

HISTORY IN *THE SECOND SCROLL*

Michael Greenstein

ONE METHOD OF UNRAVELLING *The Second Scroll* is to examine the beginning of "Gloss Aleph," Klein's "Autobiographical," for it contains some of the important themes developed throughout the book.

Out of the ghetto street where a Jewboy
Dreamed pavement into pleasant Bible-land,
Out of the Yiddish slums where childhood met
The friendly beard, the loutish Sabbath-goy,
Or followed, proud, the Torah-escorting band,
Out of the jargoning city I regret,
Rise memories.

Like Milton in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*,¹ Klein suspends the subject of the first stanza by preceding it with the triple parallelism "Out of," a phrase with the three-fold connotations of space, time, or transformation. In the spatial interpretation the wandering "Jewboy" travels out of the ghetto to the external world, between oriental and occidental realms as he encompasses the twain; temporally, memories rise out of the poet's childhood as he recalls his nonage days in "Time's haze"; and the metamorphic interpretation includes the imaginative transformation of Bibleland out of pavement. Klein interweaves all three themes in the novel and although the temporal is the most important, it is useful to begin with an investigation of "Space's vapours."

Lacking the unities of time and place, *The Second Scroll* contains two symbols which, in addition to Canadian references scattered throughout the book, serve to unify the various settings. The first is the "ocean" separating the New World from the Old, a vastness which man must overcome. Melech, who "had completely weathered the ocean of the Talmud," writes of the Atlantic, "that futile bucket" unable to extinguish the fires of the holocaust, and concludes his letter with a description of the blue and white Israeli colours of the Mediterranean where the Navy of Redemption sails. If the Atlantic is powerless to douse the genocidal fires, it also cannot dissipate the odour of Casablanca's mellah: "Not all the breezes of the Atlantic, less than a mile away, have yet effected a purification."

"Leviticus" begins with the plane roaring over the Atlantic — the airplane

being Klein's second vehicle for combining distant locales. In addition to the Daedalus-Icarus associations, the flight is eschatological: "on the wings of eagles" the narrator is "borne" to his destination. "My very levitation seemed a miracle in harmony with the wonder of my time; through my mind there ran the High Holiday praise of God for that He did 'suspend worlds on without-what,' even as my plane was suspended, even over the abyss of recent history there had risen the new bright shining microcosm of Israel." "Levitation" picks up the title of the chapter, "Leviticus," while the miraculous flight is a "re-enactment" or rebirth with the obvious play on "borne." The chapter ends with another flight to Casablanca, and the fourth chapter, "Numbers," opens with reference to the Atlantic which acts symbolically as a mirror for the city.

The opening of the final chapter parallels "Leviticus": "Warmed by the sun beating through the porthole, my mind was dreamily in communion with the murmur of the motors humming through aluminum. They made me whatever music my mind willed, ululative, Messianic, annunciatory. It was as if I was part of an ascension, a going forward in which I was drawn on and on." This "ascension," like the earlier "levitation," is highly charged with meaning as are the leviathans of the Mediterranean covered by "white horses" which recall Melech's description of the sea with other leviathans. The old man from Safed makes the final connection between the Messianic airplane and its ability to diminish distances, to cross oceans almost instantly. When the narrator announces that with the airplane the transatlantic journey "is not so great a distance," the venerable sage begins his explication: "It is the Messiah's days because we see his signs and portents everywhere. Thus is it written that when the Messiah will come there will be the wonder of *kvitzath ha-derech*, the curtailment of the route. What does this mean? It means that a route which but yesterday was long and arduous suddenly becomes short and speedy. Is this not the experience of our time? Is it not the experience of the Yemenites who, located as if on another planet, as if in another century, are brought by planes to this our century and to this our planet, our country, our home, in the space of but eight hours?" The plane is for Klein what the train was to the nineteenth-century writer. How ironic for the old man, "bearded like antiquity . . . not of this world," to refer to "our century"; yet his remarks point to the importance of time in the overall historical context of *The Second Scroll*.

Klein incorporates two fundamental theories of history in the book — the cyclic, which he may have derived from Vico, and the progressively linear, inherited from the dialectics of Hegel and Marx on the one hand, and the Talmudic *pilpul* on the other. Whereas M. W. Steinberg stresses the religious themes in the novel and Miriam Waddington focusses on the literary, humanist, and secular points of view, I believe that an historical analysis may elucidate generic, linguistic, and religious difficulties in the book.²

ON THE LITERAL LEVEL the story covers events between 1917 and 1949, and it seems that Klein implies a cyclical view of history from the Russian pogroms to the establishment of the State of Israel at which time Melech is murdered during an Arabic "pogrom." With the help of Frye's demonic-apocalyptic polarity,³ one may follow the plot conveniently and not altogether arbitrarily, for Klein alludes to the "apocalyptic dream of a renewed Zion" at the opening of "Exodus." From the outset Klein emphasizes the temporal, not only in the first phrase ("For many years") which introduces the theme of separation and reunion between brothers-in-law, but also in the apocalyptic reference to Eden which reminds the reader of the historical distance between first and second scrolls while simultaneously reviewing the narrative context of childhood. The apocalyptic continues at the Feast of Rejoicing in the Law with the father smiling until Uncle Melech's letter interrupts his mood with the news of the demonic pogrom in Ratno. The chapter ends with a further descent into the diabolic as the Nazis invade Poland; yet the demonic "cloud" over Europe changes to the apocalyptic dream of a renewed Zion at the beginning of "Exodus" as the narrator envisions the battle of Gog and Magog: "I saw through my mind's eye a great black aftermath cloud. . . . The cloud then began to scatter . . . until revealed there shone the glory of a burnished dome." "Leviticus" begins with an apocalyptic flight followed by the demonic descent into the mellah in "Numbers": "we slid into the mellah . . . descending into the . . . centuries." "Deuteronomy" remains predominantly in the upward direction from the opening flight to the transformed Sephardic elevator-boys ("whose houses but a year ago must needs be lower than the lowest Arab's") to the Safed scholar who expatiates on the Messianic resurrection.

But Klein's cyclic view of history goes beyond this vertical pattern of the rise and fall of life. In Miriam Waddington's words, "For Klein, as for Shelley, language itself is a vast cyclic poem."⁴ Perhaps the most recurrent image in *The Second Scroll*, the "circle" or the cycle is used in the historical sense of the wheel come full circle or in a "mystical" geometry like Yeats's gyre.⁵ In "A Psalm Touching Genealogy" which Steinberg quotes in his "Introduction," Klein sees himself as part of a whole historical circle complete with the risings and fallings of his forefathers:

Corpuscular,
 They dwell in my veins, they eavesdrop at my ear,
 They circle, as with Torahs, round my skull,
 In exit and in entrance all day pull
 The latches of my heart, descend, and rise —

The same metaphors appear early in the novel: "A year of the reading of the Law

had been concluded, a year was beginning anew, the last verses of Deuteronomy joined the first of Genesis, the eternal circle continued. Circular, too, was the dance, a scriptural gaiety, with wine rejoicing the heart, and the Torah exalting it to heights that strong wine could not reach." The annual cycle and the circular scroll of the Pentateuch are followed by the Hassidic circle which, in its most extreme form, verges on the mystical. This joyous celebration contrasts with its tragic counterpart in Europe when the Nazis force the Jewish women to strip and circle the synagogue in vulgar imitation of the *hakofo*s ritual. Melech uses the "corpuscular" image from Klein's "Psalm" to express the cyclical unity of the body of Jewry: "the numbered dead run through my veins their plasma, that I must live their unexpired six million circuits."

Klein's interpretation of Christianity is circular too, as seen in the dream of Melech as Pope, a transformation borrowed from Joyce's conversion of Bloom into Leopold the First: "he performed the annual cycle of religious rite. . . the long round of his encyclicals." Melech confirms his faith in Judaism by including the thirteen credos of Maimonides at the end of his letter to Piersanti: "In a single circular sentence, without beginning or end, he described God coming to the rescue of His chosen." The mystical circle appears in the theorizing of the Zionist journalist beside the narrator on the flight to Israel: Jewry "lost itself in the contemplation of the One; with commentary hooped upon commentary it constricted Him until from Circle He diminished to Dot." Klein applies the mystical circle to the poets of the Israeli settlements: "In adamic intimacy the poets had returned to nature . . . the marabou, amorphous, mystical, circling ever in a round." In the novel's final scene the narrator, "As at the centre of a whirlwind," prays for his uncle and watches "the beacons announcing new moons, festivals, and set times"; though not as circular as the beginning and end of *Finnegans Wake*, these concluding words of "Deuteronomy" act as a *ricorso* for the return to "Genesis." And at the end of "Gloss Beth" the poet prays to God, "Circled and winged in vortex of my kin":

Again renew them as they were of old,
And for all time cancel that ashen orbit
In which our days, and hopes, and kin, are rolled.

Thus, history, literature, and religion are part of a universal circle. Furthermore, the two-fold quest at the core of the novel is cyclical: nephew and uncle, seeker and sought are identical; language and poetry reside in a ubiquitous miracle, words made flesh. That the narrator and his avuncular double are the same may be evidenced when the nephew repeats, "I was like one that dreamed. I, surely had not been of the captivity; but when the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, I was like one that dreamed," which is soon echoed in Melech's letter: "When the Lord turned again the captivity, I was like one that dreamed." The

distance between the two men diminishes until in Israel the narrator discovers that "A change in our relationship had ensued; it was he, I felt, who was now pursuing me." Similarly, in the cyclical quest for "the poetry of the recaptured time" the key image is the miracle.

Running counter to this cyclical view of history is the progressive philosophy, proceeding through dialectic. Malcolm Ross summarizes the stylistic tension in Klein's poetry: "Kein has come close to creating the archetypal Canadian pattern — a dense organic fusion of traditional idiom, ancient myth and cult, the contrapuntal dialectic of our French-English relationship, the sophisticated technical reach of man alive in this age and in whom all ages are alive."⁶ The opening conflict between the lapsed uncle and the orthodox father commences the dialectical view. The father maintains primitive notions about the philosophy of Marxism; he displays his antipathy to the dialectical mode in the *reductio* "Hegel-baigal," and remains unimpressed by the Russian *pilpul* (a Talmudic equivalent of the dialectical method of argument). In direct opposition Melech, transformed into Comrade Krul, exploits his linguistic, polemical, and Talmudic talents in a dialectical essay: "it constituted a remarkable instance of what happens when the Talmudic discipline is applied either to a belletristic or revolutionary praxis . . . his argumentation was like nothing so much as like the subtilized airy transcendent *pilpul* of Talmud-commentary commentators." Indeed, the polemical content of *The Second Scroll* includes Melech's letter which occupies most of "Exodus," the narrator's political argument with Settano and Melech's religious disagreement with Monsignor Piersanti in "Leviticus," Melech's letter of protest against the treatment of Jews in Casablanca which appears dramatically in the Gloss to "Numbers," and the narrator's encounter in "Deuteronomy" with the Zionist journalist who expounds a theory of history. Thus, much of the book is taken up by letters, essays, and philosophic debates which account for the didacticism within the "novel."

No sooner does the nephew complete his uncle's essay in "Genesis" than he receives in the next chapter Melech's letter in which he notes "the abandonment of the Marxist jargon. Instead Uncle Melech had reverted to the epistolary style of his Talmudic days." This letter denounces "those two-faced masters of thesis and antithesis": "In the midst of our anguish we were regaled with a dialectic which proved that fascism was but a matter of taste." The long letter concludes with a dialectic game proceeding from Bible to Mishna to Talmudic commentary, but the rational, linear progression is undercut by the "revolving" circular "cumuli of Cabbala" with its *creatio ex nihilo* and swirling desert anticipating the imaginary "whirlwind" at Melech's death.

Klein collocates the narrator's argument with Settano and Melech's disagreement with Piersanti to show the kinship and unity between nephew and uncle. Although Klein treats his Satan with linguistic humour, the Italian begins his

attack in a manner which parodies Piersanti's proselytizing: "he had scoffed at me, styled me a typical emissary of the new religion, a sound, orthodox Coca-colian." In low imitation of the Sistine evaluation, the narrator retorts aesthetically: "I had spitefully accepted the compliment and — *pour l'épater* — had expatiated upon the beauty of the Coca-Cola bottle, curved and dusky like some Gauguin painting of a South Sea maiden, upon the purity of its contents, its ubiquity in space, its symbolic evocations — a little torchless Statue of Liberty." While Settano with his dialectical smile dogmatically asserts his materialist interpretation of history, the narrator presents himself as an example of spirituality and later imagines himself to be John the Baptist decapitated in the reflection of a window.

In comparison with his uncle's epistle to the Romans, the narrator inquires, "Whither, O Romans?"; in comparison with Settano's polylingual autodidacticism, Melech's letter is dominated by a polyphonous evocation of Aramaic; and in comparison with longitudinal-latitude directions during the conversation, Melech "was southing; other parts of his letter might be ambiguous, but that was orient clear." Stylistically there is little difference between the "homily" or "sermon" and the narrator's appraisal of it. The basic premise is the divinity of humanity in contrast to the Christian humanity of divinity; and the syllogisms lead to the conclusion that "Since man is created in the image of God, the killing of man is deicide." At the centre of the novel, Melech's critical interpretation of the Sistine Chapel is a rejection of Christian doctrine; Klein seems to be offering a defense of Jewish faith.

The description combines cyclical, labyrinthine, and dialectical modes. The passage begins and ends with the outer marble corridors; Melech circles the chapel gazing at the "whirlwind of forms" which are "circle-racked"; and in place of Michelangelo's "magic circles" he substitutes Maimonides's thirteen credos in a single circular sentence. Like Joyce's "Oxen of the Sun" episode, the letter imitates embryology: "the long umbilical cord of corridors behind me, pressed forward with infant eagerness to enter this new world." Like "Gloss Aleph," "Gloss Gimel" examines the theme of "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" as the marble corridors recall "childhood's ogred corridors" from the poem and the "ghostly gauntlet" echoes the journalist's phrasing of Jewish history — "a gauntlet to be run."

The ceiling is a heaven which "breaks even the necks of the proud" (a literal reference to the stiff-necked pride of the Jews). Melech's study of the ceiling juxtaposes Classical and Biblical allusion but, unlike Milton who blends these elements harmoniously, he has a different purpose in mind. The Classical list within the Christian setting includes the alexandrine floor, Euclidean geometry, the chapel's empyrean, januarial, Atlas-shouldered, lyre-chested, adonic figures, a pantheon of gods, damonandpythias. These Greek and Roman references deflate

the Christian content as Melech substitutes a secular aesthetic which somewhat reduces the religious subject. In addition to Classicism, Klein employs a linguistic dialectic of wit to undercut Christianity: adonic-adonaic, adamic-seraphic, demonandpythias-davidandjonathan, Michael Angelo-Archangel Michael. Klein's Classical allusions clash with the Christian; the marginal notes reveal a Hebraic-Hellenic dialectic in which the sons of Jerusalem are victorious. The method then shifts from pre-Christian history to Melech's personal history or the suffering of the Jews during World War II as his reinterpretation replaces the Christian interpretation of the Pentateuch. Seen in this light, *The Second Scroll* is an *apologia* which, in its support of the Old Testament, rejects the other Second Scroll, the New Testament.

THE NARRATOR REFLECTS THIS POLEMIC not only in his debate with Settano, but also in his understanding in Rome of "the miracle of the transformed stone." The final words from Melech's letter of affirmation ring in his ears as he realizes the historical truth: "The Arch of Titus, from being a taunt, then, had become an irony, an irony directed against itself; the candelabrum, set against the new light that had been kindled across the Great Sea, had turned into satire; the trumpets, symbolic now of jubilee, really taunted Titus!" Through the narrator's "appreciation" of the bas-relief and through Melech's analysis of the ceiling, Klein celebrates the victory of Israel over its foes.

"Gloss Dalid" also presents an *apologia* in dramatic form in a manner not unlike the most famous medieval defence of Judaism — Yehuda Ha-Levi's *Kazari*. The narrator refers to Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, and Klein wrote the poem "Yehuda HaLevi, His Pilgrimage." Desmond Pacey suggests that *The Second Scroll* is the fulfillment of Klein's partial failure in this earlier poem, but the connection may be more substantial than Pacey's evaluative statement implies.⁷ In *The Kazari* HaLevi depicts a mighty king searching for the true religion; representatives from Islam, Christianity, and Judaism try to persuade him of the truths of their respective religions, and in the end the Kazar is convinced of the merits of Judaism. In "Gloss Dalid" the Cadi replaces the Kazar as three judicial cases are brought before him; by the end of the play the Jew adapts the moral from each case to argue for freedom, understanding, and brotherhood. The Jew sees himself as the "plaintiff" while Hassan, Marouf, and Ibn Aziz are "but proxies." The parable of the lamp manufacturer and the light at the end of the play iterate the image which Klein uses in "Yehuda HaLevi":

Did he not also in that wondrous script
Of Al-Kazari chronicle that king,
The heathen begging of the godly-lipped

Some wisdom for his pious hearkening, —
 A candle for the dark, — a signet ring
 To make the impress of the soul, — that prince
 Who covenanted with the mightiest King,
 Abjured false testaments and alcorans,
 Accepting only Torah and its puissance.⁸

In another defence of Judaism the nameless journalist, like the nameless narrator, presents another view of Jewish history. His theory borrows the Hegelian “Judaic Idea” and the Essence-Existence terminology of Existentialism; in place of the Christian Incarnation he substitutes the miracle of “Discarnation.” Like Joyce, Klein resorts to medical and physical metaphors to examine spiritual, historical, and metaphysical theories. In his analysis of the Sistine ceiling Melech discovers the key word for Michelangelo — The Flesh, and then proceeds to give his own version of the Discarnation from the concentration camps: “the flesh dwindled, the bones showed.” Linguistically and ironically for this poet, the Word-made-Flesh is the “four-legged aleph.” The Diaspora infection is reduced to the lowest common denominator as Klein “overdoes” the preparations for Israel: “Scarified . . . against smallpox, punctured against typhus, pierced for tetanus, injected for typhoid, and needled with cholera. . . . they pointillated upon my arms their prescribed prophylactic prayers.” Through Melech’s veins run the plasma of six million souls, and he is “inoculated against the world” with the Star of David. The camp-manager at Bari “used the word *Monsignor* as if it were an injector.” And when the narrator discovers the “miracle” in Israel, “It was as if I were spectator to the healing of torn flesh, or *heard* a broken bone come together, set, and grow again.

“Wonderful is the engrafting of skin, but more wonderful the million busy hushed cells, in secret planning, stitching, stretching, until — the wound is vanished, the blood courses normal, the cicatrice falls off.” The individual Jew is part of a body politic that has survived the vicissitudes and cycles of history, unwilling to accept the Christian “Davidson.”

The difference between Judaism and Christianity revolves around concepts of the Messiah, Incarnation, and the Word made Flesh; the difference between Islam and Judaism is the difference between magic and miracle. In “Leviticus” Klein defends Judaism against Christianity using the Italian Renaissance as an aesthetic and historical medium; in “Numbers” Klein reverts to Dante and the Middle Ages to support Judaism against Moslem persecution. Just as Melech discovers his own Jewish reality behind Michelangelo’s art, so his nephew perceives the truth behind Casablanca’s false front. Casablanca, “arrayed in all the colours of Islam, stands mirroring itself in the mirror of the Atlantic. As upon some Circean strand magical with voices.” In contrast, Melech “naturalized the miracle” and “had become a kind of mirror, an *aspaklaria*, of the events of our

time." The mirror of art and the mirror of history reflect analogous events: Casablanca mirrors "false music" and "hollow art" while Israel reflects truth. The oxymorons depict the Arabian deceptions: "unlucky-lucky Negro," the "possible-marvellous," and "old-new affinities." History becomes regressive in the Danteque descent into the labyrinthine mellah which reveals the reality beneath the appearance of beauty in the city. The Virgilian guide remarks that space deceives the stomach; the visitor from the West cannot believe it real. "Some magician out of the *Arabian Nights*, I thought, had cast upon me a spell and conjured up with sinister open-sesame this melodramatic illusion. Or perhaps it was a desert mirage that was playing tricks with my vision. Or I was dreaming." Like the "miracle of the transformed stone," the magic in "Numbers" is transformed into the miracle in "Deuteronomy."

Similar to the photograph of Melech Davidson, history is a double exposure with the present second scroll superimposed on the original past in a cycle of recurrence. Amalgamating cyclic and dialectic theories of history, Klein offers simultaneously an *apologia* and a linguistic *tour de force*. Followed by an ambassador on a transatlantic Jamesian quest, the wandering Jew passes through the labyrinths of the holocaust, the Sistine painting, and the mellah to emerge from space into time's eternal cycle.

This need for history to be complete — whether through the synthesis of a dialectic, the recurrence within a cycle, or the result of a transformation — parallels the necessity of completion in Klein's aesthetic theory: "such is the nature of art that though the artist entertain fixedly but one intention and one meaning, that creation once accomplished beneath his hand, now no longer merely his own attribute, but Inspiration's very substance and entity, proliferates with significances by him not conceived nor imagined." This poetry of process which hands over to the reader the powers of creation appears in the poetics of the underivative Tiberias poet: "a poem is not a destination, it is a point of departure. The destination is determined by the reader. The poet's function is but to point direction." Applied to Klein's style in *The Second Scroll*, this theory accounts for the synthesis of a multiplicity of literary traditions reflected in the individual words, the syntax, and the overall structure of the book. The epigraph from *Areopagitica* is thus more complex than Steinberg suggests: Milton, advocating free speech, criticizes the Talmudists who, ironically, use the license to "re-interpret" the Bible, to complete the original text just as Klein does in his own way molding a new scroll out of a variety of traditions. History repeats itself; art repeats and completes itself through the myths and archetypes of a collective unconscious.

NOTES

- ¹ Although Joyce's influence on Klein is far more important, one notes the Miltonic adjective-noun-adjective phrasing in "stony stare Semitic" and other Baroque convolutions.
- ² See M. W. Steinberg, "Introduction" to *The Second Scroll* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1961) and Miriam Waddington, *A. M. Klein* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), pp. 92-108.
- ³ In his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 829, Frye calls *The Second Scroll* "one of the most passionate and intense of all Canadian novels."
- ⁴ Waddington, p. 100.
- ⁵ See T. A. Marshall, "Theorems Made Flesh: Klein's Poetic Universe," *Canadian Literature*, No. 25 (Summer 1965), 46-47; and for a larger, phenomenological consideration of the "circle" Georges Poulet, *La métamorphose du cercle* (Paris: Plon, 1961).
- ⁶ Malcolm Ross, Review in *Canadian Forum* (January 1952), p. 234.
- ⁷ Desmond Pacey, *Ten Canadian Poets* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958), p. 286.
- ⁸ *The Collected Poems of A. M. Klein*, comp. and introd. by Miriam Waddington (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), p. 245.

TAURUS

Cyril Dabydeen

The wild bull's
 on his way. I do not
 give myself too
 easily.
 The lasso-man
 enters the scene
 trying to grapple
 with horns.

My father hammers
 at the portals
 of his mistress's
 womb; the bull
 bellows across
 the fraudulent
 road.

My mother spins her
 machine like
 a solitary queen.
 I merely join
 with the spinning.