constituted a significant challenge to eight hundred years of tradition--in Canada, which had barely achieved Confederation at the time the first volume of *Das Kapital* appeared in print (Watt, "Protest" 458). The neo-Victorian structures which dominated Canadian society during its first decades as a nation could never foster the same resistance to modernism which they had done in more firmly rooted societies. The modernist movement, which devoted its energy to rejection of the old and assertion of the new, found relatively little to reject in Canada. There were few decaying structures to topple, and the social impact of technological progress, for the most part, took the form of a spirit of optimistic change accompanying the process of nation building. Moreover, Canada, in its regional and ethnic

diversity, was more naturally sympathetic to the multifariousness of modernism than to the highly centralized political structures it had inherited from British society. Like their European and American counterparts, the Canadian modernists sought to improve art and ultimately society by introducing a more relevant radical perspective, but in Canada the movement was possessed more by a spirit of scrutiny than of revolution. In Canada it was possible to express unorthodox views, discredit the old, and shape the new from within the bounds of society as they stood.

One of the earliest and most influential circles of literary modernism in Canada was that which has come to be known as the McGill Movement. A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, and Leo Kennedy were among the first to experiment with modern idioms and to engage in critical debate over the work of their American and European counterparts. It is also with these men that one associates several of Canada's most significant anthologies and little magazines in which distaste for the maple leaf jingoism of the neo-Victorian Canadian Authors' Association was first expressed and the aesthetic and political conditions of modernism set down.[3] One of the most familiar statements of the group's position first appeared in the *Canadian Forum* in the form of

[3] Smith and Scott were associated first with the *Literary Supplement* to *The McGill Daily* from 1924 to 1925, and then with the *McGill Fortnightly Review* from 1925 to 1927, with Leon Edel as managing editor. From 1927 to 1929, Scott, in conjunction with Leo Kennedy and others, edited *The Canadian Mercury*; in 1928 he joined the editorial board of *The Canadian Forum*. Scott was also associated with *Preview* (1942-1945) and was instrumental in the amalgamation of that journal with *First Statement* (1942-1945) to create the *Northern Review* (1945-1956). The *New Provinces* anthology, co-edited by Scott and Smith, appeared in 1936, and Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry* in 1943.

A. J. M. Smith's essay "Wanted: Canadian Criticism."[4] Smith saw the problem of the state of literature in Canada as stemming largely from the tension between economic and aesthetic interests; what was good for business was unlikely to be good for art, and in his view, the attitude of the C. A. A. in promoting Canadianism at any cost constituted a sell-out of the worst kind. Opposed to the view that Canadian literature regardless of its quality ought to be promoted over anything foreign, the McGill Movement, in answer to the "Buy Canadian Books" battle cry of the C. A. A., adopted "Good Canadian Books" as its slogan.

In 1926 A. M. Klein enrolled at McGill University and there encountered Smith, Scott, Kennedy, and their modernism in the midst of McGill's predominantly Victorian atmosphere. It was as a result of this association that Klein was introduced to the poetry of Eliot and Yeats and read Joyce's *Ulysses* for the first time. Even more importantly, however, it was in this context that Klein found support for the social stance that was to characterize his entire career. The civil yet irreverent tone that marked the McGill style allowed one to employ wit in the service of society, to exercise one's individuality while maintaining a responsible position. Like the other members of the McGill Movement Klein had little patience for iconoclasm of

[4] A. J. M. Smith, "Wanted: Canadian Criticsm," *Canadian Forum* (April 1928): 600-601. Additional examples of similar material include: "Editorial," and "Symbolism in Poetry," *McGill Fortnightly Review* 5 Dec. 1925: 9-10 and 11-12, 16; "Contemporary Poetry," *McGill Fortnightly Review* 15 Dec. 1926: 31-32; "A Rejected Preface," *Canadian Literature* 24 (1965): 6-9; F. R. Scott, "New Poems for Old--," *Canadian Forum* 11 (1931): 296-98; "Preface," *New Provinces* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936): v; "Editorial," *Canadian Mercury* 1 (1928): 3; Leo Kennedy, "The Future of Canadian literature," *Canadian Mercury* 1 (1929): 99-100.

the self-serving kind. And while his involvement with the movement soon gave way to his more pressing involvement with the cause of Jewish nationalism in the face of insurgent fascism, Klein's work, like that of his McGill colleagues, always bore the mark of his desire to reconcile society's needs with individual inclination.

Yet despite Klein's affinity for the radical founding spirit of his McGill colleagues and his significant involvement with other literary groups and individuals over the years, it is difficult to place him comfortably within any collectivity or movement in the history of modern poetry in Canada. Klein is most often mentioned in association with two groups: the McGill and *Preview* Movements. But a couple of factors suggest that, in fact, Klein never truly belonged to either. Historically, Klein falls between the two; he was just beginning his undergraduate education when Smith and Scott were completing theirs, and he was older and more established than the other members of *Preview*, in addition to being heavily committed to Jewish concerns. Moreover, if one considers the issues central to the existence of both groups, one finds little correspondence with concerns central to Klein. For the members of the McGill Movement, ridding Canadian poetry of the vestiges of Victorianism and consolidating the status of the modernist aesthetic constituted the raison d'être of the group. Klein, although basically sympathetic to their aims, showed very little personal interest in these matters. His two McGill based literary ventures, "The McGilliad," a weekly column in the *McGill Daily*, and the *McGilliad*, an independent literary magazine, although very much

in the *Fortnightly* style, never mention the state of Canadian literature *per se*. The large body of literary criticism Klein produced over the course of his career bears out this lack of direct engagement as he seldom addressed Canadian topics except in the form of occasional reviews of the work of his friends. And as for the problem of the modern aesthetic, Klein, when he was not exercising a deliberate archaism, appeared to be more interested in writing in a modern vein than in discussing modernism as an issue unto itself. Klein's interest in modernism was primarily social and political, and when he did address himself to aesthetic concerns it was more often as critic than as advocate. Similarly, Klein's perspective appears distinct from that of the *Preview* members especially with regard to the matter of political ideology and its relation to art. For Klein, as for individuals like P. K. Page and Patrick Anderson, the pursuit of a just and egalitarian society demanded a personal commitment as great as any one could make to one's art. But for Klein, the marriage of art and politics was much more problematic than it appeared to be for those who less questioningly filled the pages of *Preview* with politically relevant art. In Klein's view such a marriage was one in which the latter often dominated, terrorized, or worst of all masqueraded as the former. The union was one which fell easy prey to corruption of an especially insidious kind.

If it is true, then, that modernism or, more precisely, Canadian modernism alone does not provide an adequate context in which to consider Klein, the question then becomes: Where does

Klein belong? In what context may we best understand Klein's work?

II

In advancing the view that "whatever kind of poetry Abraham Klein writes, he always writes as a Jew" ("Poetry" 70), E. K. Brown identified the one perception which has dominated critical views of Klein over the last fifty years; now, as fifty years ago, the elusive phenomenon of "Klein's Jewishness" is never far from the centre of any discussion. Critics of the thirties and forties, evidently impressed by Klein's unabashed displays of Jewishness at a time when such displays were extremely unfashionable, expressed their sense of him in largely personal terms. Klein was considered to be "the most Jewish poet who ... ever used the English tongue" (Lewisohn 13), "heir to an authentic Jewish tradition [which is] reflect[ed] ... in every line he writes" (Edel, "Jewish" 15), and a poet whose "soul ... is an ardent symbol of the spiritual rebirth of the Jewish people" (Collin 1). Later, critics began to move away from these narrowly defined perceptions to recognize increasingly broad contexts for Klein's work. Eventually it was recognized that what was at issue was not one man's unabashed Jewishness but rather the more broadly significant relation of an individual to his culture. Thus it was observed that "no other major Canadian writer so deliberately and consistently wrote within a tradition" (Steinberg, "Living" 99) and that a "fierce sense of Jewish identity ... is the ... constitutive, substantial experience of

all Klein's best poetry up to *The Rocking Chair*" (Walsh "Condition" 9). Later still, critics began to recognize that it was not a vaguely homogeneous culture but many distinct traditions on which Klein drew. So it was that Klein, who had at first been identified simply as the Jewish poet, began to be recognized as a "psalmist" (Pacey 254-55) and a "Kabbalist" (Marshall, "Theorems" 151-62) and as a poet steeped in the Pentateuch and the Talmud (Spiro) and secular Hebrew poetry, ancient and modern, and Chassidism (Fischer; Gotlieb, "Hassidic" 47-64) and Yiddish and Yiddishkeit (Fuerstenberg, "Yiddishkeit" 66-81).

But while this view of Klein as first, foremost, and unassailably Jewish has been posited as a self-evident fact for over fifty years, it has limited at least as much as it has enhanced our understanding of Klein's work. To begin, what is at issue is not Klein's Jewishness but his writing, and, ultimately, this approach evaluates Klein on the basis of the former not the latter. In a letter to A. J. M. Smith on the subject of his inclusion in *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, Klein complained of this very problem with regard to the praise he had received from both W. E. Collin and E. K. Brown:

> With most of the strictures he finds in my poetry I may agree; but Lord, O Lord, why must both he and Collin go flaunting my circumcision. I am not a poet because I'm a Jew; ask Mr. Itzcovitch of "Better Cloaks Reg'd" whether the two are synonymous. It's an adolescent trick--this whimsical opening of another man's fly. I hope that E. K. Brown whose name I gave to the Guggenheim people, together with Pratt's, impresses them with more than the fact that I am a Jew. (qtd. in Mayne, "Symposium" 9)

Moreover, even if Klein's ethnic origins were at issue, it is simply unacceptable to employ the term Jewishness as a self-

evident designation. While it is true that Klein demonstrated a deep and abiding commitment to Jewish society and culture, to assume that this is somehow synonymous with a vaguely defined notion of traditionalism is to ignore many of the issues and conflicts at the heart of Klein's career.

A. M. Klein was both a modernist and a Jew, and his remarkable responsiveness to the events of modern history is informed not by modernism and Jewishness as paired yet distinct phenomena but by the relentless and often fierce opposition between them. Only by following Klein's lead in confronting the terrible double pull of history toward modernity on the one hand and Jewish traditionalism on the other, can we approach an adequate understanding of his work.

CHAPTER TWO

THE JEWISH MODERN ARTIST

To Jewish writers bearing their traditional burden of social responsibility, the modern claim to artistic independence must have been a veritable siren call. But as A. M. Klein among others unhappily discovered, importing the values of modernism into Jewish society often generated at least as many anxieties as it relieved. For Jewish artists, to transfer one's commitment from a social to an artistic community was to court both personal and communal disaster; the historical forces which gave rise to artistic modernism were, after all, the very forces which constituted the most catastrophic period in modern Jewish history.

The political and intellectual upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century seemed to have a centrifugal effect on the world of art. War, revolution, and industrialization all sent art spinning out away from the centre of society toward increasingly individual and decentralized artistic and social positions. While this was initially as true of Jewish artists as of anyone else, these same historical circumstances progressively produced the opposite, that is to say, a centripetal effect, on Jewish society. The events which had at first decentralized, eventually concentrated the Jews. Increasingly, Jews were subject to an enforced lack of differentiation, a violent and undiscriminating collectivization of identity. Jewish modernists, if they were to aspire toward social irrelevance or to uphold the moral imperative of art, were going to have to do so in the face of the most extreme forms of historical pressure

imaginable. Thus even from within the artistic community there was always a "lingering suspicion that the whole dramatic agony of modernity [was] not worth the candle, that there [was] something ... bogus and certainly futile in the effort to be authentically modern through a heroism of the imagination" (Alter, "Defenses" 15).

For A. M. Klein, the most disturbing aspect of modernism was its strong association of politics with art. Not surprisingly, his most strenuous criticism was directed against writers who were associated with the political right, Robinson Jeffers, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, for example. Despite their technical abilities, which he fully recognized, Klein condemned what he considered to be the fascism underlying their work. Klein saw Jeffers's verse arising out of the culture of American isolationism, his preoccupation with "elemental nature" suggesting "a quality which can only be called aristocratic." The fact that Jeffers confined himself "not to an ivory tower, but to a real one, made of rocks drawn from the mount on which he dwells" (LER 232), did little to disguise his reverence for Nazi ideology: "Blood and soil are poetry, you can fight for them; democracy is pure prose, abstract, indefinite ... dishonest" (LER 234). Similarly, Klein considered Eliot's so-called classicism to be indicative not simply of a conservative Anglican perspective, but of sympathies much farther to the right. "It is, indeed, an interesting speculation to consider," Klein remarked, "what might have developed out of Eliot's ... flirtations with Fascism had not the 1939 declaration of war taught him discretion" (LER 274). Klein was most direct in his

condemnation of Ezra Pound. In an essay written in response to Pound's winning the Bollingen Prize, Klein unequivocally voiced his objection to the awarding of such an honour to a man "who [had] prostituted his talent to the designs of the blackshirts." "If ... Ezra Pound deserved the Bollingen Prize," Klein argued, "Goebbels posthumously should be awarded the Pulitzer."[1]

Interestingly, however, for Klein, the issue of the modern association of politics and art was not, as it was for many, simply a question of the right versus the left. While he was himself a democratic socialist, Klein's criticism of artistic association with the left is often equally strong. Klein was active throughout his career in condemning the mistreatment of artists by totalitarian regimes, and in his view, the willful submission of artists to political domination, as for instance in the production of so-called proletarian poetry, was deliberately and perversely naive:

> these people think that having discovered
> that bread is vital, they have found the last
> word in human thought. It's only the first word,
> and so elementary that its proof lies only in the
> rumblings of the stomach, and not the cerebrations
> of the brain. What particularly galls me is the
> superciliousness that accompanies their insistence
> that rice ought to be shared and shared alike;
> they know something I don't know! My only consolation
> lies in watching them jump through the hoop every time the
> party changes its line. The punishment is Dantaesque.
>
> (qtd. in Mayne, "Symposium" 11)

Klein's sympathies appeared to lie rather with modern writers who favoured a deliberately apolitical, anti-social stance, the two most notable examples being Rilke and Joyce.

[1] "Old Ez and His Blankets," LER 278-81. See also, "Cantabile," LER 264-65.

Advocating a virtually absolute withdrawal of the artist from society, Rilke and his intensely private poetry of self-exploration stood for Klein as "the complete antithesis of everything the Fuehrer stood for." For Klein, Rilke was "probably the greatest, and certainly the subtlest and most sensitive poet of this century" (LER 252). With regard to Joyce, Klein, while obviously attracted to the challenge of explicating *Ulysses*, felt a strong personal identification with him as well; Klein saw in himself and his Montreal milieu strong parallels with Joyce and his relationship to Dublin. Both Joyce and Klein "had been schooled in the tradition of a dogmatic culture," and "both had broken through those nets, and taken a self-reliant stance, even while saturated with the thoughts that had dominated their ... race" (qtd. in Caplan 155). The irony of the situation is that while Klein considered both these men to be among his literary heroes, practically speaking, his own position is more remote from theirs than it is from that of Eliot or Pound. Joyce, although deeply rooted in his Irish Catholic upbringing, left Ireland, producing most of his work from the perspective of a self-imposed exile. Klein, although he attained a certain intellectual independence, virtually never left Montreal and certainly never relinquished his ties to his community. As far as Rilke's withdrawal from society is concerned, nothing could have been farther from Klein's own chosen circumstances. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how any writer could have been any more fully engaged in social issues than Klein was. In addition to his life as an artist, Klein was also a lawyer and prolific journalist, spokesman and campaigner for Zionism, speech

writer and public relations advisor to Samuel Bronfman during his time in office as president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, and twice, though both times unsuccessfully, a CCF candidate in a Canadian federal election. Rather than suggesting any real similarity between his own circumstances and those of Rilke or Joyce, his admiration for the two figures suggests, if anything, an unfulfilled longing. Attracted as he may have been to the work of such highly independent artists, disengagement from the world of public affairs was something Klein simply never considered for himself. Similar paradoxes attend the attempt to locate Klein among his contemporaries in the community of Jewish modern writers.

The group of writers whose social situation most closely resembles that of Klein and, for that reason, raises some interesting questions about his attitudes as a Jewish modernist were the Yunge, or young ones, a group of Yiddish aestheticists working in New York City in the early part of the century.[2] Here, the dilemma of Jewish modernism is most evident in the conflict surrounding the use of Yiddish as a vehicle for modern poetry, for in the Jewish immigrant communities of North America, the shared use of Yiddish, perhaps more than any other single factor, served to unify and thus consolidate the immigrant experience. It was in Yiddish that the intense difficulties of one's life as a newcomer and, in the vast majority of cases, as a common laborer were expressed. Yiddish culture, especially the

[2] For the Yunge, see Ruth R. Wisse, "Di Yunge and the Problem of Jewish Aestheticism," *Jewish Social Studies* 38 (1976): 265-76; "Di Yunge: Immigrants or Exiles?", *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 43-61; and "A Yiddish Poet in America," *Commentary* (July 1980): 35-41.

Yiddish theatre and Yiddish press, constituted the foundations of what would otherwise have been a severely fragmented society. Yiddish writers were considered to be largely an adjunct of the press and were expected to represent the community, employing their talents to voice its needs and aspirations. But despite the fact that the Yunge shared the oppressive circumstances of the community at large, they nonetheless refused their designated social role. Instead, they argued that their choice of Yiddish, despite its reputation as a folksy, 'democratic' language, in no way obligated them to be mindful of their readers. Thus against the arrestingly incongruous backdrop of the sweatshops, poverty, and overcrowding of New York's lower east side, the Yunge aspired, not toward social change, but toward a rarefied aesthetic. Needless to say, in addition to their own internal doubt about the validity of the enterprise, they often had to weather hostility from other parts of the community, especially as news of the pogroms and the First World War reached the United States.

Although he was of the generation following the Yunge, Klein certainly knew their work and would have had personal knowledge of them through his close friend J. I. Segal, who for a time had joined them in New York. Moreover, it is inconceivable that Klein would have missed the parallels between their social situation and his own, for like the Yunge, Klein himself was constantly forced to confront the changing values of an immigrant society and the competing attractions of aestheticism on the one hand and social responsibility on the other. One would expect, on the basis of these similarities, that Klein would have

displayed a considerable sympathy for their work. Yet, as with modernism at large, precisely the opposite is true. Klein's attitude toward the Yungе ranged from apparent indifference to hostility, the former evident in the astonishing lack of reference to them in his work, and the latter in his strange and unsympathetic translation of a series of poems by Moyshe Leib Halpern.[3] Halpern, who in many respects epitomizes the dilemma of Jewish modernism, is someone whose poems Klein was in a position to approach with great sensitivity and appreciation. Rather unexpectedly, however, Klein's translations of Halpern border on the perverse; Klein strips them of their modernity, effectively denying the social conflict which informs both Halpern's and his own work.

Klein displayed an equal lack of sympathy toward many American Jewish writers working in English. He was highly critical, for example, of Karl Shapiro and Delmore Schwartz, whom he considered to be assimilationists despite the fact that by contemporary standards they were considered as having favorable attitudes toward their Jewishness. "The disappointing fact," Klein commented, was that "upon the subject of their heritage," these writers were "either singularly silent, or, if outspoken, outspoken to most self-deprecatory effect" (LER 246-47). They were, in Klein's view, striving to be "American by Jewish dissuasion" (LER 247), advancing their modernity at the expense of their identities as Jews. Despite his regard for the notion of artistic integrity, Klein strongly disapproved of public

[3] See Linda Rozmovits, "A. M. Klein's Translations of Moyshe Leib Halpern: A Problem of Jewish Modernism," *Canadian Poetry* (forthcoming).

displays of Jewish self-hatred. Elitist behaviour in others was unconscionable--in Jews, it constituted the most pathetic form of personal and artistic self-betrayal.

Most telling perhaps, is the totally uncritical and at times disturbingly sentimental attitude Klein displayed toward Jewish writers whom he perceived to be suitably positive about their Jewish identities. At best, this type of writing was represented by masterful observers of Jewish society like Shalom Aleichem; at worst, it deteriorated into maudlin sentimentality and strained idealizations of Jewish life. While one can readily appreciate Klein's enthusiasm for writers like Shalom Aleichem, it is a more complex matter to sort through his comments on less obviously accomplished writing.

At times, Klein's enthusiasm for sentimental and thoroughly unmodern Jewish writing seems to be proportional to the level of sentimentality of the work itself. Writing of the work of his colleague J. I. Segal, for example, Klein would often indulge in elaborate reveries about an idealized eastern European Jewish world of which he had no direct experience and which, realistically speaking, existed largely in the sentimental imagination. This, for Klein, was a world in which experience was suffused with the "familiar fragrance of worn and cherished things," piety and scholarship assumed their rightfully mythic dimensions, and unharassed, "God's worthy Jews [could] indulge in nasal humming during the twilit moments of Sabbath afternoons."[4] Clearly what Klein valued in such writing was what he craved in

[4] "Baal Shem in Modern Dress," LER 6-9. See also, "The Poetry Which is Prayer," LER 49-51, and "Poet of a World Passed By," LER 79-80.

the rather less idealized world around him, namely expressions of culture that escaped the anti-social élitism of modern art. At least on one occasion, Klein himself confirmed this hypothesis. Writing of the work of the badchan (wedding jester) Shloime Shmulevitz, Klein admitted that his Yiddish was "archaic," his "ideas trite and commonplace," and his "poignancy saccharine." Nonetheless, Klein argued, the material ought to be valued because "the sentiments [were] real." The upheavals European Jews had suffered at the end of the nineteenth century had been immense, and it was Shmulevitz with his sentimental songs and not some highly sophisticated poet who had "aptly expressed the need of thousands" (LER 27-28).

If we try, then, to locate Klein within an artistic and social context, he appears as a curiously marginal figure. With striking consistency, Klein allies himself with positions remote from his own circumstances--the withdrawal from society advocated by Rilke and Joyce, and nostalgic or sentimental Jewish writing--and condemns positions which in fact resemble his own--the socially responsive writing of politically engaged modernists and the stylistic modernism of the American Jewish writers. The question to address thus becomes: how are we to understand Klein's modernism; what is the nature of the sensibility arising out of this strangely paradoxical attitude?

The source of the confusion in Klein's attitude toward modernism lies in a central fact: Klein is an essentially social poet, while modernism is an essentially anti-social art. For Klein, as we shall soon see, the significance of one's

existence as an artist lies not in private experience but in the social domain, specifically, in the relationship between the artist and his community. Conversely, however, the raison d'être of a great deal of modern writing (certainly of the kind of writing Klein so admired) is the refusal to subject artistic endeavors to validation by an outside community of any kind, and it is precisely at this point that Klein's modernism runs headlong into his culturally rooted sense of social responsibility. While Klein was attracted by modernism's aesthetic and intellectual virtuosity and, naturally, by the lure of artistic independence, he was simultaneously repelled by its anti-democratic tendencies; his sense of modern artistic accomplishment was inevitably countered by his sense of the social cost. Klein's career was in large part an attempt to reconcile the fiercely opposed demands of a modern artistic perspective on the one hand and a profound responsiveness to the needs of Jewish society on the other. But what are we to make of Klein's attempts to do so? Was he simply trying to avoid choosing between artistic integrity and a loyalty to one's community, or did Klein, in seeking to accommodate both modernism and Jewishness, in fact, have a grand synthesis in mind?

Klein's most complete statement on the role of the modern artist may be found in one of his very latest works, an important essay entitled "The Bible's Archetypical Poet" (LER 143-48). The essay plays a haunting dual role in Klein's career, for while it is intended as a celebration of the poet, it was, in fact, written after Klein himself had effectively ceased writing poetry. Thus, in its presentation of the biblical tale of Joseph

and his brothers as a paradigm of the modern artist in society, "The Bible's Archetypical Poet" stands at once as a celebration and as a eulogy. The tale is familiar enough to require no detailed retelling, but, briefly, it is the story of a young man of exceptional qualities, who becomes the object of jealousy and finally the victim of his brothers.[5] Ultimately, the very qualities that were initially the cause of his suffering allow Joseph to transform his misfortune so that he redeems not just himself but his family as well. Let us now consider Klein's interpretation of the tale, both in terms of Joseph's personal identity as the archetypical poet and of his relationship to his community.

While Klein called his essay "The Bible's Archetypical Poet," it might just as well have been called "The Bible's Archetypical Politician," for Klein's very definition of the archetype depends on a deliberate confounding of the artistic and social roles. Passing over such obvious candidates for the role of archetypical poet as David and Solomon, Klein, in choosing Joseph, deliberately chooses a figure widely recognized, by virtue of his loyalty, honesty and administrative expertise, to be the ideal public servant. Moreover, Joseph is not simply an accomplished politician but someone "to whom not a single strophe ... has ever been ascribed." How then does Joseph merit the title of archetypical poet?

For Klein the identity of the true poet has little to do with being a "fashioner of verses" or a "coiner of phrases." These are activities he considered, in isolation, to be relevant

[5] See Genesis, chs. 37-45.

only in the realm of "literature, not life." Rather, in asserting Joseph's claim to the role, Klein argues that he is a poet because he is a "dreamer, and what is infinitely more important, an interpreter of dreams." While this statement might appear to be politically more romantic than modern, several factors will serve to clarify that what Klein intends is an essentially social and thus, in his terms, thoroughly modern sense of the poet's role. To reiterate Klein's assertion, the poet is not just a dreamer but an interpreter of dreams. That is to say, visionary experience in itself is not an end, as it might be in romantic terms, but rather a means to an end. Rather than permit escape to a world of the imagination, it serves to reinforce the poet's relationship both to his community and to the events of his time. Klein illustrates this point through the episode of the baker and the butler. Joseph's interpretations, first of the dreams of the baker and the butler and then of the Pharaoh himself, serve not only to vindicate him personally, but also to prevent widespread suffering in Egypt. Thus Joseph escapes unjust imprisonment not by any self-validating act of the imagination, but rather by employing his talents to effect a more widely significant course of events. While it may appear to others that Joseph lives "as if in a world apart, in fact, in the fullness of time, his dreams are proven to be the true and solid substance of life." Combining a poetic breadth of vision with an ability to employ that vision to effect positive social change, Joseph stands as the ideal social poet.

Two essays written early in Klein's career, some twenty years before "The Bible's Archetypical Poet," closely parallel

his exploration of the story of Joseph and suggest historical models for the paradigm he did not fully describe until his later years. The first of these essays, written in 1931, is on the Jewish statesman and Zionist, Theodor Herzl (LER 14-20), and the second, dated 1937, on the Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik (LER 13-19).

In writing about Herzl, Klein directly addressed the paradox of conferring the title "poet" on a person who did not write poetry. The word poet, Klein reminds us, derives from the Greek *poieio*, "to make." Thus, one whose behaviour moves beyond mere expression into creative action is a poet. Like all of Klein's heroes, Herzl displayed the characteristic combination of the "imagination of the poet ... tempered with the cold practicality of the statesman." Rejecting philanthropy as a solution to Jewish problems, Herzl, in crystallizing the notion of political Zionism, transformed the myth of independent Jewish statehood into a potential reality. Additionally, Klein considered Herzl's great economic treatise, *Der Judenstaat*, to be a poetic "epic of industry where, instead of the song of the turtledove ... one hears the whir of dynamos" and "instead of the falling waters of the Jordan one listens to the noise of irrigation canals." Translating poetic vision into effective political action, Herzl was at once "the last of the Jewish romanticists and ... the first of the Hebrew realists." Similarly, Chaim Nachman Bialik stood for Klein as an heroic poet in society. In this case, Klein's poet was, in fact, a poet by conventional definition, but again, what is ultimately of significance is not the poetry itself, but the influence it was perceived to have had on Jewish

society. Bialik was associated with a collection of Jewish intellectuals known as the Odessa group whose aim was to formulate a new agenda for responding to the violence that was being perpetrated against Jews in eastern Europe. Sent as an observer to the site of the infamous pogrom at Kishinev, Bialik later commemorated the event in his monumental poem "The City of Slaughter." In the poem Bialik condemned Jewish passivity as strongly as the barbarism of the Cossacks and, as a consequence, was credited with having done "more to agitate for Jewish self-defence than any proclamation of the Odessa Hebrew Writers or the Central Committee of the Bund" (Roskies 91).

The ideal union of the poet and his community is captured, for Klein, in the image which closes the tale of Joseph and his brothers:

> Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall.
>
> (Genesis 49:22)

The image is compelling for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its utter simplicity. With an appealing self-evidence, the possibility of a mutually beneficial and entirely harmonious relationship between the poet and his community is revealed. Without the poet, the community has no voice, no focus, and little hope of moving beyond the wall. Without the well of identity and history to draw from, the poet becomes a lifeless dislocated figure who belongs nowhere and speaks to no one. The image is also compelling for its symbolic return from barrenness to "the garden," a location significant not just for its Edenic association but for the special significance the garden assumed for Klein. Virtually all of Klein's protagonists make their way

from the barrenness of the city to the modern equivalent of a pastoral setting where the suffering of the hero is at last redressed. Abraham Segal, Benedict Spinoza, the Poet of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," and Melech Davidson all make this journey whether it is from the sweatshop to the "meadow on the mountain-top," from the "maculate streets of Amsterdam to the "Garden of Mynheer," from the faceless anonymous city to the "n[illegible] Adam's" garden, or from the beleaguered towns of eastern Europe to the new state of Israel where "twigs and branches that had been dry and sapless for generations ... now budded [and] blossomed." But as with all of Klein's gardens, there is something tentative about the reconciliation symbolized by the tree growing within the wall; tensions remain that not even such an idealization can resolve. Do the branches growing over the wall symbolize a fecundity which the community can only express through its poets or the poet's reaching for escape from within the walls of his community? After all, while the story of Joseph and his brothers ends with Joseph's triumphant return, at its heart lies a violent and undeserved rejection of the poet by his community.

Joseph's misfortune had a tragic immediacy for Klein even in the modern era. It is Joseph, Klein argues, who throughout the tale seeks to maintain a meaningful bond to his community. But despite his efforts, he is nonetheless cruelly betrayed--humiliated, flung into a pit, and finally sold into slavery by his own brothers. And "it is impossible to preserve this story, detail after symbolic detail," Klein argued, "without realizing that here we have encountered the classic design figuring the

relation between the poet and his fellows." Klein saw this design "beginning with misunderstanding and envy," moving on to "conspiracy" and "revenge," finally culminating in "murder." Ultimately, Klein concedes, society recoils ... [from] the killing blow, but by this time, the distinction is purely technical."

As a late work, "The Bible's Archetypical Poet" no doubt expresses the sense of disillusionment Klein had built up over the years, but this tragic dynamic between the poet and his community is strongly present even in much earlier work. Before Klein's protagonists find their moment of redemption in the garden, without exception they too experience the pain of undeserved suffering and exile. Spinoza is cast out by the citizens of Amsterdam, the poet of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" endures a ghostly anonymity in the city, and Uncle Melech survives countless episodes of physical and spiritual torment as he witnesses pogroms, the arrival of the Nazis, and the plight of Jewish refugees in the ghettos and camps of North Africa.

But even more immediate is the fact that the undeservedly unsympathetic attitude of the community toward its poets was not simply a literary problem for Klein. The community in which he lived and to whom he devoted much of his life was often better at demanding loyalty of its members than at returning it, and the rejections Klein suffered both as an artist and as a politician were personally and professionally devastating. Politically, Klein's defeat in the federal election of 1949 exposed the community's unwillingness to support one of its most outstanding

members despite his unparalleled and distinguished record of service. Undoubtedly, on one level, Klein's political rejection was simply part of the difficulties the CCF had always experienced in Quebec (Horn 132-56). But evidently hoping that his record of service would outweigh the community's reluctance to support the party, Klein had conducted "an unabashedly personal campaign" (Caplan 161). The defeat was humiliating and costly. As Klein himself remarked after his earlier withdrawal from the federal election of 1945, "every one of my political speeches--and in Cartier you have to make plenty, and in three languages--will cost me at least three poems" (qtd. in Caplan 126). Loyalty to the community exacted its artistic price as well. Despite Klein's unrelenting commitment to the culture in which he was raised, for the Jewish community Klein's art was somehow never Jewish enough. At the least assertion of his modern independence Klein's efforts were met with hostility. As he was informed by the Jewish Publication Society: "while a general publisher could publish [his] poems with impunity," in the interests of the community, they would not be accepted by a Jewish publisher "on the basis of ... literary merits alone" (Husik).

As a writer whose modern colleagues were, for the most part, deliberately turning their backs on tradition and society, this rudely imposed exile must have seemed a terrible irony to Klein. Yet for years he resisted the modern gesture of withdrawal and retreat. As the pressures of history mounted and the attraction to modernism grew, Klein's reply was inevitably a redoubling of his commitment to the community. Through the memory of the

pogroms of eastern Europe, the British failure to fulfill the promises of the Balfour Declaration, the attempted destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis, and the repeated personal disappointments he suffered as an artist and public figure, Klein held tenaciously to the hope that society would one day recognize its true leaders and that from the evils of history a poetic justice could be wrought. But despite his untiring efforts to resist social alienation, Klein found himself irresistibly drawn toward modern despair. The destructive cycle of commitment and rejection took its toll. A. M. Klein, at the height of his powers, having just begun to receive substantial acclaim, withdrew from the world, becoming himself the archetype of the alienated modern poet.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY AND THE POETIC CONSTRUCT

"Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" presents A. M. Klein's fullest poetic rendering of the story of the archetypical modernist. The elegiac treatment of the artist, hopelessly alienated from his society, invokes comparisons with *The Wasteland*, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," and Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*.[1] Moreover, it is clear that Klein himself envisioned the poem in such archetypically modern terms, "Portrait" supplying his version of the modern story of "the poet [who] is so anonymously sunk into his environment that, in terms of painting, his portrait is merely landscape" (qtd. in "Complete Poetry").

Yet while the poem has obvious and substantial significance as a modern testament, in a curious way it represents not modernism at the height of triumphant defiance, but rather modernism tottering on the brink. For the typically modern positions Klein assumes throughout "Portrait" are eroded, subtly but persistently, by an increasingly disintegrated sense of experience, one that seems to move the poem out of the realm of modernism toward the increasingly unsettled borders of the post-modern. My aim here is to understand something of the forces impeding Klein's attempt to maintain a modern position--in effect, to understand why it is so difficult for him to be modern even at the height of his modernity. But in order to understand this powerful dynamic as it informs Klein's poetry, it may be

[1] I am indebted to Zailig Pollock for suggesting this Rilke connection to me and for his generosity in sharing his unpublished work.

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helpful first to understand something of the struggle of modern poetry at large to sustain itself in the face of its most powerful opponent, the unfolding of modern history. And in seeking to establish such a context, I propose to focus on the attitudes of the poet who not only most fully embodies the modern attempt to construct a poetic response to history, but who, as we will see, so strikingly influenced Klein, namely, Ezra Pound.

I

Ezra Pound perceived the problem of modernity to be essentially a corruption of value. "The disease" of the past century and a half," he wrote, "is abstraction" ("Essays" 59), by which he seemed to mean an increasing tendency toward the "dilution of knowledge" ("Essays" 60), through either a proliferation of untrue or useless information or an increasing social obliviousness to "true" value as expressed by certain great works of art. Pound argued that while in past centuries and civilizations "good art was a blessing and ... bad art was criminal and [society] spent some time and thought in trying to find means whereby to distinguish the true art from the sham," in modern society, "we are asked if the arts are moral. We are asked to define the relation of the arts to economics, we are asked what position the arts are to hold in the ideal republic. And it is obviously the opinion of many people ... that the arts had better not exist at all" ("Essays" 41). Simply restated, modern society had lost sight of truth and value as they had existed in the past and, as a consequence, was wallowing in

mediocrity. Thus Pound's self-appointed mission was to restore a sense of value to society, a mission he hoped to fulfill by reviving the true spirit of the past, thereby ensuring the future by re-establishing some sort of positive historical continuity.

Many of Pound's poetic strategies are clearly related to this desire to cut through what he perceived to be the superficiality of modernity in order to get at life's underlying and enduring values. Consider, for example, Pound's definition of Imagism:

> An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time ... [and] it is the presentation of such a 'complex' *instantaneously* [emphasis mine] which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art. ("Imagiste" 200-01)

The central impulse here is clearly one toward the "dissolution of logical or grammatical relations" (Durant 25), which, like the technocratic and circuitous routes favoured by modern society, obscure the self-evident truths revealed in the instantaneous presentation of the image. Pound's attraction to the ideogram, and to vorticism, is similarly centred on an impulse to cut through the surface in order to get at the heart of the matter. Like the image, the ideogram presents a complex of emotional and intellectual content all in a single instant so that what is conveyed is not primarily literal meaning, but rather a more fundamental sense of the relationships between the elements comprising the complex. Vorticism, in seeking to cut through the boundaries between art forms and to locate the artist in the still point of an obsessively moving world, again moves beyond literal meaning to the more fundamental messages trapped beneath

the surface: first, that there *are* such still points or vantage points of truth to be had, and, second, that in the cultural continuity existing across art forms we may catch a glimpse of the true continuity of history. But it is through his most enduring strategy, the juxtaposition of diverse historical and cultural allusions, that the beliefs underlying Pound's poetic method are most apparent.

Expanding on the Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa's argument that the "Chinese written character juxtaposes images that fuse in the reader's mind, Pound argues by analogy that juxtaposing histories should shock the reader into recognition of the moral that unites them" (Ellmann 246). So the paradox at the heart of Pound's strategy for combatting the ills of modernity is revealed: in order to save history one must effectively deny it. As William Harmon has argued, if Pound's aesthetic and consequently his social mission is dominated by any single element it is precisely this sense of the "unreality of historical time" (3). Just as Pound argued that through imagism one could escape the aesthetic limitations of linear presentation, so he argued about history that "all ages are contemporaneous" ("Romance" 8), freeing the poet to move at will through space and time. Viewed from one perspective such a notion of history implies nothing more threatening than the familiar and often nobly entertained modern notion that poetry and perhaps poets were what was required to prevent society from being overtaken by a corrupt perception of value. But under more careful scrutiny, these ideas appear to be considerably more problematic.

For example, Pound's notion of history raises a number of epistemological problems, such as the disavowal of any distinction between history as a series of past events and history as it is recounted by the historian. Ordinarily, one might expect that the subjective processes involved in rendering a version of the past would, by definition, introduce some sense of self-consciousness or doubt about the validity of the enterprise. For Pound, however, precisely the opposite is true: neither the subjective vision of the poet-historian, nor the potentially fictive vehicle of language (especially highly metaphoric language), contributes to uncertainty about the claims being advanced. Rather, the arts provide us with "lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man" in a classically scientific way[2] ("Essays" 42). Thus, while the debate may continue with regard to specific elements of Pound's theory of poetry, it is clear that he had tremendous confidence in the ability of poetry to respond to and indeed to transcend the unfolding of history.

While it may seem contentious to invoke Pound as a model for Klein, the two are, in fact, significantly connected. Despite Klein's unequivocal animosity toward Pound, it is clear that in many ways Klein was deeply influenced by him. Klein had more books by Pound in his library than by any other modern poet. As a lecturer in modern poetry at McGill University in the mid 1940s Klein had his students write parodies of Pound cantos, while he himself produced a brilliant example of such a parody in the form

[2] See, for example, Ian F. A. Bell, *Critic as Scientist: the Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (London: Methuen, 1981).

of a review of *The Cantos* in 1948. But most importantly, both Klein and Pound shaped their careers as a response to a shared set of historical circumstances so that while their politics were obviously violently opposed, Klein's ideal of the poet-statesman bears an undeniable resemblance to Pound's definition of the social role of the poet. Thus, as Milton Wilson has argued that in "Political Meeting" "for one awful moment [we] see the shadow of Uncle Melech rising up behind the Camillien Houde who is his parody" (94), so might we argue here that for one awful moment we see the shadow of Joseph, the "Bible's Archetypical Poet," rising up behind the figure of Ezra Pound.

Yet despite these compelling connections between Pound and Klein, ultimately, nothing could be more different than their attitudes toward history and, consequently, toward modernity. As a poet who allows no substantial challenge to his modern sensibility, Pound is at liberty to suppose the problem of modernity to be a loss of value, to approach it as primarily aesthetic, and, indeed, to depend on the existence of art as an autonomous realm. For Klein the problem of modernity is not the loss of value but the problem of value assailed. As an unassimilated Jew, strongly attached to a multitude of living Jewish cultural and intellectual traditions, Klein's mission is not to reinstate the values of the past but to defend their continued existence in the present against the advances of dominant and hostile cultures. Jewish historical experience, epitomized through the first half of the twentieth century, never allows the poet to stray very far into an abstract sense of history. Thus while Pound may have felt free to construct a

poetic theory based on the deniability of history, effectively recasting history in poetry's image, Klein cannot escape history's manifest undeniability. No matter how great his desire to believe in the effectiveness of art as an autonomous realm, Klein's poems simply cannot resist the historical onslaught. Invariably, history comes crashing through.

II

One of the most interesting ways of approaching Klein's modernity in its relation to history is by considering his use of traditional poetic forms. Two forms in particular, the sonnet and terza rima seem especially significant in this regard. Both are forms to which Klein returned repeatedly from the earliest to the latest stages of his career, and both are linked to weighty traditions and are often used by Klein to lend a sense of ritual and order to the poetic moment. Moreover, as structures formally implying their own closure, the sonnet and terza rima seem by their very nature to validate the notion of poetic autonomy.

At first glance, Klein's use of traditional forms recalls the modern strategies epitomized by Pound. Like Pound, Klein appears to be summoning tradition as an ally against the ills of modernity. But on closer examination it becomes clear that whether he is attempting to defy history through poetry, or to poetically represent the onslaught of history, Klein invariably chronicles the assault on the notion of poetic autonomy. Thus, far from offering us a Poundian affirmation, Klein's poems tend consistently to re-enact the failure of tradition.

"Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" provides an excellent example of Klein's efforts to fashion a poetic response to history. The poem recounts the excommunication of the philosopher Spinoza by the Jews of Amsterdam on charges of heresy. But viewed more broadly, it plays out an early version of the story of the archetypical poet so central to Klein's entire career. Spinoza bears a striking resemblance to Joseph in "The Bible's Archetypical Poet," the poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," the wandering Melech Davidson, and the Jews, who as a people figured for Klein as a key example of the outcast poets in history. A truly creative individual, he is cast out by a society threatened by the unconventionality of his philosophy and while in exile realizes the secret of his own redemption. The poem ends with the image of Spinoza:

> plucking tulips
> Within the garden of Mynheer, forgetting
> Dutchmen and Rabbins, and consumptive fretting,
> Plucking his tulips in the Holland sun,
> Remembering the thought of the Adored,
> Spinoza, gathering flowers for the One,
> The ever-unwedded lover of the Lord.

Invoking tradition in some of its most resonant incarnations--Renaissance humanism, Dutch painting, Christian chastity, and the return to Eden--Klein redeems his hero in an irresistible flood of associations.

Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is the degree to which Klein relies on formal symbolism to reinforce the redemptive sense of tradition lying at the heart of the poem. "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is symmetrically constructed, consisting of nine sections, with four sections leading up to the climactic central point and four moving away

from it toward the poem's resolution. The climactic section, section V, is significantly set as prose:

> 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, deciphered a new scripture in the book? Is it a marvel that he left old fraud for passion intellectual of God?

At first glance, the section appears to function largely as a narrative centerpiece conveying an encapsulated version of both the previous four sections and of the material about to follow. In fact, as several critics have noticed, the passage has formal significance beyond its structural importance as the centre of the poem. Klein's account of Spinoza's discovery of the "infinitesimal and the infinite" "out of the pulver and the polished lens" is in fact not prose but prose concealing a sonnet. Thus, what Klein has produced is not merely a description of Spinoza's moment of discovery, but a self-reflexive formal construct which compels the reader literally to emulate the poetic moment; as Spinoza discovers his truth in revealing the lens hidden in the unshaped glass, so the reader discovers the sonnet. And the message underlying both Spinoza's and the reader's moment of discovery is clear: beneath the prosaic chaos of exile lies the redemption of hidden reason and form.

In its strong affirmation of the power of poetry to effect social change, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is Klein's most Poundian poem. But having begun my discussion of Klein's formal strategies with this most persuasive and moving of

his early works, I must now note that in terms of its affirmation of formal power, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is virtually unique in Klein's poetic oeuvre. As Zailig Pollock has argued, the poem, while at first a favorite of Klein's, was one he eventually came to dislike. One of the two poems selected to represent Klein in the *New Provinces* anthology, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" was excluded from all future readings and publications, including a *Selected Poems* typescript which Klein assembled in 1955. Moreover, Klein appears to have attempted to retract "Pulver" by replacing it with a short lyric entitled: "Spinoza: On man, on the Rainbow," which first appeared as a revision to section seven of the poem. To follow Pollock's reasoning, the later poem is essentially a dialectical rewriting of the first and is ultimately favoured by the later Klein, whose thinking was increasingly dominated by an interest in the dialectic. Considering the social implications of Pollock's argument, one sees very clearly that what Klein was rejecting was a poem which, however beautifully, valorizes the alienation of the artist from his community. For it is not the community or even the relationship between the community and the creative individual Spinoza redeems, but art and the artistic self. It is difficult to imagine Klein dismissing the community so unsympathetically or taking such a callow view of tradition later in his career. As we will see, it is a stance which finds little support elsewhere in his work.

A later poem, "Sonnet Unrhymed," displays rather a different attitude toward the dynamic between poetry and history. Hidden in its lack of rhyme, as the sonnet in "Out of the Pulver and the

Polished Lens" is hidden in prose, "Sonnet Unrhymed" differs in that it is not simply disguised and awaiting discovery, but genuinely and deliberately formless. An unrhymed Petrarchan sonnet with fruitless copulation as its subject, the poem addresses the problem of form without consequence or the consequences of an undue emphasis on form. Coupling the notion of contraception with the use of the traditional form, the poem presents a striking inversion of the Poundian ideal. Rather than affirming the power of tradition to revivify the past, the poem rudely exposes the poet's self-serving activity, making him a contemptible object of study for the future generations whose existence he has prevented.

> When, on the frustral summit of *extase*,
> --the leaven of my loins to no life spent,
> yet vision, as all senses, sharper, --I
> peer the vague forward and flawed prism of Time,
> many the bodies, my own birthmark bearing,
> and many the faces, like my face, I see:
> shadows of generation looking backward
> and crying *Abba* in the muffled night.
>
> They beg creation. From the far centuries
> they move against the vacuum of their murder,
> yes, and their eyes are full of such reproach
> that although tired, I do wake, and watch
> upon the entangled branches of the dark
> my sons, my sons, my hanging Absaloms.

Condemned to the role of historical villain, the poet must endure the stares of the eternally unborn, the sonnet form standing here as damning evidence of the poet's wilful disengagement from history. Particularly resonant in this regard is the closing line of the octave where poetry and history collide in a single word. *Abba* is the Hebrew word for father, but it is also the rhyme scheme for the first quatrain of a Petrarchan sonnet--*abba*. Thus the muffled cry constitutes a dual lament, at once mourning

the poet's betrayal of his social obligation to future generations and the emasculation of a poetic tradition as it is forced into an historical context that can no longer meaningfully support it.

Similar tensions are evident in Klein's use of terza rima in his poems; "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry" clearly displays this basic conflict. Like many of Klein's works, "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry" presents a series of related poems, which, from a variety of perspectives, examine a single subject, in this case, the persecution of Jews in a Medieval town. Framed by opening and closing material, the poem comprises ten sections, each of which offers a reflection on the experience of violent anti-Semitism. The effectiveness of intellectual or philosophical responses to history is thus centrally at issue in the poem as the unifying effect of terza rima is sharply played off against the speciousness or ineffectuality of the attempt to respond to chaos portrayed within each section.

Some of the poem's spokesmen seek viable responses to the violence of their situation. "Nahum-this-is-also-for-the-good" argues that"

> The wrath of God is just. His punishment,
> Is most desirable. The flesh of Jacob
> Implores the scourge. For this was Israel meant.

Similarly, "Ezekiel the Simple opines:"

> If we will fast for forty days; if we
> Will read the psalms thrice over; if we offer
> To God some blossom-bursting litany,
>
> And to the poor a portion of the coffer;
> If we don sack-cloth, and let ashes rain
> Upon our heads, despite the boor and scoffer,
>
> Certes, these things will never be again.

In both cases, Klein's presentation of these solutions is clearly bitterly ironic. But in the latter instance, the naïveté of Ezekiel's belief is especially emphasized by Klein's use of the perfect formal ending of the verse. The single line, standing apart from the previous tercets, is meant to convey a sense of a final, grand affirmation. Clearly, however, the moment is not one of ideological triumph, but of terrible pathos, as the thrust of the poem as a whole simply demolishes this, as it does all of the poem's solutions.

Other sections of the poem convey the thoughts of those who have already been pushed beyond hope of a solution and who are effectively paralyzed by their sense of injustice. Daniel Shochet considers the unending displacement of the Jew:

> The toad seeks out its mud; the mouse discovers
> The nibbled hole; the sparrow owns its nest;
> About the blind mole earthy shelter hovers.
>
> The louse avers the head where it is guest;
> Even the roach calls some dark fent his dwelling.
> But Israel owns a sepulchre, at best.

"Isaiah Epicure," ostensibly mirroring the poem's dissatisfaction with attempts to philosophize away historical reality, is equally ineffective in his inability to move beyond the absolute material experience of physical suffering:

> Seek reasons; rifle your theology;
> Philosophize; expend your dialectic;
> Decipher and translate God's diary;
>
> Discover causes, primal and eclectic;
> I cannot; all I know is this:
> That pain doth render flesh most sore and hectic;

Most interesting, perhaps, is the treatment Klein reserves for those seeking literary solutions to historical problems. Solomon Talmudi, the scholar, seeks to win immortality through

the explication of arcane religious texts. Claiming to have found the perfect textual unity, Talmudi posits the "simple sentence broken by no commas," which will render the teachings of scholars from Rashi to Aquinas obsolete. Ultimately, his inordinate belief in the power of exegesis is cruelly repaid when his manuscript, his "charm against mortality," is unceremoniously burned. An even crueler fate awaits the figure of Judith, who has based her expectations not simply on the presumed truthfulness of a text, but on a specifically literary model. In the section entitled "Judith makes comparisons," her faith in the chivalric tradition collides violently with her real situation. While Judith expects the approaching knight to sing of "truth, chivalry, and honour," she finds herself, instead, "wrestling" with a "cross-marked varlet," who bears little resemblance to the knights of her literary experience. Here, Klein seems especially anxious to impress the reader with the dangers of Judith's folly as the terza rima, otherwise regular throughout the poem, at this point begins to break down. The visual succession of tercets collapses into a single block, while the line "Judith had heard a troubadour" is ironically repeated, turning the rhyme scheme in on itself so that it regresses back to rather than progressing away from the original *aba*. The third tercet altogether abandons the prescribed pattern of rhyme:

> Judith had heard a troubadour
> Singing beneath a castle-turret
> Of truth, chivalry, and honour,
> Of virtue, and of gallant merit,--
> Judith had heard a troubadour
> Lauding the parfait knightly spirit
> Singing beneath the ivied wall.
> The cross-marked varlet Judith wrestled
> Was not like these at all, at all ...

Judith's misfortune, brought on by her literary delusions, is so great that it seems to move beyond the poem's predominant ironic strategy of interweaving perfect form with horrific content. Here, the bitterness is simply overwhelming, and the devastation of content precipitates the devastation of form. An even more striking example of the ineffectiveness of poetry as a response to history is provided by Klein's use of terza rima in *The Hitleriad*.

Confronted with the contemporary horror of Hitler's rise to power, Klein, in *The Hitleriad*, momentarily loses his sense of the limits of poetry in redressing the ills of modernity. Remarking to James Laughlin that he saw the poem as a summons to "the prophetic indignations of [his] ancestors (qtd. in "Complete Poetry"), Klein clearly sought to validate his position by association with the great literary traditions of the past. Thus relying heavily on the weight of traditional forms and unfortunately ignoring the lesson of "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry," Klein here resorts to a recognizably Poundian strategy, but it is a strategy that he cannot effectively sustain. The extended use of such highly artificial forms ultimately trivializes the historical content and, in turn, reinforces our sense of the limits of literary satire. Rather than succumb to the formal persuasion of tradition and civilization, history simply shatters the formal strategies of the poem.

The glaring tension between the poem's form and content is evident in section XXIV where Klein employs terza rima to describe Hitler's self-declaration of godhood:

> Nor did he merely wage his war on Man.
> Against the Lord he raised his brazen brow,
> Blasphemed His name, His works, contemned His plan,
>
> Himself a god announced, and bade men bow
> Down to his image, and its feet of clay! ...

Here the ritual solemnity of the terza rima confronts the demagogic corruption of ritual perpetrated by Hitler in declaring himself a god. However, the terza rima, far from harnessing Hitler's evil, seems increasingly bombastic and ineffectual as stanza after stanza of evil is revealed:

> The pagan, named for beasts, was born again.
> The holy days were gone. The Sabbath creed
> Unfit for slaves, superfluous to his reign,
>
> Stood unobserved. the nine-month-littered breed
> Traduced their parents to the Gestapo;
> Adulterous, the stud-men spawned their seed.

In the final stanza Klein attempts to formally represent the collapse of civilization by allowing the metre to be overrun by the surge of the crowd as it roars its approval of the demagogue. In a perverse parody of the tripartite terza rima form, the final rhyme is reiterated three times, line after line, until at last it finds its resting place in an animal incarnation:

> He raised aloft the blood-stained sword;
> Upon the square the heathen horde
> Roared.

But unlike the Judith episode in "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry," the gesture here is too calculated and facile. The overall effect is one of deluded self-satisfaction as the poem ultimately fails to address the material at hand in a serious way.

Yet despite its shortcomings, *The Hitleriad* ought not to be simply dismissed. Even with its strange mismatch of content and form, the poem foreshadows one of Klein's most masterful uses of

a traditional form and, indeed, one of his greatest poetic achievements, "Political Meeting."

In "Political Meeting," a marked shift in Klein's sensibility becomes apparent, for while the familiar interplay between the poem and the event it describes is still evident, the strong binary oppositions characterizing earlier work are conspicuously absent. Good and evil, form and content, give way to complex and ambiguous social and poetic dynamics. For example, the dangerous idolatry, corrupt ritual, and mob rule of section XXIV of *The Hitleriad* all re-appear in "Political Meeting," but this time, insidiously, they do not bear the insignia of evil. Rather, the presence of evil suggestively pervades the poem, mingling invisibly with good. Like the priests, whose "equivocal absence is felt like a breeze that gives curtains the sounds of surplices," good and evil shimmer together, at once offering relief from the stifling heat of the auditorium and exploiting the guilty vulnerability of the crowd overflowing into the street. Similarly, the orator, in sharp contrast to the figure of Hitler, exudes an unsettling ambiguity of intent. Rather than precipitate an obvious shower of evil, the ominous appearance of the orator--"The Orator has risen!"--unexpectedly shifts the mood of the poem to one of homey and comfortable intimacy. The orator is strangely familiar, yet at the same time he is clearly not one of Klein's obvious demagogues. Not a self-appointed idol but a publicly acclaimed one, he is "Their idol," "Worshipped and loved, their favourite visitor,/ a country uncle with sunflower seeds in his pockets."

Suggesting a compelling connection to the episode in *The Second Scroll* where the strangers from Ratno appear at the narrator's home, the moment is one which gravitates toward a disturbing confluence of familiarity and evil. Like Houde, the European strangers overcome their unfamiliarity by producing sunflower seeds from their pockets, a gesture which, the narrator tells us has the power to evoke his entire childhood.[3] But as in "Political Meeting," the understated intimacy of the moment is soon flooded by evil, in this case, by news of the recent pogrom in Ratno. Unable to resist the childlike desire to accept sunflower seeds from an outstretched hand, one is faced with the realization that, at best, the offering is meant to serve as an amulet against evil and, at worst, as a lure toward it. In any event, until the evil itself has been revealed, one motivation is indistinguishable from the other.

This significant move away from binary oppositions is equally evident in Klein's use of terza rima in "Political Meeting." In the poems we have previously examined, Klein's formal strategy is clearly based on a strong sense of social order and disorder. Whether employing tradition and poetic regularity earnestly, as in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens", or ironically, as in *The Hitleriad*, Klein establishes a clear opposition between order and disorder evident in the formal order or disorder of the poetic structure. Formal poetic disruption, or an ironic use of form, is used to signify a more broadly significant set of social conditions. But in "Political Meeting" quite a different strategy is employed. Unlike earlier

[3] See *The Second Scroll* 11-13.

poems which tend to move from formal regularity to symbolic disruption, "Political Meeting" offers us no such unmistakable oppositions. While the poem maintains its regular succession of tercets until the climax of the poem, the rhyming pair of lines within each tercet is irregular.

One interesting consequence of this loosening of structure is a paradoxical reinforcement not of certainty but of uncertainty in the poem. Rather than simply reinforcing a sense of order, the traditional form here conveys a compelling sense of the ideological confusion experienced by the crowd assembled in the hall. Like the priests, who are at once there and not there, and the orator, who is both hero and demagogue, the terza rima, in its tentative incarnation, at once validates and subverts the ritual being played out in the poem. Like the *alouette*, the traditional Québecois anthem of community, the terza rima is invoked in an appeal to tradition. But as the bird is "snared" and "plucked," "throat, wings, and little limbs," it becomes clear that nervous appeals to tradition here yield unexpected results. Despite the apparent "jocularity" of the hall and of the poet's manipulation of form, startlingly, the people and the poet both find themselves in the midst not of rituals of unification but rather of dismemberment. Even more paradoxical, however, are the revelations which await the poet's move toward formal regularity at the poem's close.

Viewed from a social perspective, "Political Meeting" addresses a number of Klein's deepest and most enduring concerns. Most obviously, it has as its subject, the ideological exploitation of the Québecois by corrupt political leaders during

the 1940s and the consequent aggravation of alarming fascist sympathies. But even more broadly, the poem plays out the social paradigm which so consistently dominated Klein's thinking. Basically, the poem represents the unification of a community experiencing great historical strain. Unfortunately, however, the version of the dynamic we see played out in "Political Meeting" is a dangerous parody of the communal unification Klein ideally envisioned. The orator, appealing to values dear to both the Québecois and to Klein, manipulates the assembly, engendering a false and dangerous unification:

> The whole street wears one face,
> shadowed and grim; and in the darkness rises
> the body-odour of race.

Significantly, it is in building toward this conclusion that Klein chooses to redeem his lost rhyme scheme, conveying the parodic transformation of a community into a hostile mob in perfect terza rima. What then are we to understand by this unequivocal and violent inversion of the modern idealization of old poetic forms?

Clearly, it is in "Political Meeting" that poetry and history at last come face to face; in the orator the poet has met his match. Like the poet, the orator is full of "wonderful moods, tricks, imitative talk." And, indeed, at this point one can hardly avoid wondering who is imitating whom. Using the very strategy that was meant to constitute a prescription against the ills of modernity--the appeal to tradition--the orator has transformed the poet's remedy into poison. Klein's chronic discomfort with the claims of modernism suddenly becomes acute. In "Political Meeting" it becomes an undeniable fact that poetry

and history do not exist in isolation from one another and that positing art as an autonomous realm may delay but will not indefinitely postpone a confrontation with history. Moreover, the poem insists that we recognize the impossibility of constituting an effective poetic response to history, for if it teaches us anything it is that despite the alluring claims of Poundian modernism, history and the poetic construct are ultimately inseparable.

One final poem, "Sestina on the Dialectic", moves us even beyond the striking revelations of "Political Meeting" to Klein's most radical transformation of a poetic tradition. As Klein was well aware, the sestina is "one of the oldest forms of verse" (qtd. in "Complete Poetry"). Consisting of six stanzas of six lines apiece and a concluding three line envoy or *tornada*, the sestina derives its structure not from rhyme but from a manipulation of the end words of each of the six lines comprising the opening stanza. The form was invented by the medieval poet Arnault Daniel, but more importantly, as Klein himself noted, one of the few poets to attempt the form in English before him was Ezra Pound.

For a number of reasons, it is clear that in alluding to Pound, the sestina Klein had in mind was Pound's highly reputed "bloody sestina," properly titled "Sestina: Altaforte." Noting with regard to the form of the sestina that "the second stanza is a folding of the first, and the third ... a folding of the second ...," Klein directly echoes Pound's own description of the sestina as "a form like a thin sheet of flame folding and

infolding upon itself" ("Romance" 27).[4] Additionally, Klein's remark that Dante had Daniel Arnault [sic] "justly placed in Hell" is clearly a confused reference to the Epigraph of Pound's poem: "Dante Alighieri put this man in hell for that he was a stirrer-up of strife," which in fact refers not to Arnault but to Bertran de Born upon whose poem Pound's sestina is based.

Pound's rendering of Bertran's poem, like the original, is a glorification of war:

> The man who fears war and squats opposing
> My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson
> But is fit only to rot in womanish peace
> Far from where worth's won and the swords clash
> For the death of such sluts I go rejoicing;
> Yea, I fill all the air with my music.

And though Pound tentatively admitted that the "shrill neighs of destriers in battle ..." were "more impressive before 1914 than ... since 1920" ("Romance" 48), like Bertran, he perceived a sense of social order in the field of battle. It is out of conflict, Pound argued, that civilization will arise:

> Better one hour's stour than a year's peace
> With fat boards, bawds, wine and frail music!
> Bah! there's no wine like the blood's crimson!

"May God damn for ever all who cry 'Peace'!" As Peter Brooker has noted, in writing the sestina Pound, characteristically, "revivifies Bertran through his contemporary Arnaut" (Brooker 44). But what precisely does Bertran represent for Pound, and what perceptions and values attend his revivification?

For Pound, Bertran's importance exceeds his contribution as a poet. Bertran appears as an archetypical hero, a man "who sang of his Lady Battle, as St. Francis [sang] of Poverty ..."

[4] Klein actually owned a copy of *The Spirit of Romance.*

("Romance 44) and whose "passages on the joy of war ... enter the realm of the universal" ("Romance" 46). Bertran appears in Dante's inferno holding his "severed head by the hair, swinging in his hand like a lantern" ("Romance" 45), reflecting the crime of having incited the schism between Henry II and his brother Richard the Lionhearted.[5] But interestingly, for Pound, the headlessness of the hero does not signify defeat. Rather, the strange duality paradoxically bears witness to the unyielding spirit of monolithic figures, who engage courageously against one another. Unlike King Richard, whom Pound mocks by referring to him in his rendering of Bertran's poem as "yea and nay," Bertran is a hero in that he bears his dividedness, his severed head, as a symbol of illumination. "Thus," declares Bertran, "is the counterpass (law of retribution) observed in me" ("Romance" 45).

These same values are reflected in Pound's formal rendering of "Sestina: Altaforte." In applying the rigour of the sestina in "translating" a poem not originally written in that form, Pound reinforces the notion of formal poetic rigour as an emblem of courage and rigour in the world at large. Except for very minor deviations, Pound adheres faithfully to the difficult form, choosing end words that boldly proclaim his purpose: 'peace', 'music', 'clash', 'opposing', 'crimson', 'rejoicing'. As a form which functions essentially by juxtaposition, as a fixed set of terms are presented and re-presented in a variety of arrangements, the sestina provides the ideal vehicle for Pound's idiosyncratic historicism.

[5] See *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII.

In Klein's sestina one finds no trace of either literal or metaphorical monoliths; here there is only the dialectic, "braided, wicker and withe," so pervasive that "there's not a sole thing that from its workings will not out." Again, the difference between Pound's perception of the problem of modernity and Klein's comes to the fore. Pound sees "the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing," while for Klein:

> ... dynasties and dominions downfall so! Flourish to flag and fail, are potent to a pause, a panic precipice, to a picked pit, and thence--rubble rebuilding,--still rise resurrective,--and now we see them, with new doers in dominion! They, too, dim out.

But even beyond the obvious contrast of the political right versus the political left, fundamental differences between the poets' attitudes prevail. Klein does not simply seize Pound's mocking "yea and nay," transforming it into "yes yeasts to No, and No is numinous with Yes." For although Klein is clearly appealing to the dialectic as a way of making sense of history, here, as in the other poems we have examined, history cannot be mediated by the poetic construct. In Klein's hands, even the dialectic becomes subject to its own process of transformation, yielding not synthesis but perpetual uncertainty:

> ... O just as the racked one hopes his ransom, so I hope it, name it, image it, the together-living, the together-with, the final synthesis. A stop.
>
> But so it never will turn out, returning to the rack within, without. And no thing's still.

The formal difficulty and obscurity of the poem reflect this sense of the uncontainability of history. Indeed, in a sense, Klein's very choice of the sestina form verges on the absurd. The poem is so thoroughly enjambed and the defining end words so inconspicuous--'with', 'a', 'to', 'out', 'so','still'--that

the form is effectively unrecognizable. Like "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," "Sestina on the Dialectic" constitutes a response to Poundian poetic strategies. But unlike the sonnet in "Pulver," which adopts the Poundian strategy by depending on a notion of truth as poetic revelation, the "Sestina," also a poem set as prose, attacks the Poundian view, arguing rather for truth as poetic dissolution.

At this point we may re-approach "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" with a new sensitivity to the uneasy modernity it displays. For while the poem presents itself in unmistakably modern terms--as a confrontation of the troubled relationship between the artist and society--it also consistently undermines its own defiance. Perpetually threatened by the forces of history and thus never truly at ease with idealizations of art or the artist's role, Klein, even in this, his most archetypically modern poem, is ultimately unable to sustain a modern stance.

The most obvious dynamic in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is that of the dialectic which, although it has its negative aspect, eventually transforms the poet from alienated outcast to "n[th] Adam" in a poetic Garden of Eden. Moreover, in moving from the pandering "ventriloquism" of the false poets to the "naming" and "praising" of the "first green inventory," the poem appears to redeem both the poet and the social status of his whole "declassé craft." But while one might thus characterize the mood of the poem as one of guarded optimism, another equally forceful dynamic undercuts the first, throwing its optimism into serious doubt. Progressively, the forces of fragmentation erode not simply the triumph of the poet, but, indeed, the very notion

of dialectical historical progress, until, ultimately, with both the poetic individual and his sense of experience under attack, the context of the poem tips over from the social and modern to the epistemological and post-modern.

Increasingly, the poet "thinks an imposter ... has come forward to pose / in the shivering vacuums his absence leaves." It is a vacuum filled by various identities throughout the poem: "the corpse in a detective story," "a Mr. Smith in a hotel register," "the Count of Monte Cristo"; the nth Adam is merely the last in the parade of "schizoid solitudes." And what of the poet's role? Does not the "naming" and "praising" "item by exciting item" bear a disturbing resemblance to the disintegrating experience of the false poets? While they "court angels," he "makes a halo of his anonymity." They "stare at mirrors" and he at his "single camera view." They go "mystical and mad"; he seeks new senses, new life forms, new creeds. The poet may "love the torso verb, [and] the beautiful face of the noun," but does he himself not "mistake the part for the whole, curl [himself] in a comma ... make a colon [his] eyes"? And what of the dialectic, Klein's model of history itself? For although it is on the upward swing of the pendulum that the poet climbs, "the better to look ... upon this earth--its total scope," it is equally along this great arc of modernism that he descends, "wigged with his laurel", until he finds himself, at last, alone, "shin[ing] like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NARRATIVE MESSIAH

Although it is a novel deeply engaged with history, *The Second Scroll* is not an historical novel. If we approach it as if it were historical, that is to say, as if its most obvious purpose were to convey a unified and coherent account of eastern European Jewish history from the pogroms to the founding of the State of Israel, we meet with significant textual resistance. The novel's complex structure, its deliberate evasion of genre, its layering of historical accounts, and its self-referentiality all serve to obscure as much as clarify the history which is the novel's ostensible object. Yet *The Second Scroll* is deeply engaged with history, and if it is not an historical novel what kind of novel is it? Klein himself suggests an avenue of approach when he declares the novel's central concern to be "messianic" (qtd. in Mayne, "Symposium" 12), for as we shall see, it is a designation which connotes a complex and paradoxical relationship to history.

As Gershom Scholem explains: "Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature ... a theory of catastrophe" ("Messianic" 7) whose "influence is exercised almost exclusively under the conditions of the exile as a primary reality of Jewish life and Jewish history" ("Messianic" 2). Moreover, Scholem characterizes the redemption sought through Jewish Messianism not as privately spiritual, but as broadly social, "as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community" ("Messianic" 1). In other words, Messianism in a

Jewish context is indicative of a responsiveness to historical and not religious imperatives. However, while Jewish Messianism is, in this sense, obviously an historical phenomenon, paradoxically, it is also extra-historical in that "the magnitude of the Messianic idea corresponds" not to historical engagement but to an enforced disengagement, to "the endless powerlessness [of the Jews] during all the centuries of exile when [they were] unprepared to come forward onto the plane of world history" ("Messianic" 35). In this light, Jewish Messianism may clearly be seen as an interpretive strategy for responding to an unavoidable and catastrophic series of events. And in so displaying this strong narrative aspect, in seeking, in effect, to deliver meaning out of chaos, Jewish Messianism reveals itself to be not an historical, but rather, a profoundly historiographical phenomenon.

Klein corroborates this view of Messianism by defining his Messianic quest in terms which are obviously more social than spiritual. While Melech Davidson functions as a Messianic symbol in the novel, he is not himself, nor does he embody, the notion of the Messiah as a spiritual individual with primarily spiritual concerns. Rather, as Klein asserts, "the Messiah is, or is of, or is in, the ubiquitous anonymity of universal Jewry's all-inclusive generation" (qtd. in Mayne, "Symposium" 25); he is the "anonymous fractions of total Jewry, in the hour of its great calamity discovering new strength and resource" (qtd. in Mayne, "Symposium" 13). Like Scholem, Klein sees the Messianic function to be primarily the re-enfranchisement of a disenfranchised people. But here, in Klein's account, it is the telling of

history, in effect, the fashioning of the historiographical narrative, which is brought to the fore. "The search for [the Messiah] runs simultaneous with the search for Israel's poetic principle," Klein tells us, "they are one and the same" (qtd. in Mayne, "Symposium" 13).

It is my contention that *The Second Scroll*, if it is to be read as a Messianic novel, is best read as one that posits a redeeming historiographical narrative--a narrative Messiah--as the object of its Messianic quest. Thus, it is my intention to approach *The Second Scroll* as historiographical, as a narrative about narratives about history, in which Klein explores the idea that to forge one's own narrative is to be the master of one's destiny. Only from such a meta-historical perspective can we begin to unravel the complex of narrative strategies the novel presents and understand something of the struggle of Klein, the novelist, to make sense of the chaos of history.

The fundamental historiographical problem addressed in *The Second Scroll* is defined by the protagonist, Melech Davidson, as he shifts his allegiance from one form of discourse to another--the Talmud, Marxism, Catholicism, Zionism--in search of the narrative context that will render history meaningful. As he writes in his letter from the refugee camp at Bari, "counting over and over again the puny alphabetical files to which we have been reduced" (25), it is the Jewish narrator's task to "compose backwards from these human indices the book of our chronicle" (24). And while it initially falls to Melech to fashion such a restorative account, it is equally the task of Melech's nephew, the narrator, and indeed, of the author himself, despite their

increasing distance from the centre of the text. Thus, what we see in the triple narrative of *The Second Scroll* is not a gradual distancing of the narrator from the novel's historiographical concerns, that is to say, a movement away from history to an increasingly abstract concern with narrative *per se*, but rather the restatement of an inescapable, historically rooted problem from one generation to the next. But what precisely is involved in fashioning such a narrative, and more importantly, what is finally at stake?

Hayden White has argued that the value of narrativity in the rendering of an historical account lies in the narrative endowment of morality and meaning. Selecting and arranging historical details, the historian-narrator produces an account of past events which is sympathetic to a particular set of social and personal priorities. If we look to Uncle Melech as a model of the Jewish narrator, we see that, indeed, his chronicle of recent Jewish history, at least in part, answers this description; his most evident priority is to lend both literal and moral intelligibility to an ineffably chaotic series of events. But if we examine Melech's narrative imperative more closely, we see that White's sense of what is at stake falls short of the mark, for here the historical situation is so extreme that the narrator is driven to seek something significantly more drastic than metaphorical redress.

The strain under which the Jewish narrator labours is exemplified in Melech's description of the forces militating against his attempt to chronicle the recent history of the Jews:

> I hear from the neighboring tent the voices of the castrati and evoke images of the white-robed monsters who deprived them of race. I scan the tattooed arms ... and wonder whether it is in gematria that there lies the secret of their engravure .... I ... talk to children, and observe how it is that so many of them wear ... lockets that break open like cloven hearts to reveal the picture of father, or mother, or brother lost .... I conceive the multitudinous portrait gallery of our people ... hang[ing] pendent from the throats of little children .... Yet from all of these studies and encounters I am not able to make me a chart of what actually happened; it is impossible. (25)

Staking out a stronghold in discourse, the Jewish narrator is forced to respond to the alarming paradox that it is in actual fact and not in the recounting of fact that Jewish existence has been rendered most nearly fictional. As the only remaining source of cultural continuity, it falls to the narrator not simply to re-tell but in fact to reconstruct, or to quote one of Klein's favorite puns, to literally "re-member" what has been dismembered. But while material circumstance compels the Jewish narrator to his task, it is equally his downfall; inevitably, the narrator finds himself trapped between the physical urgency of the narrative imperative on the one hand, and the ontological limits of narrative on the other. Because the issue of narrative here is not a matter of art but literally one of life and death, the Jewish narrator seeks not simply a consoling metaphor but an ontological reversal that will somehow lend real status to his narrative context. Somehow the narrative must sustain existence until existence itself resumes. Ultimately, however, all the narrator has on hand is language, and as Melech himself declares, whether in the face of hope or hopelessness, the Jewish narrator's task is that of fashioning "aught from naught."

Let us now consider *The Second Scroll* in terms of protagonist, narrator, and author, as each confronts his

historiographical task, and consequently the tension between narrative imperatives on the one hand and narrative restraints on the other.

Melech's central gesture as a narrator is his letter on seeing the Sistine Chapel, which appears as Gloss Gimel of *The Second Scroll*. It is here that he most strenuously tests the hypothesis that to forge one's own narrative is to be the master of one's destiny. If we consider Melech's narrative strategy in this remarkable letter, we see that on several counts his reading, or more properly, his dramatic re-writing of Michelangelo's narrative, constitutes a spectacularly defiant historiographical gesture. Monsignor Piersanti urges Melech to visit the Sistine Chapel because he believes that Michelangelo's images will wordlessly win the conversion that he, despite his eloquence, has been unable to effect. Piersanti believes that Melech will "be led from the Old Testament scenes to the New Testament truths," that "Michelangelo's sense of order ... and, above all, his sublimity" (42-43) will finally persuade Melech of the superiority of Catholicism. Unexpectedly, however, Melech replies by expressing his appreciation not of the ineffable sublime Piersanti believes any viewer of the ceiling must see, but rather of what he in fact sees, namely, ineffable chaos. Thus seizing one of the most powerful documents of Christian civilization, the legendary Sistine Chapel, Melech is finally the converter and not the converted, as he radically transforms Michelangelo's "parable of the species," into "a narrative of things to come which came indeed ... the parable of my days."

Reflecting the chaos which has so completely dominated his own life, and suggestively echoing his definition of the Jewish narrator's task to "compose backwards ... the book of our chronicle," Melech employs inversion as the key element in his deliberate mis-reading of Michelangelo. Most obviously, he reads the ceiling backwards, from the door to the altar rather than from the altar to the door, moving toward and not away from the images closest to the roots of the Old Testament. Additionally, he ignores all the New Testament material; "Nowhere in his letter [does] Uncle Melech advert to the scenes from the life of Christ" or to the portrayal of the Last Judgement appearing behind the altar. Finally, Melech's emphasis throughout his reading is overwhelmingly on the physical and not the spiritual. In a violent inversion of Piersanti's belief that the universal truth conveyed by Michelangelo's images is that of Catholic dogma, and thus refusing a dominant narrative which validates its conclusions by appeal to the transcendental beyond the material, Melech seeks, instead, to discover the grossly physical lying just beneath the surface of Michelangelo's beautiful frescoes. "One colour dominates this ceiling" Melech writes, "the colour of living skin; and behind the coagulation of paint flows the one universal stream of everybody's blood" (139). If one is overwhelmed by one's experience of the Sistine Chapel, Melech argues, it is not by the abstract "whirlwind of forms," but by "the weighted animate corpus of humanity" (136). For Melech, Michelangelo's story is not, as it is for Piersanti, one of the spirit, but manifestly one of blood and flesh.

Melech's strategy of inversion is clearly at work, for example, in his unorthodox readings of the nine central panels of the ceiling:

> the drunkenness of Noah he takes as a parable of murder, which is an intoxication with blood; *The Flood* he considers a general allusion to his own time; in *Noah's Sacrifice* he discovers a veiled illustration of the slaughter of his generation's innocents; and *The Expulsion from Eden* he ingeniously regards as having proleptic reference to the world's refugees, set in flight, not by an angel, but by a double-headed serpent. (56-7)

Crucial to an understanding of these readings is the fact that Melech's purpose here is not merely to substitute one closed reading of history for another. Rather, his purpose is dynamic: to expose the on-going though obscured tension between a dominant and a submerged narrative, and hence to re-open what the dominant narrative has declared to be a closed chapter of history. "In vain," Melech writes, "did Buonarotti seek to confine himself to the hermeneutics of his age" (139). Recognizing in Michelangelo's images not simply an expression, but an interpretation of history, Melech forcefully counters with an hermeneutic of his own.

This impulse to employ narrative as a means of re-engaging rather than of obscuring historical conflict is most dramatically evident in Melech's response to Michelangelo's vision of the human form:

> Certainly I could not look upon those limbs, well fleshed and of the colour of health ... without recalling to mind ... other conglomerations of bodies the disjected members of which I had but recently beheld.... For as I regarded the flights of the athletes above me the tint subcutaneous of well-being faded, the flesh dwindled, the bones showed, and I saw again the *relictae* of the camps, entire cairns of cadavers ... a leg growing from its owner's neck, an arm extended from another's shoulder, wrist by jawbone, ear on ankle: the human form divine crippled, jackknifed, trussed, corded: reduced and broken down to its named bones, femur

> and tibia and clavicle and ulna and thorax and pelvis and cranium. (140)

The passage is remarkable on a number of counts, perhaps most of all for its striking and grotesque vitality. Although Melech is describing bodies in a mass grave, the passage is, nonetheless, driven by an obsessive sense of historical process; rather than adopt an elegiac stance, Melech focusses instead on the historical unfinishedness of death. In Melech's vision, the dead are, in fact, living dead, "a leg growing from its owner's neck, an arm extended from another's shoulder," their lives continuing though horribly disrupted and rearranged. Moreover, this grotesque vitality extends even to the very process of destruction. "They would be like gods," Melech writes, "but since the ... touch of creation was not theirs, like gods would they be in destructions" (141). Thus, displaying a sense of purpose and an attentiveness to anatomical detail matched by Michelangelo alone, the forces of destruction leave behind "bundled ossuaries," monuments comparable in historical magnitude to the Sistine Chapel itself. The key revelation brought to light by Melech's inverted narrative, however, is that of the impossibility of disentangling icons of civilization from chronicles of barbarism. Like the ignudi, whose feet dangle above the medallions depicting scenes of destruction, Piersanti, with his sense of the transcendental sublime, cannot help but get caught up in "these wheels the colour of dried blood" (137). From the moment Melech dissolves the bodies of the athletes into those of the *relictae* of the camps, the entire passage reflects this violent convergence. Finally, having dug his way down to historical bedrock, Melech comes up with lime, the single element

essential to both the production of frescoes and the efficient management of a mass grave, and "bulldozes" civilization and barbarism together "into [the] sistine limepit" (140).[1]

Exposing the underbelly of Michelangelo's vision, Melech has turned his marginality to advantage. Not simply illuminating, but re-engaging in conflict with Piersanti's view of history, Melech has demonstrated the effectiveness of narrative as an historiographical weapon. There is no centre, Melech teaches us, no transcendent vision, which has not relegated something to the margins. However, in uncovering the transgressions obscured by the dominant narrative, Melech has, as Scholem had predicted, simultaneously exposed his own powerlessness. For while Melech's strategy of inversion has been highly effective in recovering what had been so wrongfully buried, it is substantially less effective in resuscitating the dead.

Drawing his mis-reading of the ceiling's central panels toward its close, Melech turns his attention to the "Creation of Adam." In so doing, he suddenly finds himself confronted by more than just one of Michelangelo's most renowned images. Inverting the creation of man, Melech approaches anti-Genesis, the destruction of creativity itself:

> He dared not transliterate it, Michelangelo, he dared not point the burden of his charge. But I read it plain and spell it out--summation and grand indictment--the unspeakable nefas--deicide. (146)

But having reached this, the climax of his argument, after laying out his allegations "corpse upon accusing corpse" (57), Melech, without warning, suddenly backs away from his own materialist

[1] See Spiro, 168

premises. Playing on the notion that human beings share in the divinity of God, Melech now argues that murder is impossible since the killing of a man would therefore be deicide, a crime "possible only in its attempt, not in its perpetration" (147). The formulation is so neat and alluring that it can only be met with the deepest suspicion; in terms of Melech's strategy of narrative inversion, surely this is the most backward gesture of all. Who better than Melech, as both a survivor and documentor of the camps, knows how false such claims can be? Has not his entire purpose been the refutation of such arguments? Why, at the climax of his narrative has Melech retreated into the specious logic of this absurd syllogism?[2]

As Zailig Pollock has explained, the phrase "unspeakable nefas" is "an etymological pun for the Latin word *nefas*, meaning an impious or wicked deed, [which] originally meant that which could not be spoken" (Pollock, "Gloss" 36). In other words, Melech here justifies his syllogistic claim for the impossibility of murder by likening it to ineffability, a concept which, in its centrality to Kabbalistic doctrine, gives him access to mystical redemption:

> Though bloody coursed the red and orange fevered bright, though the pus yellow yeasted, the gangrene green and the smitings waxed bruise-blue contused to indigo and the virulent violet, violet waned, the indigo fled, the veins throbbed azure, and green was the world once more and golden high sanguinary, and the body ruddy with health. The remnant would be whole again. And that this would come and in this wise come Michelangelo signified it, writing on a ceiling his seven-sealed token ADAM PALSYN ZAHAV YEREQ KOHL

[2] My view of this syllogism as crucial to Melech's narrative strategy is indebted to the argument set forth by Zailig Pollock in his article "The Myth of Exile and Redemption in 'Gloss Gimel,'" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 4.1 (1979): 26-42.

> ISOTHYS ADAM-SAPIRI ... All colors melled to hope; the spectrum fused to white. (147)

But while the notion of ineffability is thus what allows Melech to derive meaning from chaos, it is equally what alerts us to his inevitable unhappy fate. In narrating the recent history of the Jews, Melech has pushed language to its limits, and it is precisely in his leap from history to faith that we see the Jewish narrator trapped between his narrative imperative on the one hand and the ontological limits of narrative on the other. While Melech climaxes his reading of Michelangelo by claiming to spell out plainly what the painter had not the courage to utter, absurdly, it is a pun on ineffability which is the substance of his declaration. Ironically, what Melech actually exposes is the fact that the redemptive narrative he offers balances precariously on what is equally a spiritual and a discursive act of faith.

But is this a sign of failure? Or has Melech's narrative, to some degree, actually served a redemptive function in Jewish society? Whatever the nature of Melech's narrative legacy it is obviously highly charged, for it is with the banishment, the enforced ineffability of Melech's name, that *The Second Scroll*'s second narrative, that of Melech's nephew, begins.

From the novel's opening sentence, it is clear that the bond between Melech and his nephew depends less on the fact of their blood relation than on their shared role as chroniclers of Jewish history. Klein chooses to open his narrative sharply focussed not on individuals, but on the role of discourse in the characters' personal histories and in their relationship to one another. Although Melech and his nephew have never met, they participate

in an intimate relationship based entirely in language. It is Melech, the prodigy of Ratno, whose reputation inspires the boy at his lessons; Melech, the apostate, whose name is deemed unutterable in the boy's home; and Melech, the Bolshevik intellectual, whose revolutionary activities have become the stuff of rumour, and with whom the nephew affects a secret reconciliation through one of his uncle's publications. While the nephew has a narrative mission in his own right--to compile an anthology of Hebrew poetry that will express the ethos of the newly founded state of Israel--it is Melech's narrative that shapes and informs his own. It is through Melech's letters, through the vicarious experience of European history as both subject and chronicler, that the nephew fulfills his archetypal obligation to wander first in the desert before entering into Palestine.

While "the distance between incognito uncle and nephew unmet ... disappear[s]" over the course of the novel, the narrative family resemblance becoming increasingly apparent, it is only in Casablanca, the last stop before Palestine, that the nephew is finally drawn into a symbolic re-enactment of his uncle's narrative experience. Arriving at the offices of the Joint Distribution Committee where he expects to find his uncle, the nephew's enquiries are met with suspicion. Melech, he is informed, has been "expulsed" from the region for organizing the beggars of the mellah, the Jewish ghetto. In Rome, the nephew contents himself with evidence of his uncle's experience through the Sistine Chapel letter. Here, he moves one step closer by literally tracing his uncle's descent into the mire of

Casablanca. It will be "Le mellah des mellahs!" (71) the nephew is warned, the ghetto of all ghettos.

Moving from the intoxicating fragrance of the city to the putrescence of the ghetto, the nephew relives his uncle's dis-illusioned experience of a Renaissance masterpiece. "Beset ... by ... [a] frenzy of hands" at every turn, the second narrator is assaulted not by the sublimity of the Sistine Chapel but by the undisguised anguish of Dante's *Inferno* (74). If Melech's task was the unmasking of a dominant narrative, his nephew's task is to somehow make his way through the freshly unburied carnage.

Like Melech's passage into the "new world" of the Sistine Chapel along "the long umbilical cord of corridors" (136), the nephew too marks the beginning of his experience with a birth metaphor. But here, in a world entirely stripped of its illusions, even the act of birth is fouled by a sense of corruption:

> We entered, we slid into the mellah; literally: for the narrow lane which gaped through the gateway at the clean world was thick with offal and slime and the oozing of manifold sun-stirred putrescences (73).

Here, it is not the oppressive narrative of another the narrator sees, but the full-blown assault of history itself. "In a moment," he writes, "we knew the twentieth century had forsaken us, and we were descending into the sixteenth, the fifteenth, twelfth, eleventh centuries" (73). Melech's "whirlwind of forms" is grotesquely animated in the mellah, the chaotic vitality of the Sistine limepit parading through the streets:

> Everywhere poverty wore its hundred costumes tatters of red and tatters of yellow, rags shredded and rags pieced, a

> raiment of patches makeshifts and holes through which the naked skin showed, a kind of human badge. (73-4)

The colours of blood and skin, the "reality" of Melech's narrative, here become the stench of rotting flesh, of fish heads and rancid meat, of donkeys and open sewage. Not the "weighted animate corpus of humanity" but the smell of civilization in an advanced state of decay now binds the narrator to his situation, assuring him that although the mellah is unimaginable, it is also undeniably real. Eventually, the smell leaves the nephew in a state of acute nausea which, ironically, in this situation marks something of an epiphany, for it is while trying desperately to quell his urge to vomit that the narrator learns he is following in his uncle's footsteps. "You remind me very much of the last man I guided through the mellah," the chauffeur tells him. "He too was nauseated." Unaware of the hidden weight of the remark, he casually adds, "he actually rejected" (80). Thus the two narrators are bound together in their shared revulsion as they both physically and metaphorically reject the oppression of the mellah. But how does the nephew's experience in Casablanca affect his narrative mission? And what does the narrative relationship between uncle and nephew finally mean in terms of both cultural and narrative continuity?

In his role as questing anthologist, the nephew approaches his task in what appears to be a perfectly logical fashion. Surveying the poets associated with various aspects of the newly formed Jewish state, he systematically searches for the quintessential Hebrew voice. He is, however, continually disappointed as neither the fierce nationalism of the Sabra poets nor the absurd idealism of the poet of Tiberias, nor anything in

between, seems truly to express the ethos of Israel. Finally, the nephew does find what he has been looking for, where it is entirely unexpected:

> It was after I had returned from Tiberias to Tel Aviv to attend a literary soiree ... [that] the creative activity, archtypical, all-embracing, that hitherto I had sought in vain, at last manifested itself. Not at the soiree. In the streets, in the shops, everywhere about me. I had looked but I had not seen. It was all there all the time--the fashioning folk, anonymous and unobserved, creating word by word, phrase by phrase, the total work that when completed would stand as epic revealed! (106-7)

Specifically, what he discovers is not poetry per se, but a use of language in everyday life which attests more indisputably than poetry ever could to the vitality of "the shaping Hebrew imagination" (107):

> An insurance company ... I observed ... called itself *Sneh*--after Moses' burning bush, which had burned and burned but had not been consumed.... a dry-cleaner called his firm *Kesheth*, the rainbow, symbol of cessation of floods ... There were dozens, there were hundreds of instances of such metamorphosis and rejuvenation. Nameless authorship flourished in the streets. (107-8)

Nameless authorship indeed, for it seems that the meaning of Melech's perpetually indeterminate identity is, at last, made clear. Evidently, it is only in the transfer of narrative responsibility from the designated narrator to society at large, to the "merchants, tradesmen [and] day laborers" (107) that the quest for the narrative messiah is fulfilled. Ultimately, it is not a poet laureate but the thriving anonymous ubiquity of everyday discourse that redeems Melech's unhappy chronicle. The sustaining illusion of existence is now dispensable, for existence itself has resumed.

While the second narrative thus appears to be an improvement on the first in that the optimism it expresses is viable in ordinary social circumstances and not only in a mystical realm, it may, for several reasons, be as worthy of skepticism as Melech's Sistine Chapel letter. What Klein appears to be celebrating through the revelation of the second narrator is, to return to Scholem's suggestive formulation, the movement of the Jewish people back onto the plane of world history, a movement symbolized by the renewed viability of Hebrew as the language of everyday discourse. At best, this conclusion may be seen as a validation of the ideal of the poet-statesman that Klein had envisioned in his early essays on Herzl and Bialik and to which he had remained doggedly faithful over the intervening years. In achieving a balance between politics and art, one achieves a viability which recognizes the role of narrative in the making of historical circumstance. From this perspective, the conclusion of the nephew's narrative quest is a celebration of the triumph of democracy over tyranny evident in the democratization of discourse. Viewed more skeptically, however, the nephew's revelation, like Melech's historiographical radicalism, may be just another fashioning of aught from naught. One has only to consider the circumstances surrounding the writing of *The Second Scroll* to see that the narrative democracy Klein was promoting was, in his own life, virtually unsustainable and thus a constant source of discouragement and despair. For all its carefully wrought optimism, *The Second Scroll* was the last major work Klein published before his life as an artist came to its sudden and tragic end.

Klein's abhorrence of élitism led him in constant pursuit of true democracy whether in the political or the artistic realm. Unfortunately, what this often amounted to, in practice, was a pandering to commerce or to the public taste. neither of which recognized the notion of artistic integrity or even shared a sense of Klein's democratic ideals. While it is with a heartfelt optimism that the nephew finds his poetry in the Hebrew of everyday life, there is something queer and unsettling about the triumphant revelation of an historical epic manifesting itself in the advertising of an insurance agency and a dry cleaner.

A late essay entitled "The Usurper," written in 1949, roughly contemporary with *The Second Scroll*, takes up the nephew's theme in rather a darker mood.[3] Bearing such a strong resemblance to "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" that it is virtually a prose rendering of the poem, "The Usurper," like so much of what Klein wrote, bitterly laments the poet's fate. The essay opens with a cynical appraisal of the modernism of the little magazines, the "rebellions which overthrew nobody but their authors" (195). "The poet is no more," the little magazines say; as in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," "He has [simply] vanished from our society" (195). Once the poet's whereabouts are revealed, however, all is self-evidence and cliché: "the vanished poet [is] now in an advertising agency"; the poet has become a "copywriter" (196). The poet turned copywriter obviously corresponds to the false poets of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," the panderers who "own,/ of their dandled brightness, only the paint and board." But while Klein

[3] See LER 195-97.

seems to have regarded these poets with pity, his indignation is now fully unleashed. Here the poet turned copywriter is not merely pathetic but thoroughly depraved; he is a "debaucher of words," a "prostitute," and a "usurper." Interestingly, here, as in *The Second Scroll*, the concept of anonymity is key. Throughout the novel Klein makes a virtue of anonymity, valorizing it as essential to the high ideals of his narrative quest. Here, unfortunately, these high ideals are crudely exploited by those who use their authorial anonymity to escape answerability to the public.

Sadly, the issue of anonymity brings us back, in yet another sense, to *The Second Scroll*. There remains, after all, one final narrative to be considered, that of the author himself. It is a narrative which displays a tragic anonymity of its own.

As a journalist and committed spokesman for Zionism, much of Klein's career was consumed by the very history that finally comprised the substance of *The Second Scroll*. The novel, in fact, grew directly out of a fact-finding mission Klein undertook to Israel in 1949, first appearing embryonically as "Notebook of a Journey" in serialized form in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*.[4] Yet in addressing this material as a novelist, Klein renders himself disturbingly invisible, in spite of the novel's many autobiographical elements. It is through the novel's deliberately complex structure that the presence of the author is most strongly felt. However, Klein effectively relinquishes his claim to authorial space by attributing text, glosses, and even footnotes to Melech's nephew, the narrator. The only part of the

[4] See "Notebook of a Journey" in *Beyond Sambation* 340-83.

text to which the author lays claim are the epigraphs, one from Levi Yitschak, the legendary Rabbi of Berdichev, the other from Milton, which open *The Second Scroll*. Evidently, there was something in Klein's sense of the narrator's role which prevented him from responding, as a novelist, to the history to which he had been so obsessively responsive as a journalist and public figure. At the moment when Klein was, at last, in a position to embody his own ideal of the poet statesman, he chose instead to embody authorial anonymity in a resigned and voluntarily marginalized way.

At this point, it will come as no surprise that *The Second Scroll* has not one but two epigraphs, and even less of a surprise that they stand in dialectical opposition to one another. The epigraph from Levi Yitschak endorses a vision of narrative as authorial anonymity in its most optimistic form:

> 'Tis a Thou-song I will sing Thee--
> Thou ... Thou ... Thou ... Thou ...
> O, where shall I find Thee? And where art Thou not to be found?
> Wherever I fare -- Thou!
> Or here, or there -- Thou!
> Only Thou! None but Thou! Again, Thou! And still, Thou!

The epigraph from Milton, however, effectively negates this optimistic view:

> ... And ask a Talmudist what ails the modesty of his marginal Keri that Moses and all the prophets cannot persuade him to pronounce the textual Chetiv.

Through this epigraph, Klein himself acknowledges the hopelessness of the narrative endeavour; "The Chetiv (that which is written)," he admits, "is not often identical with the Keri (that which is read)" (qtd. in Mayne, "Symposium" 13). Thus,

having glossed the title page of his only novel with an epigraph on narrative futility, Klein, like Milton's Talmudist, could not be persuaded to speak again.

If we return now to the closing moments of *The Second Scroll* we see, in the image of the nephew standing by his uncle's grave, not just two but all three narrators re-united in the tragedy of Melech's violent death. If there is any consolation to be had, it is the consolation of intoning the prayer for the dead and providing a decent burial for Melech, for Melech's courageous narrative, and for the tradition to which they both are tied. Whether we consider the task of the Jewish narrator within the confines of this novel, or in the equally tragic circumstances of Klein's life, the narrator is central only in moments of crisis. Otherwise, he lives inside the margins. The narrative is written, the narrator consumed.

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