SIGNS ON A WHITE FIELD

Klein's Second Scroll

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It is a fabled city that I seek;
It stands in Space's vapours and Time's haze;
("Autobiographical". *The Second Scroll.*)

I READ *The Second Scroll* soon after its publication in 1951. At that time I was living in Montreal, and I remember going to a public meeting where Klein was to read excerpts from his new work. He read with great enjoyment and style, and later talked, in his fiery oratorical way, about his journey to Israel which had given him the impetus for writing the book.

I had always admired Klein's poetry, but I was strongly repelled by the diction of *The Second Scroll.* Although I read it carefully later, I became more and more convinced that the book was a failure. Not only did the diction seem to me strained and tormented, but the theme of the Jewish *Galut* and eventual *Giloh* seemed narrowly focused on the State of Israel — with all its Zionist political connotations — as well as on the theological aspects of Judaism in a way which excluded unorthodox believers. Moreover, the structure of the book, with its sudden allegorical eruptions, sparse characterization, and elaborate glosses, seemed to me inexcusably manipulative of the reader, and also pointed to the author's unwillingness to make up his mind about what mode he wanted to use, prose or poetry, fiction or autobiography, allegory or realism. So, on all three counts, diction, theme and structure, I found *The Second Scroll* a strange, unpleasing work.

With these memories still fresh, I took up *The Second Scroll* again in 1964. This time it evoked an entirely different response. I still had reservations about the structure, but I found that Klein's diction, which had so repelled me thirteen years earlier, was rich, profound, and individual; in fact, it seemed to hold the key to the whole work.

What then had changed in the intervening years? I had changed a little, may-

be, and the world had changed a lot. The publication of Emmanuel Ringelblum's *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* in 1958 had altered the world for me. It had brought me to a new imaginative realization of the broad range of possible values in Jewish Ghetto society, and what was possible, was not all good. For the first time I understood and felt the threat from within; (the threat from without is such an old story, and has been so thoroughly documented in history and literature, that one of my students once tenderly described the Jews as "the cry-babies of the world".) After reading Ringelblum, I could no longer regard the State of Israel as just a political entity; it became a symbol of rescue and recognition, the concrete expression of what was best in the ethos of a whole culture. And, from the artist's point of view, is any nationalism ever more or less than this?

There are many ambiguities about *The Second Scroll*, the first and most obvious of which is its genre. Is it prose or poetry, fiction or autobiography, a religious tract or a literary jokebook? The title itself, if read from the theological point of view, has certain heretical implications, since the first scroll is the Torah, the Law, as it was transmitted to Moses on Mount Sinai. From the secular point of view, *The Second Scroll* might simply be referring to the fact that the Jews received the original Law in ancient times, and a second Law is now required to suit the new times and the new world. There is also the sinister un-Torah-like irony of the fact that, when the title is abbreviated, it reads "S.S".

Klein called his work a novel, but as a fictional narrative it presents serious problems. First of all, the line between fiction and autobiography is very wavering throughout, and Klein's use of a narrator who speaks in the first person does not help matters. There are occasions when the narrator slips unmistakably into the author's persona, such as when he describes life on the Avenue de l'Hôtel de Ville. The autobiographical impression is further strengthened when the narrator tells of his assignment to visit the newly founded State of Israel in order to discover and translate "the poems and songs of Israel's latest nest of singing birds". One cannot help recalling that Klein too had translated both Yiddish[1] and Hebrew poetry.

Then there is the problem of the glosses. The use of glosses, reminiscent of the commentaries of Talmudic students, seems to be serving a double purpose here: the glosses supply a variety of footnotes to the text, and they also constitute a selection from Klein's work papers. There is nothing wrong with appending footnotes or work papers to a novel, but since it is a departure from usual practice, the question arises: does it bring any advantages? To the writer, yes, for it provides him with a shortcut, and saves him the labour of integrating in the text raw

material which doesn't quite fit in, but is still too good to discard. To the reader, the inclusion of glosses offers no advantage, but on the contrary, it sets him adrift without guide lines or markers, so he has to decide for himself how to steer these footnotes to a safe textual harbor.

The sparse characterization also raises questions. It is entirely too sketchy to meet the demands of a fully developed fictional work. Since Klein's purpose is didactic, he tries to by-pass the issue of characterization altogether, but this often results in passages so melodramatic, that they read like parodies:

> "My own father was hanged before my eyes!" cried out the younger of the two strangers. "I know the men. I will yet return. Revenge!" He broke into uncontrolled sobbing. It was contagious.

Still other descriptions read as if they had been synopsized: "The Monsignor [Piersanti] was double edged with paradox aimed at easy explanations that both the economists and psychiatrists had to offer for the world's ills. It was as if he were plucking playfully a tuft of Marx's beard, a tuft of Freud's; not bitter, he was most engaging." Besides synopsizing them, Klein often pares his minor figures down to frankly didactic outlines; so much so, that Mr. Settano (Satan) of the Roman incident becomes a personification of evil, where evil is equated with Settano's "materialist interpretation of history".

Nor is Uncle Melech fully drawn in the novelistic sense. The narrator, in searching through Italy, Casablanca and Israel for his mysterious relative, never actually meets him. When he is at last shown a photograph, he finds that it is "a double, multiple exposure", implying that Melech incorporates both the narrator and everyman. Professor M. W. Steinberg, in his introduction to the recent Canadian edition of *The Second Scroll*, suggests that Uncle Melech symbolizes both the Jewish people and the Messiah concept. I would add to this, that in Uncle Melech are also merged the persons of "the incognito uncle and the nephew unmet". Each is a mirror image of the other, and when the two images are brought together, we get, literally, a double exposure, just as in the photograph. But we also get a double exposure in the more complex metaphorical sense, in terms of the spiritual quest each is engaged in.

In many ways the talents of the narrator and Uncle Melech are similar. Both the narrator and Uncle Melech show "what happens when the Talmudic discipline is applied either to a belletristic or revolutionary praxis". The very word "praxis" leads us to think of "practice" and "axis"; the word "axis" makes us think of the line stretching between two polarities, which is exactly what happens

when you put the Talmud at one end of the axis and Marx at the other, or even when the imaginary line is between the Talmud and the poetry of Spenser.

A play of doubles also takes place in the reader's mind when he reads what the narrator has to say about Uncle Melech's dialectical essay and compares it to the style in which *The Second Scroll* itself is written. Uncle Melech's essay, we are told, consisted of "a series of curious alternations between prophetic thunder and finicky legalism", while the narrator's own interests, like those of his relative, emerge as "linguistic and polemical".

An understanding of the meaning of Uncle Melech as a character, goes hand in hand with an understanding of Klein's theme in *The Second Scroll.* The theme is as involuted and braided as the diction, and can be examined from at least three points of view: the literary, the theological, and the secular. In literature, the tradition of the quest theme is ancient and honourable, and the figure of the Wandering Jew is well known in folk lore and myth. Klein, however, adds to the already existing connotations of the Wandering Jew, the Cabbalistic suggestion that Uncle Melech is one of the *Lamed Vavniks. Lamed Vavnik* is a Yiddish word derived from the Hebrew letters *Lamed* and *Vav* whose numerical value is thirty-six, and thirty-six is the number of secret saints (in Hebrew, *nistar*), who are supposed to exist in each generation.

Apart from the ambience of secret sainthood which surrounds Uncle Melech, he is also reminiscent of two famous literary heroes, Homer's Ulysses and Joyce's Leopold Bloom. Klein's two protagonists, the narrator and Uncle Melech, like Bloom and Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses*, are engaged in separate but related quests. In *Ulysses*, Bloom and Stephen finally do meet at the end of the day's wanderings, but in *The Second Scroll*, the encounter between Uncle Melech and the narrator is not actual, but only spiritual and metaphorical; since they meet after Uncle Melech has died. Nevertheless, Klein, like Joyce, attempts to merge, through this final encounter, the two aspects of life which are represented by the narrator and Melech. The meeting between Bloom and Stephen in *Ulysses* helps Stephen to validate his search for identity as an artist, while it helps Bloom to recognize his biological mortality and at the same time shows him how to extend it metaphorically by choosing Stephen for a spiritual son.

Analogously, in Klein, we also have two separate searchers. The narrator is to go to Israel to find and translate the authentic new poetry. The narrator, then, is an artist, in search of the truest art. But to complicate matters, the narrator adds to the first mission, a second one — the search for his long lost Uncle Melech; and the search for Uncle Melech results in the retracing of the latter's footsteps,

so that both quests finally merge and are contained in the single person of the narrator.

AND WHAT DOES MELECH'S QUEST consist of? According to Professor Steinberg, who sees it from the religious point of view, Melech's search — and Klein's — is the search for an understanding of "the problem of evil and its bearing on God's relation to man".[2] Yet this answer seems too general, and at the same time, too confining; and it also fails to take sufficient account of the more secular questions Klein is concerned with. For Uncle Melech moves from an early and brilliant devotion to religious studies, to disillusion and political communism. Only after he survives extermination by the Nazis does he cast off polemics to become the Wandering Jew. Burdened both by the guilt of his survival and amazement at the miraculousness of it, Melech feels compelled to justify his life in some socially creative and humanly meaningful way.

After a brief interfaith flirtation with Christianity through Monsignor Piersanti, and an epiphaneous insight into the artist's vision of life through Michelangelo, Uncle Melech departs for Casablanca, where, as his nephew learns later, he was nothing but a troublemaker. Sent out by the Joint Distribution Committee — a Jewish welfare organization — to gather statistics in the Casablancan ghetto, Melech not only collects information, but tries to publish it. And he is not content with merely recording his indignation at ghetto conditions; he goes so far as to organize and lead a little army of beggars and cripples in a protest action against the authorities.

At long last, in Israel, we come upon his traces in Safed, a city famed in mediæval times as the centre of Cabbalistic delvings. In Safed, Melech is known and loved both for his learning and his communal work. Melech, then, has moved, dialectically, all the way from the religious thesis of the supremacy of God's command to man, to the communist antithesis of society's command to man, and on to the humanist resolution, which combines devotion to God with an equal devotion to man. This then, is the meaning of survival, as Melech at last divines it; it is the miracle and holiness of brotherly human life against "the great drunkenness" and desecration of murder and violent death. Like Bloom in *Ulysses*, Melech discovers that "man is not born for a day, but for all time; . . . and that man, being also a seed, may between his thighs compass eternity".

Meanwhile, the narrator, in his search for the truest poetry, has also discovered that the real miracle is something which has been there under his nose all along. The "fabled city" which "stands in Space's vapours and Time's haze" is not to be found in the poetry of nostalgia, while the poetry of lament is too limited. Although "... the pyramids/Preserve our ache between their angled tons", the satirical poetry of protest is not acid enough to dissolve this historical ache, nor can satirical poetry exceed the compressed wit of the Hebrew poet who summed up survival with epigrammatic irony: "Said the seeing-eye dog with the hearing device".

The fabled city turns out to be the poetry of everyday language and speech. For Klein, as for Shelley, language itself is a vast cyclic poem, and like Leo Spitzer, the narrator discovers "a paradise in linguistics".[3] The Hebrew language and speech was in a feverish process of renewal in 1949; it was responding to and reflecting all the new experiences of the people who were then arriving in Israel. The figurative language of its advertisements and daily transactions constituted the real miracle for Klein, who could find the only "completely underivative poet" in language. Thus, language is at one and the same time both poetry and the source of poetic renewal; it is creation and creator together. The key image is miracle; but the miracle is language, and language, to the narrator, is poetry, and poetry is creation; and creation, as Melech discovered in the Sistine chapel, is life.

So the two quests finally merge in Israel. The narrator, who is the metaphorical expression of the new world (North America) and the secular artist, encounters the ongoing spiritual presence of his murdered Uncle Melech, who stands for the old Jewish European world with its traditional religious learning. The new world, as experienced in Israel by the narrator, contains the death of the old, and something new besides. The miracle of art, like the miracle of survival, turns out to be life itself.

And so it seems clear that once you go beyond the manifest content of *The Second Scroll*, the theme turns out to be secular and humanist, and not, as first appears, doctrinal in Judaic terms. Yet this raises the question of the extent to which a specific content must always limit the work of art. Homer's *Odyssey* suffers some contextual losses in translation, and those of us who are not familiar with Joyce's Dublin of 1904, must also miss a great many references to the cultural context. The same undoubtedly holds true for *The Second Scroll.* Klein's erudition in Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as his frequent summoning up of the ghosts of Pope, Byron, Spenser, and the anonymous authors of Anglo-Saxon epic

and homiletic verse, makes for an obvious linguistic complexity; it also results in the less obvious loss of cultural connotation to the reader who is not familiar with the Jewish world.

Let me give an example of how cultural connotation works. I will use the concept of self-pity, although the notion of original sin could serve the same purpose. Desmond Pacey, in *Ten Canadian Poets*, praises Klein highly, but he finds it necessary to mention, as well as to forgive, Klein's self-pity.[4] William Poster in his Chicago *Poetry* review of *The Rocking Chair* is also doing the same thing when he criticizes Klein for linguistic excesses and emotional self-indulgence.[5] But the critical canon that self-pity is a moral and literary fault is based on an unexamined and unreasoned assumption, on what John Stuart Mill referred to as a "received opinion". Why should the attitude and expression of self-pity be condemned any more than other literary stances? We do not condemn T. S. Eliot's disgust with the physical life in the Sweeney poems, while the violence and hatred in Norman Mailer's *American Dream* arouse delight and admiration in fashionable critics. No one finds anything wrong with Tennessee Williams' depiction of heterosexual sex as pure hell, or of Woman as the Great Destroyer; in fact, this view is so widely accepted among us, that Hollywood has based a number of profitable movies on Williams' dramatic premise. I can only suppose that it is permitted to hate and kill as long as you feel no pity about it, either for self or others. Or perhaps our North American cultural situation is such, that the strength of murder is more admirable than the weakness of self-pity.

However, this is not true of all cultures. The great Russians, from Dostoievsky on to Mayakovsky, have always cried eloquently into their tea, and the Irish poets have all wept into their whisky with excellent literary results. Interestingly enough, the Irish and the Russians, and a Jew like Klein, express self-pity consciously and deliberately. Klein is fully aware of the self-pity engendered by ghetto life. In *The Second Scroll*, the narrator has an interesting conversation with Krongold, a pure anti-ghetto and unstereotyped Jew. Krongold is contemptuous of Uncle Melech's infatuation with suffering, and has little patience with "this nostalgia for suffering; this wallowing". Later on, among the poets in Israel, the narrator himself is critical of the *Sabra* poets who write in the tradition of the "ghetto and its melting paralyzing self-pity". Self-pity, Klein knows, may paralyze a man, but it is also a sign that he *can* melt, and for him it does not carry any connotation of condemnable weakness. And much the same can be said of the concept of original sin. It just has never been a big thing in Jewish cultural consciousness. Klein refers ironically to "original virtue" because he knows that,

though the Jews may have plenty of other troubles, original sin is not one of them.

So we see how a writer's message may be limited, distorted, or wrongly decoded, unless the important contextual referents are available to the reader. The mention of contextual referents brings me up against Klein's diction, which, more than his theme, simultaneously reflects his background in Jewish tradition and his love for English literature. Here, in the area of diction, and through his individual and personal use of language, Klein recreates the "set times" of his traditional heritage, and names the "new moons" of his adopted culture. It is in the language, more than in the theme, that we find the fusion of Klein's two selves — the self he was born with and the self he became.

KLEIN'S DICTION COMBINES the vocabulary, syntax and idiom of at least three languages. Klein's syntactical structures, when they are not English, are most often Hebrew; his idiom is Yiddish, translated with a fanatical literalness, which is in contrast with the way he translates Yiddish poetry. His linguistic style and word consciousness are Joyceian. Yet the frequent use of archaisms owes nothing to the Joyceian irony or deviousness, but originates in Klein's own mimetic homage to, and remembrance of, Spenser and Byron, among others.

It would not be practical to analyse all the Hebraisms in Klein's syntax here. However, there is no reason why the ordinary reader should not understand the source of at least one of Klein's most irritating mannerisms, the inversion of the usual syntactical order of adjective and noun. In English, the adjective usually precedes the noun it modifies, but nearly always in Hebrew (as very often in Milton), the adjective follows the noun. In Hebrew the word for "small" is *katan* and for "boy", *yeled*, and "small boy" is *yeled katan*. In Klein we have such inversions as "realms spiritual", "myriad bodies instant", "the body of Adam anticipative", "spirit intelligential", and "delusions intellectual". We also have the characteristic flourish of Biblical Hebrew and the pomp and circumstance of Elizabethan rhetoric in such Kleinian English as "the four cubits of my uncle's ambience", "cull me a canticle", "the malefic tree on which hermaphrodite evil sits and loves itself".

Klein does not hesitate to combine, with his formal Hebrew rhetoric, the informal and folksy idiom of Yiddish. Yiddish is the vernacular spoken for over

five hundred years by East European Jews, the *mammaloschen* (mother language), with emphasis on "mother". It lends itself wonderfully to curses, lamentations, and the special kind of linguistic sweetness and intimacy which makes the diminutive form grow and flower in a language.

Klein's combining of the informal idiom of Yiddish folk tradition with the formal rhetoric of either Hebrew or English, sometimes results in strange and disturbing effects: "It was high time that the Czar and his crew came to a *black end* [from the Yiddish *schwarzer sof*]. But Bolshevism — that had corollaries that were anathema".

The use of Yiddish idiom is not always as incongruous as in the example above. Klein often uses it effectively to convey the tone of lament or humor of the original. Thus, "my fallen crown" from the Yiddish *gefallener croin* is a lament linguistically and contextually appropriate for Melech, whose name in Hebrew means "King"; and "From where comes a Jew", retains the emphasis on the word "Jew" that is contained in the flavourful Yiddish expression "*Fun vanen kumt a yid*". Discordancies result, not so much from the use of Hebrew syntax or Yiddish expressions, as from the combinations of the formal utterance with the informal, in whatever language they happen to occur.

Klein's use of archaic English is also baffling at first glance. Why would any twentieth-century writer say "Uncle Melech was always *but* a political subject of the Czar", "*whence* we had removed", "*whither* my meandering reverie had led me", "learning [was] reviled as *hapless* and Jews were not ashamed to *wax* rich selling pork"? What is the significance of these "buts", "whithers", "whences", and "waxes"?

One of the clues to understanding Klein's archaisms is in his translation of a fragmentary song from medieval Hebrew into Middle English. Historical context is preserved, but the cultural context is lost. The gap between Middle English and medieval Hebrew simply cannot be bridged by linguistic devices alone, as Klein implies. The archaism, when not used ironically, is a mimetic verbal gesture. I am convinced that it is, essentially, the writer's attempt to make present a bygone era, or a bygone writer, through the wilful use of words or syntax characteristic of the past era or writer. The artist, as Paul Klee said in his epitaph, lives "just as well with the dead as with the unborn", and if, in his attempts to get "closer to the heart of creation than usual", he does not come close enough, perhaps we should not blame him. "Whither", "wax", "whence", and "hapless" succeed in conjuring up the voice of Spenser, but whether he can be assimilated by the Kleinian world, or can be truly comfortable in such a Jewish company, is a question.

Although Klein does not fully succeed in his desire to write Hebrew prose in English, he does succeed in creating interesting connections between the two languages. In "Gloss Gimel", which contains Melech's letter describing the Sistine Chapel, Klein's diction is subjected to the tremendous tension resulting from the pull between the forces of Hebrew and English. The pull is twofold: syntactical, and also contextual, in terms of the polarized contexts of the Christian and Judaic traditions.

Klein does not abandon these tensions in "Gloss Gimel" for the sake of inventing an analogous language in the manner of Joyce. Instead, Klein strains the boundaries of English to such an ultimate degree that he just stops short of the complete shattering of language. The reader becomes aware of the emotional risk involved, for he senses that Klein has no substitute language hovering in the wings, and if the language of "Gloss Gimel" fails, then the show just can't and won't go on. Indeed, all through "Gloss Gimel", Klein is working very close to the edge which divides meaning from non-meaning. What prevents him from creating a surrogate language, is his view that language is a living, and perhaps even a holy process. The awe and reverence which are present elsewhere in the content of *The Second Scroll*, extend also to the diction, and forbid Klein's further unmooring from the basic linguistic traditions of either Hebrew or English.

On the whole, Klein is more at ease when he is altering and adding to a convention than he would be if he were inventing one. When he appropriates the Anglo-Saxon poetic convention of name lists, he uses various witty devices to achieve the inclusion of Jewish connotation. In the course of his search for Uncle Melech, the narrator examines many official documents and reads through "whole catalogues of incognitos". The most impressive of these catalogues, consists of a list of thirty-six names,[6] suggesting that these are the thirty-six secret saints of Cabbalah fame.

A close scrutiny of the names yields additional meanings. Thus, "Isac Chamouche" is a play on the Hebrew *Humash*, the name of the volume which contains the five books of the Pentateuch; "Jacob Gottlieb" is from the Yiddish compound, *Gotlieb*, and means love of God. "Samuel Galut" refers to Jewish exile through the Hebrew word *galut*, and M. Hadom" contains an obvious reference to the Hebrew word for man. "Abraham Nistar" incorporates the Hebrew word for "Secret Saint", and "Simon Rachmin" translates from Hebrew to Simon Mercy. The name "Ephraim Zacuta" leads back to the historical figure of Abraham Zacuto, a Hebrew astronomer who worked in Salamanca during the fifteenth century. "Aaron Wassertrager" is the Yiddish translation of the English

"water boy", and I. I. Segal is the actual name of a prominent Montreal poet whose work Klein translated from the Yiddish. In addition to all these vocabularic strayings in Hebrew, English, and Yiddish linguistic pastures, Klein also wanders off into the occasional inter-lingual pun, such as "Noah Venod". In Hebrew, *noah* and *venod* both have the meaning of "wandering". The name Noah therefore carries a double meaning, both in sound and in sense. In this way, through the bringing together of several languages, Klein has extended the linguistic resources at his command. The result, in practice, is not always pleasing because the disparate linguistic elements may be brought into a conflicting or inappropriate relation to one another; but such partial or occasional failure is the price paid for all experimentation.

I HAVE ANALYSED Klein's diction in such detail, not because I am especially interested in linguistic idiosyncrasies, but because I believe that close attention to a writer's diction nearly always illuminates his content, and helps us to better understand his themes. In the case of Klein, an analysis of his use of, and attitude to metaphor ("the brocade of the gold snore") would show that he considers it to be a method of discovery of the realities beyond language: "A poem is not a destination, it is a point of departure. The destination is determined by the reader. . . . A poem is not the conflagration complete, it is the first kindling".

This means that the writer, when he speaks figuratively, initiates a process which the reader must complete for himself. "The poet's function is but to point direction". In this fashion, metaphor discovers, both for writer and reader, new and as yet unnamed experiences. This is perhaps what Klein is moving towards when he has the narrator declare at the end of the quest in Israel that the key image is miracle. Miracle, by its very nature, is revelation; but poetry can also be understood as the revelation of human experience through metaphor.

If metaphor is understood as imaginative discovery, then the word "miracle" as Klein uses it is neither religious nor mystical, but secular in meaning, and subject to analytic examination. Miracle in poetry, then, takes place, not as a result of the reader's faith or belief, but as a result of the poet's simultaneous compression and fusion of a number of different meanings, which we usually perceive as separate in our ordinary experience.

Of course, the poet must combine these meanings in such a way as to guide the reader to an instantaneous imaginative perception of the experience the poem is pointing towards. And that kind of experience only becomes accessible through Wordsworth's visionary moment, Joyce's epiphany, or Klein's miracle. The writer's ultimate task is to enable the reader to see for himself through space's vapours and time's haze. Klein's fabled city lies beneath all the paradoxes, ambiguities and linguistic strangenesses of *The Second Scroll.* But the reader who is willing to nurse Klein's first kindlings into conflagrations, will inevitably come closer to the nature of his own festivals, new moons, and set times.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Joseph Leftwich, ed. *The Golden Peacock, An Anthology of Yiddish Poetry,* Cambridge, Mass. Sci-Art Publishers, 1939. p. 403, 404, 405, 406.

[2] M. W. Steinberg. "Introduction", *The Second Scroll,* Canadian edition, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1961, p. xvi.

[3] Leo Spitzer. "Linguistics and Literary History", *Linguistics and Literary History,* New York, Russell and Russell, 1962, p. 1.

[4] Desmond Pacey. "A. M. Klein", *Ten Canadian Poets,* Toronto, Ryerson, 1958, p. 287.

[5] William Poster. Review of *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems,* Poetry. Chicago. LXXV. Nov. 1949, p. 105-106.

[6] I am indebted to Phyllis Gotlieb for drawing my attention to the fact that there are thirty-six names in the list.