

THE NTH ADAM

Dante in Klein's "The Second Scroll"

Richard Cavell

No; Canada has produced no Dante . . .

WILLIAM ARTHUR DEACON, *Pens and Pirates*

A. M. KLEIN, LIKE MANY OF HIS MODERNIST contemporaries, was profoundly influenced by the example of Dante.¹ Dante provided one of the central models for the modernist sensibility because, in his choice of Virgil as spiritual and literary guide, he had proclaimed his debt to antiquity while in his choice of the vernacular as the language of his *Commedia*, he at the same time announced his break with that tradition. A commitment to the purest elements of his native speech reconciled these motives, so that the universality of Latin would be constantly renewed in the refinement of the vernacular. That Dante's agent of innovation is the *past*, has a particular relevance to writers of the New World, who are confronted by a vast literary patrimony out of which they must articulate their newness, using a language that lacks the authority of tradition.

When Dante made Virgil his literary father, he asserted the predominance of literary relations over historical ones, for the son, here, generates the father. In the same way, the pilgrim's history is the prelude to the poem's writing, so that the goal is the quest discovered in language. On these levels of language and affiliation Klein and his fellow modernists engaged with Dante. Thus we find T. S. Eliot stating in his 1929 monograph on Dante that his importance lies in the creation of a language at once popular and universal, an idea which Eliot, translating Mallarmé, rendered in the *terza rima* of "Little Gidding" by the phrase "To purify the dialect of the tribe." He reiterated this point twenty years later in his essay "What Dante Means to Me," positing a connection between the elaboration of such a language and literary affiliation: "To pass on to posterity," he wrote, "one's own language, more highly developed, more refined, and more precise than it was before one wrote it, that is the highest possible achievement of the poet as poet."² With regard to the nature of that language, Samuel Beckett wrote in his 1929 essay on Joyce that "he who would write in the vulgar must assemble the purest elements from each dialect and construct

a synthetic language that would at least possess more than a circumscribed local interest."³ Through the explicit comparison with Dante, Beckett sought to justify the language of *Finnegans Wake*; Joyce himself expressed his relationship to Dante "in the consistent association of the poet with the paternal image."⁴ This form of indebtedness was in turn appropriated by Klein in *The Second Scroll*.

Other examples could be cited to indicate the persistence with which the modernists incorporated Dante into their poetics. Of particular concern here, however, is the relation which those poetics bear to New World, and specifically Canadian, literature.⁵ A historical overview of Dante's presence in Canadian literature reveals an interest less in poetics than in "the man who hath been down in hell," as Robert Norwood referred to Dante in his poem *The Modernists* (1918). There we find Dante on his deathbed, expounding to Cavalcanti (anachronistically) a variety of anti-Catholic sentiments. These were the terms on which Dante was admitted to the Protestant sensibility, as Dunstan Ramsay makes clear in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*:

I was a Presbyterian child and I knew a good deal about damnation. We had a Dante's *Inferno* among my father's books, with the illustrations by Doré, such books were common in rural districts at that time, and probably none of us was really aware that Dante was an R.C.

Even in Lampman's clearly Dantesque "City of the End of Things," the infernal elements are mediated through the politically and religiously more appropriate Milton. From the more frequent allusions in Québec literature emerges a necromantic Dante, as in Crémazie's "Les Morts," Nelligan's "Sur un Portrait du Dante," Choquette's "Muse Intellectuelle," and Morin's "Alighieri." However, contemporary references to Dante in both literatures reveal a shift away from isolated allusions toward instances of a more sustained engagement with Dante. The *Commedia* has served as a literary model in such diverse works as Hubert Aquin's *Trou de mémoire*, in Davies' Deptford trilogy (itself mediated through Lowry's Dantesque "Voyage That Never Ends") and Irving Layton's *The Gucci Bag*, which, he claims, "is [his] Divine Comedy."⁶ This shift from poet to poetics, facilitated largely by the modernist concern with form, is exemplified in the work of A. M. Klein.

K

LEIN'S WORK ILLUSTRATES DANTE'S major relevance to Canadian literature as poet of exile. As W. E. Collin wrote in his 1936 essay "The Spirit's Palestine," Klein's highly eclectic style, whereby "a sweet singer of the lineage of David has tried to recapture the 'dolce stil nuovo' for Canadian poetry," was a function of Klein's status as spiritual and literary exile. The importance of Dante to this style lies in the centrality of the metaphor of exodus to

the *Commedia*, which provides a precedent for the belief in the typological possibility of Eden on earth, a belief which the pilgrim Dante learns in the Earthly Paradise to be a function of the poet's craft:

'Quelli ch'anticamente poetao
l'età de l'oro e suo stato felice,
forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.'
Purgatorio 28.139-41

('Those ancients who sang of the Golden
Age, and its happiness, perhaps dreamt
in Parnassus of this place.')

Insofar as Dante's journey to Eden (which he located at the top of Mount Purgatory) is presented as a journey to the new land in the West, it becomes accessible to a New World mythology of exodus and promised land. Hence the appropriateness that Dante, when he has successfully navigated the Purgatorial waters, should compare himself to the unfortunate Ulysses, who perishes on his westward journey when in sight of the Mountain: "ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque / e percosse del legno il primo canto" (*Inf.* 26.136-38: "for [says Ulysses] a tempest arose from the new land and wrecked our ship"). The pattern implied here occurs readily in Canadian literature, as in William Kirby's *The Golden Dog*, where Dante's poem provides one of the central metaphors through which New France is projected as the Edenic counterpart of Old,⁷ or in Kirby's poem *The U.E.*, where the Virgilian metaphor he employs suggests that the Colonies are the burning Troy and that Canada is Latium, the Empire restored. *The Second Scroll* incorporates the Latin idea of empire within the Hebraic concept whereby, as Northrop Frye puts it, the "conquest of a promised land" is read as the "oracle of a future."⁸

Klein alluded to or quoted from Dante throughout his literary career. Dante is alluded to in "Christian Poet and Hebrew Maid," where the verse "The vulgate and the scroll are twin" anticipates "Gloss Gimel" of Klein's novel. "My Literati Friends in Restaurants" quotes the last line of the *Paradiso*, and Collin hears echoes of the same canticle in "Letters to One Absent," and of the *Vita Nuova* in "Sonnet XIX"; the reference to the *Vita Nuova* is significant as well in that it provides a structural analogue to *The Second Scroll* in its mingling of forms within an "autobiographical" framework. Klein makes ironic reference to the "subterranean dantesque" in "Les Vespasiennes," and in one of the last of the *Collected Poems*, "Cantabile: A Review of the Cantos of Ezra Pound," appear both Dante's name, and his epithet for Arnaut Daniel, "'miglior fabbro'" ("better craftsman [of the mother tongue]"), which had acquired contemporary fame as T. S. Eliot's dedication of *The Waste Land* to Pound.⁹

These scattered references come together in *The Second Scroll*, where Klein makes systematic use of Dante.¹⁰ In *The Second Scroll*, Klein is concerned with

a quest which is at once spiritual and literary. As a Canadian of Jewish heritage writing in English within a French enclave, Klein was acutely aware of having to find his own voice while endeavouring to speak through a tradition. What made this tradition relevant to him was not Paris or London or Jerusalem so much as the Roman *imperium*, with the proviso that for Klein, Aeneas was the contemporary of David: "had not Jerusalem been holy, Rome would not have been sacred."¹¹ In his poetry and his fiction, Klein advanced a peculiarly Canadian poetics, whereby nationalism is given the paradoxical expression of internationalism, of a synchronicity in which, to quote Milton Wilson, "all the things that couldn't happen when they should have happened keep happening all the time."¹² Dante is the great exemplar of this process, for in choosing Virgil as his literary father he implied that literary tradition is as much the creation of the poet as his inheritance.

Through the Dantean pattern of a journey into hell and up the purgatorial mountain, Klein defines in *The Second Scroll* the poetics for a place which is at once New Jerusalem and new found land. He achieves this amalgam by conflating his unnamed narrator's search for his Uncle Melech with the mission to find the poetry of the new state of Israel and translate it to Canadian shores. The pattern that can be perceived here, with its Dantesque overtones, together with the Hebrew/Catholic duality and the thematic and formal concern with affiliation, derives most immediately from Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹³ Yet, as Malcolm Ross has remarked, "perhaps because of the clear, unequivocal religious affirmation of the novel, one is reminded not so much of Joyce, as of Dante. The inferno of pogrom gives way in turn to purgatorial quest, to a realization of the Earthly Paradise of the New Jerusalem, even to a prospect of the universal and eternal."¹⁴ Klein's concern with the universal has, as well, a formal dimension, and to this aspect of Klein's novel Dante is likewise central.

WHEN KLEIN'S NARRATOR RECEIVES his order to go to Israel, he finds that the way is not easy; there are "wild beasts that lie in wait," and "not only the ravenous ones of the forest." Here we have the essential elements of the opening canto of the *Inferno*: the difficult way, the fierce beasts, the forest. Like the pilgrim Dante, Klein's narrator travels under the sign of the number nine which his passport bears, the number associated with Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*. The role of Virgil (Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory) is announced by the letter which arrives from Uncle Melech "like a voice from the beyond." Melech's letter tells of a descent into a great pit from which he views a "horizon . . . dark with smoke, streamered here and there with tongues of flame." Having, like Virgil, made the *descensus Averno*, Melech is qualified to be his

nephew's guide, and from this point Melech's journey and that of his nephew converge, much as in *Ulysses* both Stephen and Bloom are figures of the exiled Dante, even though Bloom appears most often in the guise of father/Virgil to Stephen's Dante.¹⁵ As Klein's narrator writes,

the distance between incognito uncle and nephew unmet had, during these years, disappeared. . . . Was he not, in a sense, responsible for my pilgrimage? Had it not been his name that had encouraged me forward from the first twisted aleph of my schoolbook to the latest neologism of Hebrew poetry?

Here, as elsewhere, Melech is associated with the process of learning a new language, in which the child's act of naming creates the world anew for him, as it did for Adam. In this Klein found the essential poetic activity, writing in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" that the poet is "The nth Adam taking a green inventory / in a world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising." There is an insistence, here, on the recreative function of poetry, as well as on the idea that every act of poesis duplicates the journey toward the Earthly Paradise, the purgatorial journey which dramatizes 'before' and 'after' and is fundamentally elegiac, able to accommodate the story of vast human suffering, but also of regeneration — dismembering and re-membering — told in *The Second Scroll*.¹⁶ By superimposing the quest for Melech and the journey to Israel on the search for a new language and a new poetry, Klein transforms all history into the history of language. That combined quest is associated from the outset with Rome and with Dante, and particularly with "the ghetto where the wonderful Immanuel, Dante's friend . . . had written his re-echoing *Tophet and Eden*." The allusion to Immanuel of Rome is most apt, for in his adaptation of the *Vita Nuova* and his adherence to Dante's "sweet new style," Immanuel personifies that fusion of traditions at which Klein's novel aims.¹⁷

The hellish landscape of the Ratno pogrom leads to Rome, and to an encounter with Satan/Settano, an encounter which, although it has a Miltonic structure, Klein imbues analeptically with Dantesque overtones in the description of the movie *Shoe Shine* (De Sica's *Sciuscià*), with its "more than dantesque catharsis," its "inferno . . . filled with children." These children recall the scene of pogrom just described, and also the Ugolino episode of *Inferno* 32-33, where, as John Freccero has demonstrated, the "sacrifice of a son in the presence of a father who only half understands the gesture is inevitably to recall, if only by contrast, the moment of the foundation of Israel in the story of Abraham and Isaac."¹⁸ The Ugolino episode figures a sundering of filiation, and Klein describes this situation in specifically Dantesque terms in the Casablancon mellah, the descent into which concludes the infernal journey. There, the narrator is "reminded of those drawings illustrative of Dante's *Inferno* in which the despair of its denizens is shown rising from the depths in a digitation and frenzy of hands."

TO THE INFERNO OF THE MELLAH, its unspeakability, the new state of Israel provides the Edenic counterpart. It is reached through the purgatorial ascent alluded to in "Gloss Gimel," where Melech describes the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. His account begins with a reference to "the beatific door," which alludes to the one leading to the first cornice of Purgatory, where the Proud are purged. Once inside the chapel, Melech views the ceiling while "circling the chapel," writing later that "this heaven breaks even the necks of the proud." The marble wall of the cornice is carved with sculptures — the "white statuary of that ghostly gantlet" — which include scenes from Hebrew and Roman antiquity, a juxtaposition seen also in the ceiling.

Melech sees the ceiling as the incarnation of a language, citing its "flesh majuscule," its "conjugation of cherubim," its "dialogue of being." His description, which will become "the first of the translations of [the narrator's] anthology," brings together the thematic and formal aspects of affiliation in its vision of universal brotherhood (reiterated in Gloss Dalid), which is described in a text combining Hebrew and Latin. The combination itself reflects the alternation of Sybils and Prophets on the ceiling, and that alternation is in turn based on a similar juxtaposition in the sculptures of the first cornice.¹⁹ Thus Klein boldly enacts the thought in his early poem that "The vulgate and the scroll are twin." To such a vision Melech's life has led, as the narrator learns when he "climb[s] up the staircase of [his] hotel," an action which recalls the ascent up the *escalina* of the Mountain. Only then does the narrator learn that his Uncle has perished in fire, like those on the Mountain's last cornice. At this point the narrator is ready to encounter the Earthly Paradise to which Melech has guided him, where he is to complete his quest for the new poetry of Israel. Repelled by the "insularity" of this poetry and faced with the impossibility of finding "a completely underivative poet," he finally realizes that "in adamic intimacy the poets had returned to nature." The poetry for which the narrator has been searching is not, like his Uncle, to be found in any one place but among the "fashioning folk, anonymous and unobserved, creating word by word, phrase by phrase, the total work that when completed would stand as epic revealed!" This language, which gives "new life to the antique speech," is analagous to Dante's illustrious vulgar, in which the sacred language of Hebrew — the language, according to Dante, spoken by Adam — has been refashioned to accommodate contemporary usage; Uncle Melech's description of the Sistine Chapel, written in the languages of scripture and empire, comprises its poetics — necessarily artificial, as Klein remarked, if they were, finally, to be universal.²⁰

The problem of continuity between New World and Old is resolved here through a language which is popular and yet faithful to a noble predecessor. Cul-

turally, this resolution is explicated in terms of the topos *translatio studii*, a transference of learning which parallels the renewal of empire.²¹ The ultimate version of this topos is the association of the New World with the westward course of empire, a *translatio* perhaps first envisioned in Ulysses' westward voyage in the *Inferno*, the failure of Ulysses' journey mirrored (in Klein's novel) in the failure to find Melech, the success of Dante's navigation seen in the narrator's achievement of his anthology. Having had his vision of the "fabled city" in "Space's vapors and Time's haze" (Gloss Aleph), the narrator completes a journey which, like Dante's, is circular. The last vision, in both cases (as Freccero remarks of Dante), is "the point of transition between the pilgrim who was and the poet who is, at once the point of departure and the point of arrival of the poem which we read."²² For the narrator must now translate the poetry he has brought to Canadian shores, thereby recreating and renewing it. The relation between pilgrim and poet, Uncle and nephew, could also be described, then, in terms of the affiliation inherent between first and second scrolls, between novel and glosses, between the story of Melech and the story of the narrator: that of one book having one author.

NOTES

- ¹ My major references are to A. M. Klein, *The Second Scroll* (New York: Knopf, 1951), and *Collected Poems*, ed. M. Waddington (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974); Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975); Frank Kermode, *The Classic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975); W. E. Collin, *The White Savannahs* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936); Usher Caplan, *Like One That Dreamed* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1982); Dennis Duffy, *Gardens, Covenants, Exiles* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982). A version of this paper was read to the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, Vancouver, 3 June 1983.
- ² T. S. Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 157.
- ³ Samuel Beckett, "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce," *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 18.
- ⁴ Mary T. Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), p. 34.
- ⁵ Among the early disseminators of Italian literary culture in Canada were James Forneri, James De Mille, A. A. Nobile (whose novella *An Anonymous Letter / Una Lettera Anonima* [1885] is perhaps the earliest example of Italian-Canadian writing), and Thomas O'Hagan.
- ⁶ See Layton's "Foreword" to *The Gucci Bag* (Oakville: Mosaic, 1983); the reference to Dante is omitted from the McClelland & Stewart edition of these poems.
- ⁷ Kirby also uses the *Commedia* as a vehicle for his irony. In "Dante and *The Golden Dog*," *Canadian Literature* no. 86 (Autumn 1980), pp. 49-58, Joy Kuropatwa argues for the centrality of *Inferno* 5 to the novel's theme of "corrupt love," though her argument relies on Kirby's translation of a line from canto 5

- which differs critically according to which edition of *TGD* one reads. On the reception of Italian literature, including Dante, in nineteenth-century Canada, see Eva Marie Kröller, "George Eliot in Canada: *Romola* and *The Golden Dog*," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 14, no. 3 (1984), pp. 312-21.
- ⁸ Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 224.
- ⁹ Klein also used this phrase in a letter to A. J. M. Smith (5 November 1943); he comments on the poets included in Smith's *A Book of Canadian Poetry*, referring to Smith as "The impeccable artist. Il fabbro miglior." Quoted in Seymour Mayne, ed., *The A. M. Klein Symposium* (Ottawa: Univ. Press, 1975), p. 8; cf. Caplan, p. 101.
- ¹⁰ The extraordinary complexity of *The Second Scroll* is itself a reflection of Dante's art; that this aspect of Dante strongly influenced Pound and Eliot is argued by Marshall McLuhan in *The Possum and the Midwife* (Idaho Univ. Press, 1978).
- ¹¹ Klein, "Notebook of a Journey," in *Beyond Sambation*, ed. M. W. Steinberg and U. Caplan (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 378. Klein long remembered his high school teacher of Latin, "'who in the high company of the man from Mantua first opened for me the magic casements of English literature.'" Quoted by Caplan, pp. 34-35.
- ¹² Milton Wilson, quoted by N. Frye in "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts," *The Canadian Imagination*, ed. David Staines (Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), p. 45.
- ¹³ See Lorraine Weir, "Portrait of the Poet as Joyce Scholar," *Canadian Literature* no. 76 (Spring 1978), pp. 47-55. Contemporaneously with the writing of *The Second Scroll*, Klein was assisting in the preparation of Stanislaus Joyce's translation of Italo Svevo's 1927 essay *James Joyce* (1950; rpt. San Francisco: City Lights, 1969), in which Joyce is twice compared to Dante.
- ¹⁴ Malcolm Ross, "Review of *The Second Scroll*," in Tom Marshall, ed., *A. M. Klein* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), p. 90; reprinted from *Canadian Forum* 31 (1952).
- ¹⁵ See Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante*, p. 123, and Margaret Broad, "Art and the Artist: Klein's Unpublished Novella," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 30 (1980), pp. 115-16. Note also Patricia Merivale, "The Biographical Compulsion: Elegiac Romances in Canadian Fiction," *Journal of Modern Literature* 8, no. 1 (1980), pp. 139-52.
- ¹⁶ See E. D. Blodgett, "Dante's *Purgatorio* as Elegy," in *The Rarer Action*, ed. A. Cheuse and R. Koffler (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1970), pp. 151-78. The elegiac thrust of *The Second Scroll* is made clear in the "Elegy" which comprises "Gloss Beth"; there, Dante's famous "E 'n la sua volontade è nostra pace" (*Para.* 3.85) is echoed in "of Thy will our peace."
- ¹⁷ See the *Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. T. Carmi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 119; 421-22. I am indebted to Michael Wex for calling my attention to this book.
- ¹⁸ John Freccero, "Bestial Sign and Bread of Angels," *Yale Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1977), p. 57.
- ¹⁹ See Charles De Tolnay, *The Sistine Ceiling* (1945; rpt. Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 152n, 171n, 181n; Arturo Farinelli, *Michelangelo e Dante* (Torino: Bocca, 1918), pp. 156-217; and Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (1939; rev. New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 178-79.
- ²⁰ "Our Language," in *Beyond Sambation*, p. 9.

²¹ See Kermode, *passim*, who notes the presence of this topos in Milton's *Areopagitica*, from which Klein takes an epigraph.

²² Freccero, "Introduction" to *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 6.

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