

# Sabotaging Utopia

## Politics and the Artist in A.M. Klein's *The Bells of Sobor Spasitula*

The short story "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" seems to have been the last creative work that A.M. Klein finished before his fall into the seventeen-year period of mental illness, isolation, and silence that lasted until his death.<sup>1</sup> Completed in 1955, this text is perhaps Klein's bleakest articulation of the despair which led him to abandon his art. "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" recounts the fate of Terpetoff, a brilliant composer who is persecuted in the early years of the Soviet revolution. The story's central concern is the complex relationship between the artist and his community, an issue that preoccupied Klein throughout his career. By the early 1950s, Klein's previously idealistic view of the artist as one who has the power to transform "his fragmented and alienated society into . . . a genuine, unified community" (Pollock, *The Story* 4) had darkened considerably. The pessimism of "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" is a reflection of Klein's understanding of his own situation as both an artist and a Jew. The story indirectly engages the debate among world Jewry concerning the validity of the Diaspora following the formation of the state of Israel. Klein perceived the dismissal of the Diaspora endorsed by some Zionists as an attack on himself and his artistic project, and his depiction of Russia's revolutionary regime is a tacit critique of anti-Diaspora ideology. By suggesting a parallel between Marxist and Zionist revolutions, "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" betrays Klein's distress over the doctrinaire politics of self-styled utopias.

In "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula," as in much of Klein's late fiction, the tension between the individual (who is often an artist) and his socio-political

context is manifested in the ominous presence of Russian Marxism.<sup>2</sup> Part of the reason for Klein's interest in Russia is his engagement with contemporary politics. As M.W. Steinberg writes, "Klein's dislike for the totalitarian aspects of Soviet communism and his fear of the regimentation of mind and body involved in the attempt to establish a monolithic society . . . found renewed expression in the post-war era not only in editorials but in his fiction as well" (*Stories* xvi-xvii). Klein's portrait of Russia, however, is a largely subjective landscape, more tropological than topographical. In part a reaction to Stalin's regime, the Russian stories also betray Klein's ambivalence towards his own immediate and extended Jewish community. It is through the setting of Russia that Klein expresses his concern about politics in the state of Israel. "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" explores Klein's alienation from Israel by drawing a subtle analogy between the Soviet regime's enforced uniformity and the intolerance of artistic freedom that he perceived in some aspects of Zionism, particularly in anti-Diaspora ideology. While never directly equating Stalinist Russia and the state of Israel, in "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" Klein displaces his misgivings about the newly created state of Israel onto the unequivocally threatening setting of Russia.

In the late 1940s, Jews around the globe were re-evaluating the meaning of the Diaspora in a world where a Jewish homeland was a reality, and the horrors of the Holocaust led many to dismiss the possibility of leading an authentic and safe Jewish life in any country but Israel. With the creation of Israel, some Zionists saw the potential for a solidarity which they felt the Diaspora undermined. The movement that argued that the existence of Israel negated the validity of Diaspora life caused Klein pain at the deepest level of his being. Although he spent most of his life as an active Zionist, he was at heart a Diaspora Jew who "feared and opposed the narrow, Diaspora-negating chauvinism that he . . . saw developing in Israel" (Caplan 177). Klein's reaction against Zionists who dismissed the ongoing importance of the Diaspora was intensified by the way in which anti-Diaspora ideology exacerbated the growing sense of alienation which he felt from his community. Like Spinoza in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," Klein was often frustrated with those he characterized as "the paunchy sons of Abraham" (CP 208), who valued orthodoxy and conformity over creativity and intellectual innovation. For Klein, the move to sacrifice the diversity of the Diaspora for the unity of the state of Israel may have been an extreme example of the pressure that he felt to fit into a community that did not understand him.

The implicit commentary on Israel in Klein's Russian fiction is illuminated by his responses to anti-Diaspora ideology in his journalism. He published two major articles about the negation of the Diaspora: "The Dangers of Success" (March 1949) and "In Praise of the Diaspora: An Undelivered Memorial Address" (January-February 1953).<sup>3</sup> Although it has received less attention than "In Praise of the Diaspora," "The Dangers of Success" is in some ways a more revealing response to anti-Diaspora ideology, particularly in its emphasis on the political repression of artistic freedom. At times, the article's diction is surprisingly harsh. Klein laments that opposition to the Diaspora "seeks to achieve with a theoretical dictum what all the tyrants of all the ages failed to achieve with fire and sword, namely, the nullification of Diaspora Jewry" (BS 333). Linked with the violent imagery of "fire and sword," the comparison of negationist Zionists to "tyrants" hints that the "nullification of Diaspora Jewry" will resemble a party purge.<sup>4</sup> In "The Dangers of Success" Klein condemns the exclusionary dogma which he sees in the anti-Diaspora ideology that would achieve cultural oneness through force instead of harmony. In Klein's view, the urge for ideological uniformity ultimately causes fragmentation, and thus the anti-Diaspora movement fosters "an unreasoned . . . purely doctrinaire discord" among world Jewry (BS 333). Pollock argues that much of Klein's work seeks to unite society through shared tradition, creating "a vision of the One in the Many" (*The Story* 3). Instead of Klein's ideal of a metaphysical unity which rises out of diversity (the One *in* the Many), the enemies of the Diaspora are divisive in their efforts for political totalization (the One *or* the Many).

Klein reacts against the demand for ideological uniformity as an artist as well as a Diaspora Jew, for the negation of the Diaspora entails the negation of his vision of the poet. His view of the heroic poet as a marginal or absent figure who nevertheless works for unity is consonant with his own situation as a Diaspora Jew fighting for Israel while in Montreal.<sup>5</sup> In "The Dangers of Success," Klein feels that opponents of the Diaspora have betrayed him as a poet by using the Zionist convictions in his earlier work against him. He realizes that his status as a poet and a public figure invests his writing with an authority that can be appropriated. He admits that

'the negators' [of the Diaspora] can adduce many texts—including some from my own writings—to prove how superior *aretz* ['the land,' or Israel] is to *chutz l'aretz* ['outside the land,' or the Diaspora]—but such texts are essential to the culture of a people in exile. It is through such texts that it lives until the day of reintegration. But once reintegrated—such texts are but literature. (BS 334)

With his insistence that the creation of the state of Israel frees readers to approach his writing as “but literature,” Klein attempts to reappropriate his work from those who interpret art ideologically. He suggests that art, even if created with a political goal in mind, can transcend its immediate political context. Unfortunately, Klein may have harboured doubts about the compatibility of artistic nuance and political commitment stronger than those expressed in “The Dangers of Success,” for in “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula,” the trope of the betrayed artist whose work is turned against him is played out in full.

“The Dangers of Success” is particularly relevant to “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” in the way it draws upon analogies to other countries to clarify its position. Klein uses the Irish situation as a template for his own: “There are many parallels to be drawn between the Hebrew Renaissance and the Irish one; but one parallel must be carefully avoided; the Yishuv [Jews who settled in Israel before the establishment of the state] must not become *Sinn Fein*—‘ourselves alone’ is not a proper slogan for those who cherish a concern for ‘*klal Yisrael*’ [the whole community of the Jewry]” (BS 334). This sentiment appears again in *The Second Scroll*, where Klein writes that fiercely nationalistic Israeli poets “invariably referred to themselves as *Anachnu* (Us)—unhappy reminiscence of *nous autres, nos otros, sinn fein*—xenophobic antonym to *Haim* (Them). Not Israelis did they style themselves, but Canaanites—more aboriginal than the aborigines! And again and again they slipped into their secondary theme—*shlilath hagaluth*—the negation of the Diaspora” (79).

This argument does more than simply indicate similarities between different types of nationalism. Klein’s analysis through analogy indicates his need to find another community onto which he can displace observations about his own, a strategy many have seen in *The Rocking Chair*. Something prevented Klein from articulating his frustrations with negationist Zionism in his short fiction—perhaps a knowledge that his comments could be appropriated by anti-Semites and used against the young country. Klein needed a new setting. In a letter to *Poetry* magazine dated 22 July 1946, he describes the similarities between the Jewish and French-Canadian communities, and writes, “[I] am only travelling incognito, disguised as a Frenchman” (quoted in Pollock, *The Story* 179). In “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” we see Klein similarly disguised, bearing a passport “in cyrillic print” (*Stories* 275).

Although it takes place in the years immediately preceding and following the Russian revolution of 1917, “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” is decidedly

Stalinesque in its atmosphere. It is narrated by Arkady Mikailovich, a Russian in Paris who emigrated after the revolution. He tells the story of his friend Terpetoff, a composer who is persecuted as an enemy of the revolutionary regime because of his non-partisan art. Terpetoff's problems begin when, after the revolution, one of his compositions, which was originally called "Opus No. 13," is retitled "Overture Proletarian" by an acquaintance, and is performed publicly. It is enthusiastically reviewed by Krasnovitch, an old and mysterious acquaintance of Arkady Mikailovich and Terpetoff, who praises "Overture Proletarian" as a masterpiece of Marxist dialectics. Krasnovitch soon learns that the piece was written without any political intent, and reports Terpetoff to the Commissar of Culture, who pressures Terpetoff to compose music that is overtly political. After being blackmailed with information about his trysts in the countryside with a peasant woman named Evdokia, Terpetoff agrees to the Commissar's demands. All of Moscow is shocked when Terpetoff climbs the belltower of the church of Sobor Spasitula ("Cathedral of the Saviour") and sounds the bell with a hammer. Authorities are notified, and Terpetoff is shot dead. In a motif reminiscent of, and perhaps derived from, Orwell's 1984, the incident is erased from official record.<sup>6</sup>

In order to read the commentary on negationist Zionism implicit in "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula," we must examine the way in which Terpetoff functions as a conflation of the persecuted artist and the negated Diaspora Jew. The translation of Terpetoff's name certainly captures Klein's feelings of artistic and political malaise during the mid-1950s: "Terpetoff" seems to be derived from the Russian word "терпеть" (v. impf. 'terpet' [Garfield 354]), which translates as "to suffer" or "to endure." Through Terpetoff, Klein attempts to find a solution to the conflict between artistic freedom and repressive party solidarity described in "The Dangers of Success." Of crucial importance is the fact that Terpetoff is political without being partisan. His support for the revolution affirms Klein's ideal of a political stance not dictated by ideology: Terpetoff "had arrived at [his revolutionary sympathies] . . . not through some doctrinaire syllogism, but emotionally, through his experience, his personality" (291). This is also a good description of Klein's own Zionism.

The parallel between Terpetoff's ideal of Diaspora Jewry with Klein's is strengthened when we examine the similarity of Terpetoff's aesthetic stance with that suggested in "The Dangers of Success." Although he is friendly

with the peasants outside Moscow and is sympathetic to the revolution, Terpetoff's politics do not determine the nature of his art; he believes that art is "a thing apart, *au dessus de la bataille* [Fr. 'outside or beyond the battle']" (279). Terpetoff embodies Klein's insistence that artistic meaning not be contained in a single political context. Klein's experience with the ideological appropriation of words described in "The Dangers of Success" may have led to Terpetoff's wariness of commentary; the composer charges that "No more should the listening to music be made a basis for annotation . . . One doesn't look at a great painting to deduce the moral of an anecdote" (281). For Terpetoff, interpretive commentary is ultimately divisive, and only abstract art is truly inclusive. Indeed, abstract music unites its audience through a morality that transcends political divisions; Terpetoff claims that "To listen to music . . . is to perform a rite of communion (281). While Terpetoff supports the revolution, it is through his art that he hopes to make his real contribution by uniting a community of listeners.

Terpetoff also takes on Diasporic connotations when contextualized in the larger body of Klein's work. Pollock notes that "whenever [Klein] wants to evoke a sense of continuity and tradition . . . [he uses] the motif of a young child being escorted by a loving and protective male adult, generally an uncle or father or teacher" (1994 46). Terpetoff is such an escort. He is not related to Arkady Mikailovich (although at one point he is likened to "a tolerant older brother"[292]), but he is a distinctly avuncular presence. In the only sustained study of "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula," Margaret Broad observes that Terpetoff resembles *The Second Scroll's* Uncle Melech, pointing out that in both "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" and *The Second Scroll* "the narrator is fifteen years the junior of the artist" (116). However, a better parallel is to be found in "In Praise of the Diaspora." In this essay, Klein personifies the Diaspora as his newly deceased Uncle Galuth (Heb. 'exile'), a benign figure who represents the resilience, achievement, and diversity of Diaspora Jewry. In Uncle Galuth Klein celebrates the traversing of both geographic and interpretive latitudes—he is "*the philosopher peripatetic*" (BS 470). Uncle Galuth embodies the link between the Diaspora and artistic freedom suggested by Morris Grossman: "[exile] has meant possibility, challenge, venture-someness . . . Alienation, whether from self or from tribal brethren, contributes to intellectual liberation and psychological emancipation" (76). When read against "In Praise of the Diaspora," Terpetoff's execution seems to be a dramatization of the death of Uncle Galuth and the creativity that he signifies.

The story of the misunderstood artist is one that Klein told repeatedly over his career. Indeed, in some senses “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” conforms to a pattern of characterization present in texts such as “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens,” “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” and *The Second Scroll* through its central configuration of personae: the artist, the demagogue, and the speaker. Obviously, the artist figure is Terpetoff, who occupies a centrality similar to that of Uncle Melech, the artist in “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” and Spinoza (“Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens”). By triangulating Terpetoff with the characters of Krasnovitch and Arkady Mikailovich, we can see how “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” suggests an upsetting connection between the artist’s enemies and allies. Klein’s demagogue is the embodiment of the forces hostile to the poet. Pollock notes that much of Klein’s work involves the conflict between the “real poet [who] acknowledges the fact of his isolation . . . [and] retreats within himself as part of a process of self discovery” and the demagogue, “who . . . [takes] the place of the true poet, exploiting, in a spirit of destruction rather than creation, society’s yearning for wholeness” (*The Story* 4),<sup>7</sup> and uses as examples Shabbathai Zvi (“Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens”) and Camillien Houde (“Political Meeting”). The character who would seem to occupy this role is Krasnovitch, the literary critic who imposes his commentary on Terpetoff’s music and betrays him to the revolutionary authorities. Krasnovitch is introduced immediately after Terpetoff, and Arkady Mikailovich himself identifies them as opposites: “Unlike Krasnovitch, our literary editor from whose sanctum only categorical imperatives issued, Terpetoff was to us, *les jeunes*, tolerant and indulgent” (278). Even Krasnovitch’s name distinguishes him from Terpetoff. It is based on the Russian word “красный” (adj. ‘krasnyi’ [Garfield 322]), and translates as “son of redness.” As the narrative continues we see that in his veins runs pure ideology.

If we accept that texts such as “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens” and “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” protest the way society misunderstands creative thinkers, then Klein’s narrative strategy seems somewhat paradoxical, for these artists rarely tell their own stories. Klein seldom lets his artists speak directly in the first-person voice. Usually the experience of the artist is filtered through a separate narrator, often a friend or a sympathetic persona. In this sense, Arkady Mikailovich performs a similar function to that of Uncle Melech’s nephew, the speaker of *The Second Scroll*. Broad notes that the narrative strategies of the two texts

corresponds, and that by telling Terpetoff's story, Arkady Mikailovich, like Melech's nephew, acts as an agent to "probe the state of art and the plight of other artists in other times and places" (115). However, we shall see that the relationship between Terpetoff and Arkady Mikailovich is a subtle but important problematic. Although she interprets the bond between narrator and artist as a harmonious one, Broad admits that the narrative voice knows the poet "from the outside looking in" (115). Indeed, Arkady Mikailovich's understanding of Terpetoff is far from perfect and depicts a deterioration rather than a continuation of the connection between Melech and his nephew.

"The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" gives us strong hints that despite the genuine sadness that he feels over the death of his friend, Arkady Mikailovich's perspective on Terpetoff is questionable. Arkady Mikailovich's insensitivity to Terpetoff's aesthetic leads him to behave in a similar fashion to those who are eventually responsible for his demise. When one remembers Klein's fear of artistic appropriation as discussed in "The Dangers of Success," the ostensibly friendly character of Arkady Mikailovich seems uncomfortably similar to Krasnovitch. The roles of Arkady Mikailovich and Krasnovitch are collapsed through their reaction to Terpetoff's work. Their feelings about Terpetoff may be very different, but neither Arkady Mikailovich nor Krasnovitch can resist the impulse to impose a narrative on Terpetoff's music.

Though Arkady Mikailovich is familiar with his friend's aesthetic of abstraction, he instinctively glosses "Opus No. 13": "[Terpetoff] was fated always to have the critics verbalize his music—even I, whom he tried to persuade to the beauty of pure sound, never quite disembarassed myself of the habit of translating, as he called it, harmony into grammar" (281). Such comments underscore the differences between Arkady Mikailovich and Terpetoff and thus make the reader seriously question Arkady Mikailovich's objectivity as a narrator. However loyal, he cannot resist seeing a narrative in a work meant to be abstract:

Though Terpetoff had designated his work by a mere number (again his predilection for the abstract), the melodies of which it was composed were so identifiable, so pregnant with association, that their sequence alone did in fact seem to tell a story,—so much so that Strynenko [a friend of Terpetoff's] ventured, amidst the non-committal silence of the composer, to suggest a more descriptive title. He would call it . . . *Prelude to the Dormition of the Little Mother*. It was, I thought as I followed the performance, a most apt title. (287)

Arkady Mikailovich's commentary, and the re-titling of "Opus No. 13," recalls the appropriation of art described in "The Dangers of Success." Indeed,



Terpetoff's "non-committal silence" following Arkady Mikailovich's gloss bespeaks more anguish than any of his friends know.<sup>8</sup>

The religious nature of the commentary on "Opus No. 13" that Arkady Mikailovich expounds is less important than the fact that he must create a commentary at all. Klein uses Arkady Mikailovich's musical appreciation to ironize the relationship between the two men. Arkady Mikailovich claims that though it defies Terpetoff's aesthetic, his commentary on "Opus No. 13" is a valid musical interpretation that "opened for[him] yet another window onto [Terpetoff's] temperament" (289). Arkady Mikailovich deludes himself; his impulse to gloss suggests a lack of real communication with Terpetoff. It is ironic that, when he condemns the revolution as "the mammoth mob . . . stampeding over everything that's delicate and different!" (291), Arkady Mikailovich may be inadvertently describing his own interpretive process. Indeed, Klein's use of narrative voice seems to prophesy his own fate. Because the narrative springs solely from Arkady Mikailovich's ironized point of view, Klein denies his readers any clear understanding of Terpetoff's opinion of those around him. Already the artist is receding before his fictional and actual audiences.

In addition to the similarity of their commentaries, the names "Arkady Mikailovich" and "Krasnovitch" suggest that the two characters are not so different. Broad points out that Arkady Mikailovich's name is built around Klein's first two initials (116). However, she fails to mention that the figure of Krasnovitch also represents part of Klein; he complements Arkady Mikailovich by bearing the first initial of Klein's last name. Although the detail is not important to the plot, Klein identifies Krasnovitch as a poet who even publishes reviews under "K." That he is also Klein seems of little doubt. By giving the characters who misgloss Terpetoff's work his own initials, Klein seems to be hinting at a tension within himself. A reader would expect Terpetoff, the idealized artist, to be directly identified with Klein, and the fact that Klein inscribes himself into a faulty narrator and worse, a treacherous Marxist, hints at an profound authorial self-division. Klein's presence in "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" is a microcosm of revolutionary Russia—both are "torn by inner cramps" (294).

Because Arkady Mikailovich is a member of the bourgeoisie and Krasnovitch a revolutionary, the multiple readings of "Overture Proletarian" makes us realize that misglossing is not confined to any one ideology. However, while Arkady Mikailovich's reading alienates Terpetoff, Krasnovitch is

an agent for a political ideology that actively threatens the freedom of artists. The ideological demands that Krasnovitch and the revolutionary regime make of art are too exacting to be resolved dialectically, and Terpetoff's artistic project is negated by the forces of political upheaval. Like Klein himself, Terpetoff is caught in the collision between art and political solidarity.

The pessimistic view of the artist's role in society suggested by the totalizing commentaries on Terpetoff's work is made even more grim by the catalyst of history. "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" is Klein's bleakest statement about art's vulnerability to the forces of history. In "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula," the "golem of history" succumbs to the "Russian Epilepsy" (294) of violence and chaos. Arkady Mikailovich laments "Woe to him who stepped into the radii of those robot flailing limbs! . . . From October to the following March, the body of my country, torn by inner cramps, the clonic spasms of intraparty conflict, turned and twisted and rolled in its convulsions" (294). In addition to their obvious significance as signs of neurological disfunction, epileptic seizures are a motif Klein uses to express the chaos which prevents the continuity of tradition and defies the orderly unfolding of history. In "The Spinning Wheel," Klein uses the spinning wheel as a symbol of unifying tradition, and contrasts it with the "epileptic loom and mad factory" (*CP* 660) which imitate the action of the wheel in a parody made grotesque by the drive for commercial profit. Even more chilling is "The Bible Manuscripts," in which false scribes' "fingers' epilepsy" (*LER* 136) miscopy the Torah. By mistranscribing, they consecrate a faulty tradition and pass it on into history. The miscopied scrolls are not a reliable basis for beliefs and morals, and an investigation of their validity reveals the tenuous bond between Scripture and the divine revelations which they allegedly record and explain. The possibility that Scripture is without divine authority causes every aspect of existence to convulse; it "sends earthquakes under the world's foundations. The dynasties tremble. The question distils poison in the brain—the moralists shake in a chill, the philosophers go mad" (*LER* 143).

The Revolution reveals the vulnerability of idealism to history. The noble ideals of class equality quickly give way to "the raucous stertor of tyranny" (295). In the wake of revolution, rituals symbolizing order are corrupted into parodies: "the porter at our door presided one day over a meeting of his soviet, at my father's board-table, using his whiskbroom for gavel" (295). The depiction of the revolution echoes Klein's reaction to the certain aspects of the state of Israel, as he criticizes the institutionalization of a belief which he still holds

dear. For Arkady Mikailovich, there is a great schism between his idealized homeland and its political manifestation. Russia has become for him “metaphysical, a blurred concept ... something out of time and out of geography” (275). The Revolutionary government that forces him to flee affects the way he remembers his homeland: Russia’s “so welcome sky is still presided over by a moon of a bloated Tartar cast, a Malenkov of a moon, cold, unsmiling, inhospitable” (276).<sup>9</sup> Malenkov’s mention indicates Arkady Mikailovich’s despair about the future of his homeland; Tom Marshall notes that Klein often uses the moon as “an indicator of his mood and the focus of his poetic universe” (*Multiple* 26). A “Malenkov of a moon” is therefore particularly upsetting because the “focus of [Klein’s] poetic universe” is a bureaucrat who negates poetry.

The revolution is an artistic crisis as well as a political one; it also undoes some of Klein’s most consolatory themes, suggesting a loss of faith in the power of art. As the political situation in “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” gets worse and worse, the text becomes ironically self-referential.<sup>10</sup> For example, in the aftermath of the revolution, the escort motif breaks down. Terpetoff refuses to accompany Arkady Mikailovich when he flees Russia, leaving his young friend with a sense of abandonment. Terpetoff ceases to be a nurturing presence; Arkady Mikailovich confesses that he “felt older than [Terpetoff], and indeed. . . never again felt younger than him” (295). If read back into Klein’s earlier work, Arkady Mikailovich’s disenchantment with Terpetoff indicates Klein’s growing doubt about the possibility of finding strength and identity through tradition.

When he returns to Moscow two years after having fled with his family, Arkady Mikailovich begins to search for Terpetoff. His quest echoes *The Second Scroll’s* vain pursuit of Uncle Melech. At first, Terpetoff is nowhere to be found: “They knew nobody by that name. I wandered the streets” (297). However, the two searches yield very different results. Leon Edel complained to Klein of his tantalized frustration with the ever-elusive Melech. He “told Klein that he had made [him] . . . eager to meet Melech . . . and [he] felt frustrated. [Melech] is a fabulous character unseen” (“Marginal” 23). It is Melech’s absence that allows him to take on a mythic significance which his human presence could only diminish.<sup>11</sup> The degradation of a potentially legendary persona is precisely what happens in Terpetoff’s case. He is not allowed to become a hero; when Arkady Mikailovich contacts Terpetoff, his former mentor is a drunkard who earns his living playing music at weddings. Unlike Melech, Terpetoff is human, all too human.

Arkady Mikailovich ultimately finds Terpetoff by spotting a poster advertising a performance of a Terpetoff composition called "Overture Proletarian" by "The People's Orchestra" (297). He immediately wonders if Terpetoff has aligned himself with the ideology of the revolution, evoking scenes in *The Second Scroll* where Melech shocks his family by adopting and rejecting various ideologies. But Melech has a different type of agency; while he is free to experiment, Terpetoff is persecuted and powerless. Terpetoff is less able to choose his politics than politics are able to choose him. In "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," it is the poets seeking fame who voluntarily become affiliated with politics ("[who] join party and wear pins, now have a message / an ear, and the convention-hall's regard" [CP 637]). Now, however, dogma is an imperative, not a choice. The artist is lucky if allowed to remain landscape.

Terpetoff's composition draws unwanted attention from Krasnovitch, who immediately turns the composer in when the facts behind "Opus No. 13 / Overture Proletarian" emerge. Krasnovitch's superiors are creatures of dogma, and they are the true demagogues of "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula." However, a comparison with earlier demagogues reveals the extent to which Klein's view of society has darkened. Often in his career Klein has suggested parallels between the poet and the demagogue; Pollock notes that in "Political Meeting," Klein "is interested in exploring the strength of [the demagogic Orator's, in this case Camillien Houde's,] appeal, and, through exploring it, he discovers that he himself is not immune to it, whatever he may think of the Orator's ultimate aims" ("Sunflower Seeds" 48). However, in the political landscape of "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula," the artist and the demagogue are polarized. Houde's success may have depended on his oratorical skills of persuasion and a sense of identification with his audience, but the power of the post-revolutionary demagogue is maintained through brute force. Demagoguery does not depend on individual charisma—it has been institutionalized.

"The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" contains two demagogues in addition to Krasnovitch: the Commissar of Culture and the Commissar of Religious Property. That neither is given a personality or distinguishing characteristics could be used as proof of Klein's inability to create convincing fictional characters. However, I believe that through the Commissars, Klein is commenting on the nature of a totalitarian bureaucracy which erases individuality while increasing, for a small elite, power over others. The conflation of power and anonymity is a defining feature of totalitarian regimes. Arendt claims that "[n]othing is more characteristic of the totalitarian movements

. . . and of the quality of fame of their leaders . . . than the startling swiftness with which they are forgotten and the startling ease with which they can be replaced” (305). The Commissars of Culture and of Religious Property are virtually interchangeable, and they even share an idiosyncratic, and telling, oddity of speech. The Commissar of Culture taunts Terpetoff about his relationship with Evdokia, a peasant woman, and demands “Ate her nice big *de-li-cate* cucumbers, didn’t you?” (306, italics mine).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the Commissar of Religious Property cries “*Scan-dal-ous!* . . . he’s alerting a counter-revolution!” (307, italics mine). Both men rend, or, to use Kleinian terms, dis-member language and the community it creates.

When interrogating Terpetoff (a meeting at which Krasnovitch sits and gloats), the Commissar of Culture defines the function of the revolutionary artist: “To explain, using your own experience as object lesson, what are the rules which govern the creation of proletarian art”(305).<sup>13</sup> At this Terpetoff bristles with an indignation similar to that expressed in “The Dangers of Success”:

Is this, then, your idea of cultural freedom? . . . Do you think it compatible with civilized notions concerning the dignity of art that the composer should be compelled to recant his staff-notation . . . simply because a politician wants to listen to music politically? You are trying to reduce us to less than persons! (305)

In Terpetoff’s confrontation with the Commissars, Klein vents all of his frustration with those who demand that party ideology be reflected in art. The idea that Terpetoff’s abstract music could be politically subversive seems grotesque because he works to create a community of listeners that transcends political divisions. But the Commissars are unaware of art’s capacity to create a meaningful, positive solidarity, and see Terpetoff’s art only in terms of political utility. Just as the bells of Moscow’s churches are “melted down for cannon” (296), the beauty of Terpetoff’s music is redeployed as ideological weaponry.

An important result of Terpetoff’s resistance to doctrine is his tolerance of political difference. Klein uses this aspect of Terpetoff’s personality to make an implicit critique of the intolerance he sees in negationist Zionism. Though their politics differ, Terpetoff and Arkady Mikailovich can remain friends. Early in “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula,” Terpetoff good-naturedly teases him for his bourgeois sensibilities. When Terpetoff jokingly says to Arkady Mikailovich—whose first name may be an ironic echo of the idyllic pastoral world of Arcadia—that “You are sabotaging utopia!” (292), he

acknowledges political difference with a spirit of humour. However, Terpetoff himself is subjected to a similar accusation that draws in sharp relief the incompatibility of artistic tolerance and ideological totalization. Although the revolution succeeds, and although Terpetoff unofficially supports it, the revolutionary regime persecutes him, making demands for loyalty much like those Klein felt were being made by Israel. Krasnovitch angrily asks “What good was it to command the loyalty of the workers and the farmers when, in the more influential domains of action, the objectives of the Government were either passively frustrated or intentionally sabotaged by the intellectuals?” (304). Klein felt his insistence on artistic autonomy, and the support of the Diaspora that such freedom allowed, made him a saboteur in the eyes of negationist Zionists. But ideological conformity was a sacrifice that he was unwilling to make, even for a cause in which he believed as much as Israel.

The negation of the Diaspora exacerbated Klein’s growing anxiety over the tenuous position of the artist. Indeed, anti-Diaspora ideology seems to have reinforced the feelings of paranoia that signalled the beginnings of Klein’s mental illness, heightening his fears that a Zionist utopia could come to resemble the totalitarian regime masquerading as a communist utopia.<sup>14</sup> Earlier in the narrative, when reminiscing about Russia’s churches, Arkady Mikailovich feels a rush of belonging which he expresses using images of flowers. He floridly says,

O forty times forty churches of Moscow, burgeoning with turrets and belfries—stamens of ghostly pollen!—germinant with your cones of divine balsam, fructuous with domes! O cupolas in quincunx, silvered, gilded, gala with green of the apple-leaf, red of the cherry, the hyacinth’s blue—you are still my horizon! You are still my hope, ovoids of resurrection, bright-hued and Easter, rainbow of a second covenant! (277)

Pollock observes that “imagery of flowers, especially in bunches, occurs whenever Klein perceives the vision of the One in the Many with the greatest intensity” (“Sunflower Seeds” 52). Arkady Mikailovich’s words seem to bear this observation out. However, later in “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” the images that make up Arkady Mikailovich’s reverie are ironically subverted. Arkady Mikailovich’s desire for an absolute feeling of belonging is, by the end of the story, shown to be an instinct which gives rise to dangerous movements. Accordingly, Terpetoff uses images that qualify Arkady Mikailovich’s vision of unity. Terpetoff expresses the importance of tolerance and diversity by asking Arkady Mikailovich to “Imagine how unbearable life would be if everything about us was always good, always beautiful! Imagine

if one woke every morning to the odour of the rose, breakfasted and dined on its petals, went clothed in the fragrance of its leaves . . . imagine—what a stink life would be!” (283-84). When infused with exclusive nationalism, the scent of the rose can become the “body-odour of race” (CP 658).

Terpetoff’s last “composition” is a heroic yet futile protest against the new revolutionary regime. When he climbs to the top of Sobor Spasitula, his actions resemble those of the poet in “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” who “walk[s] upon roofs and window-sills and def[ies] / the gape of gravity” (CP 638). However, Terpetoff’s ascension does not symbolize artistic ambition. Instead, Terpetoff is chased there by societal hostility. He is a unifying, albeit anonymous, force:

all eyes turned toward the domes of the Cathedral of the Saviour. But from the circular boulevards which run like the rings of some great and ancient oak about Moscow’s central core . . . only the swinging outline of the bell was to be descried. It was about the church itself that the true ovation to Terpetoff’s last concert was given. (307)

Terpetoff’s “true ovation,” of course, is gunfire. By likening “circular boulevards” to “the rings of some great . . . oak,” Klein echoes the last stanza of “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” which turns a “zero” into a “rich garland” (CP 639). D.M.R. Bentley states that this garland is a “perfect circle . . . a sign of psychic order and spiritual stability” (39). In “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula,” Klein mocks his previous work, emptying out this “garland” or “halo” into a void. Furthermore, the violence which takes place at Sobor Spasitula implies that the “ancient oak” that is Moscow is rotting at the centre.

The story’s climax is a moment of artistic crisis, where Terpetoff’s aesthetic is simultaneously fulfilled and negated. On one level, sounding the bell is simply a rebellious way to get attention. In another sense, it is a musical composition which absolutely resists glossing. Arkady Mikailovich insists that “Terpetoff was composing an *opus*, not a mere exercise in tintinnabulation” (307). However, Terpetoff’s “composition” is both the epitome of abstract art and its parody. Rather than being a force for order, Terpetoff’s work rings “wildly, furiously, in random peals” (307). Klein seems to suggest that while it is possible to create a purely abstract piece of music, such art is, to most, indistinguishable from mere noise. Furthermore, the community of listeners that Terpetoff’s composition creates enjoys only a momentary feeling of unity, which is based on curiosity, not harmony.

As with Uncle Galuth’s, there is nothing generative about Terpetoff’s

murder; it suggests termination rather than closure. Broad tries to find consolatory results in Terpetoff's death, and claims that it is proof that "[the artist's] personal survival is not important; what matters is the survival of cultural freedom, and this may require the sacrifice of the artist" (127). Her optimistic interpretation leads her to emphasize the Messianic overtones of Terpetoff's fall. It is true that he falls from the "Cathedral of the Saviour," and that he is described as a "living ikon" (307), but Terpetoff's fall is anything but redemptive. While Melech's death may have been a meaningful sacrifice, Terpetoff's is only a cruel parody of it. His fall dislodges a stone which strikes the Commissar of Religious Property, causing a scar "the shape and size of aminim" (308), and Broad claims that this injury "stands for the removal from office of at least one man who would suppress freedom" (129). However, the text does not indicate that the scar is a particularly grave wound. Furthermore, the indistinguishability of the two Commissars suggests that the Commissar of Religious Property can easily be replaced. Broad neglects to emphasize that Sobor Spasitula is razed to make room for the stronghold of the demagogue, "some bureaucrat erection" (278), which punningly recalls the "teated domes and . . . phalloi of minarets" of the evil city of Casablanca (SS 69). Most importantly, Terpetoff is "willfully unremembered" (308) by the community he has tried to unite through his art. Arkady Mikailovich explicitly states that "thousands heard [the ringing of the bells] with me, but one will search in vain, in the files of contemporary newspapers, or in the records of Marxist history, for a report of Terpetoff's fatal demonstration" (307-08). Terpetoff's exclusion from official history recalls Klein's anguish at Israel's dismissal of the legacy of the Diaspora as detailed in "In Praise of the Diaspora:" "we despise [the Diaspora], we abhor its memory, we would raze it from recollection, . . . bury it in the desert places of the mind, there where no thought ever passes" (BS 465). For Klein, the forces which persecute Terpetoff resemble those responsible for the negation of the Diaspora. Thus, for one awful moment, we see the shadow of Uncle Galuth falling alongside Terpetoff.<sup>15</sup>

The crime of "sabotaging utopia" with which Terpetoff is charged has rich personal implications for Klein as both a Diaspora Jew and an artist. In so far as "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" is an implicit protest against the utopian vision of negationist Zionism, the charge of "sabotaging utopia" can be made against Klein as easily as Terpetoff. Of course, Klein suggests that the real crime of "sabotaging utopia" is perpetrated by the imposition of dogma by political authorities, a betrayal of the promise of the Soviet and



the Zionist states. But the phrase also applies to Klein's retroactive subversion of his earlier, idealistic vision of the artist in society. An act of sabotage did take place in the mid-1950's, for the pressure that Klein felt to produce ideological art sabotaged his faith in his community to appreciate any meaningful contribution his art could make.

The conclusion of "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" is particularly grim when we realize that Terpetoff's final fall has been rehearsed as a fortunate fall in earlier texts. Just as the poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" "zoom[s] to zenith" (*CP* 636) before plunging to "the bottom of the sea" (*CP* 639), Terpetoff rises to the top of Sobor Spasitula before falling to earth. Even more resonant is Joseph's treatment by his brothers in "The Bible's Archetypal Poet," in which Klein laments "As if they were reading an indictment, [Joseph's brothers] in hatred proclaimed him dreamer. They flung him into a pit—he who in his mind had elevated himself to the highest of the sun and the moon now lay lower than the level of the earth" (*LER* 145). However, Terpetoff's fall imposes an ironic commentary on the paradoxes of these earlier texts. Joseph is raised from the pit, and he goes on to use his artistic vision to secure a position of power and respect. And, while the artist in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" does not surface, he is still alive and vital, "shin[ing] / like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea" (*CP* 639). Terpetoff's death, however, is not a generative sacrifice but a humiliating political execution. The poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" may someday rise, but Terpetoff cannot. And, as we know from sad hindsight, the creator of both these artists would not rise again.

## NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Professor Tracy Ware for his support and assistance in the preparation of this article, as well as Professors Zailig Pollock and Elizabeth Popham for the generosity with which they shared their unpublished work.
- 2 For other relevant examples of Marxism in the late work, see characters such as Settano in *The Second Scroll* and Djz, a Marxist literary theorist, in "And the Mome Raths Outgrabe," as well as the short story "Letter from Afar," which concerns a victim of a Stalinist purge. Some of Klein's work involving Russia has not yet been published. See *That Walks Like a Man* (National Archives MS3802-4441), a novel about Igor Gouzenko's defection, and "The Icepick" (National Archives MS4689-4772), an unfinished play about Trotsky's assassination. In their correspondence Klein heatedly berates Leo Kennedy for naively accepting Soviet propaganda about politics and race relations (see Klein's letter dated March 15, 1940).
- 3 Despite the four year gap between their dates of publication, the texts are roughly

- contemporaneous: in her forthcoming introduction to *The Second Scroll*, Popham notes that “In Praise of the Diaspora” existed as a lecture for years before being printed.
- 4 Steinberg argues that the intensity of the articles “The Dangers of Success” and “In Praise of the Diaspora” is incommensurate with the relatively small minority who were calling for the negation of the Diaspora. He suggests that “the force of [Klein’s] attack against a relatively insignificant group . . . might suggest that it was in part also an attempted subconscious justification for his own unwillingness or unreadiness to live in Israel” (BS xv). I am not sure that the anti-Diaspora movement was as insignificant as Steinberg suggests (it is hard to define the situation as Klein would have been exposed to it), but I do agree that Klein’s statements are motivated by more than the external situation would seem to warrant.
  - 5 At the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies/Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures session “25 Years Later: The Legacy of A.M. Klein,” Elizabeth Popham pointed out that in “The Bible’s Archetypal Poet,” Joseph, like Klein himself, is both a poet figure and a Diaspora Jew working in exile to help his people.
  - 6 Anne Goddard of the National Archives kindly informs me that Klein owned a copy of the 1949 edition of 1984.
  - 7 Klein goes so far as to say that Terpetoff “had neither the temper of steel, nor its hunger” (279). “Steel” is the English translation of “Stalin,” a fact which Klein was aware of by 1939, when he played with it in his article “Stalin: The Man of Flexible Steel” (BS 49-50).
  - 8 Klein’s anxiety over the link between interpretive commentary and ideological totalization also figures prominently in the short story “And the Mome Rath’s Outgrabe,” the tale of a literary conference that features multiple glossings of Carroll’s “Jabberwocky.” It is significant that in this story the final gloss is provided by a Marxist and resembles Krasnovitch’s commentary on “Opus No. 13/OvertureProletarian.”
  - 9 Georgy Maximilianovich Malenkov (1902-1988) was the Soviet Premier from 6 March 1953 to 8 February 1955. It is highly possible that he held this office while Klein was writing “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula.”
  - 10 Pollock’s brief but trenchant discussion of “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula” (*The Story* 261-62) supports his point that in Klein’s last phase he “turns against [his ideal vision of the poet and society], subjecting it to a series of profoundly skeptical revisions . . .” (253).
  - 11 Patricia Merivale classifies *The Second Scroll* as an “elegiac romance” in that “the ‘hero’ . . . is largely a projection into mythic dimensions of the needs and obsessions of the narrator . . . . The story is not so much the hero’s as the narrator’s: how he shared the hero’s life, survived his death, and is now providing an elegiac memorial for him, in order that he, the narrator, may finally free himself from the burden of his obsession . . . and renew his own existence on better terms” (140). However, when Terpetoff dies, he is less heroic than Uncle Melech, and his death leaves Arkady Mikailovich feeling incomplete.
  - 12 It is difficult to understand why the knowledge of Terpetoff’s trysts with Evdokia empower the Commissars, for Arkady Mikailovich implies that his multiple romances are common knowledge. I believe that Klein is addressing the vulnerability of the artist by (perhaps, clumsily) subverting a trope that runs through much of his work: the idyllic garden (his companion, after all, is ‘Eve-dokia’). Rozmovits notes that Abraham Segal (“Diary of Abraham Segal, Poet”), Spinoza, the poet in “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” and Melech all have Edenic gardens to which they can escape (28). Terpetoff’s situation is much bleaker; even a pastoral setting of safety can be used against him. This may also be a comment on the negation of the Diaspora, where travel away from a central location justifies persecution.

- 13 Klein also discusses the corruption of artistic integrity by Marxist dogma in articles such as "Proletarian Poetry" (LER 161-62) and "Sha! Sha! Shostakovitch" (LER 181-82). The latter is particularly relevant to "The Bells of Sobor Spasitula" in its discussion of Shostakovitch and Prokofieff, two composers persecuted by Stalin's regime. In this essay Klein states that the enjoyment of music "need never be marred by . . . [the] composer's political convictions" (181) and sarcastically asks "how does one tell bourgeois music from communist music? . . . Is F-flat revolutionary and G-sharp counter-revolutionary?" (181).
- 14 Caplan notes that "During the onset of his mental illness, Klein's frustrations as a writer . . . and his feelings of neglect . . . evolved into a morbid belief that all true artists are persecuted by those nearest them" (*Like One* 193).
- 15 See Wilson: ". . . for one awful moment [we] see the shadow of Uncle Melech rising up behind the Camillien Houde who is his parody" (94).

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