

THEOREMS MADE FLESH

Klein's Poetic Universe

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O, he who unrolled our culture from his scroll . . .

and a third, alone, and sick with sex, and rapt,
doodles him symbols convex and concave . . .

(“Portrait of the Poet as Landscape”)

At first I saw only geometry: triangle consorting with square, circle rolling in rectangle, the caress parabolic, the osculations of symmetry: as if out of old time Euclid were come to repeat his theorems now entirely in terms of anatomy. Theorems they are, but theorems made flesh . . .

(Gloss Gimel, *The Second Scroll*)

FROM THE ABOVE EXAMPLES, which could easily be multiplied, one can see that the world of Abraham Klein is very often seen in terms of a book (or scroll) or as a system of geometry. For he believes with the Spinoza of his “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens” that the order in the universe can be grasped by the intellect. One can reduce providence to theorems and set these down in a book; the book or system of order devised by man (including, of course, any work of art) is a metaphor for total reality.

There are good reasons for this in Klein’s cultural heritage. Jews do not, like Roman Catholics, venerate images, but they do venerate the holy scroll itself in its physical aspect. This consists of sheets of parchment sewn together into a scroll rolled at each end on to a piece of wood. In a scroll the Hebrew is copied out letter by letter by hand, and the words must remain exactly as they have been for over two thousand years. The very letters must be preserved, and are venerated as sacred objects.

Hebrew letters are very versatile. They can be used to render numbers (e.g. Yod-Aleph for 21), and the pages of the Talmud are numbered in this way. The letter Hai is especially significant since it is used as a short form of the tetragrammaton or four-letter abbreviation of the name of God. Klein concludes *The Second Scroll* with his Gloss Hai, a liturgy affirming the ultimate goodness of God's design.

For Hebrew cabbalists letters and numbers have special hidden significances. It seems certain that Klein, who begins a poem "I am no contradictor of Cabbala . . .," has been influenced by this sort of mysticism.¹ The idea of Jerusalem as princess (employed in "Yehuda Halevi, His Pilgrimage") and the interpretation of the Song of Songs in terms of spiritual marriage are Cabbalistic. Safed, a city Klein celebrates in "Greeting on this Day" and *The Second Scroll*, is chiefly noted for the school of Cabbalistic mystics who flourished there after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

The Cabbala divides itself into the speculative Cabbala, which is the "contemplation of the sensual world as it sprang from the spiritual essence of the Deity", and the practical Cabbala, which is "the Talismanic use of divine names and words for the accomplishment of certain ends". The ultimate goal is the kingdom of the Messiah.²

Klein exhibits a concern for "practical" cabbala in "Talisman in Seven Shreds". This sonnet sequence employs the legend of the golem or robot created by the rabbi to aid persecuted Jewry. In the legend the golem is brought to life by the placement under his tongue of a piece of parchment bearing the tetragrammaton, but the speaker of Klein's poem mourns the loss of the magic formula.

By way of contrast, we might note that Isaac Luria (1533-72), the chief cabbalist of Safed, "invented a whole system of amulets, conjurations, mystic jugglery with words and numbers, and a process of ascetic practices whereby the powers of evil might be overcome."³

The Cabbala was very influential in Poland, the land of Klein's ancestors, after the sixteenth century. Here was founded Chassidism, a mystical reform movement which aimed at a more direct experience of the divine soul, and here abounded individuals "who, by manipulating the letters spelling out the Divine Name, were believed to exercise authority over spirits."⁴ Klein customarily speaks of illness in terms of possession by defiant evil spirits, and notes the benevolent presence within himself of his ancestors in "Psalm XXXVI, a psalm touching genealogy".

The Cabbala "taught a doctrine of unbroken intercourse between God and the

world.” God’s creation is matter, but is “ablaze with soul”. God needs to establish His identity:

He is the *En Sof*, the Endless or Boundless one, who like Spinoza’s substance, cannot be designated by any known attribute, but who is best called *Ayin* (Non-Existent). Hence in order to make His existence known at all, the Deity was obliged or wished to reveal Himself to at least some extent. In other words, He had to become active and creative in order to make Himself manifest.⁵

God here seems to be motivated by the same need that motivates Klein’s poet in “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape”. Creation is self-realization; one must create in order “to be”. The poet’s attempt at self-definition through art parallels God’s desire to make himself manifest. More than this, it is an attempt to realize the godhead innate in every man and is thus an approach to the Messianic kingdom of the spirit.

The Cabbala has supported its more extreme doctrines by giving the letters, words and names of the Bible special meanings. This can be done by using the numerical equivalents of the letters, by treating individual letters as initials or abbreviations of other words, or by substituting the preceding or following letter of the alphabet. Klein does not indulge in such extreme verbal jugglery, but his attempts at a bilingual poetry and the significance he attaches to alphabetical characters (and to puns and other figures of speech), can be considered in the light of the Cabbalistic belief in the magic properties of language. Klein may not share the literal belief in magic, but he is certainly influenced by it.

Thus, when he discusses the faith of French-Canadians, it is natural for him to see a wall-crucifix as an “agonized Y”. Similarly, it is natural for him to think of art as a divine faculty. Michelangelo is for Klein in much more than a trivial sense the Archangel Michael. For the world is One, and art is a kind of communication with the perfect whole. Man collaborates in God’s continuous creation. Therefore a connection in language (and, by extension, any connection of any system — whether it be geometry, heraldry or the law) is a true statement about the whole universe. Seeing creation whole is a matter of partaking in it through the activity of metaphor.

IT IS USEFUL, after this introduction, to examine the development of those persistent and recurrent metaphors that give to Klein’s particular

vision of the universe the coherence of myth. We have seen how persistent in his work is the general notion of the universe as God's writ; we may now briefly consider the most important features of the microcosm that is Klein's writ.

The figure that dominates Klein's earliest poetry is certainly the Jew as dwarf or clown, and, more important, as martyr and wanderer. The clown is an aspect of the martyr; hunted and persecuted by his enemies, the Jew defends himself by narrowing the scope of his world and by a retreat into self-deprecating humour. "I will dwarf myself," declares Childe Harold, "and live in a hut." This dwarfing process can be seen in the creation of the comic and charming fairy-tale world that takes up most of the latter part of *Hath Not A Jew*. Here is a pleasant diminutive world peopled by dwarfs, children, homunculi and elves. Love prevails, and life's problems are scaled down, as in "Bestiary", where a little Jewish boy is able to hunt down the persecuting beast, Nebuchadnezzar, in the pages of the Bible. This poetry is full of the association of the words "little" and "Jew". The little, it seems, can be enough if it is self-contained and self-sustaining, as in "Dr. Dwarf", where all ills are cured by the magic of the Doctor, a sort of diminutive Messiah.

But the Jew is also engaged in a more positive struggle, the journey back to Zion. This journey is for Klein a symbolic representation of each individual's struggle to achieve wholeness within himself and harmony with his environment. Israel is to be both a physical and a spiritual homecoming for the Jew; the miracle operates on a cultural and a personal level. The goal can be seen in terms of the young poet's love for a beloved woman. She is seen as the fair princess of chivalry, and the union with her is analogous to the spiritual marriage of God and his people on their Holy Land.

Because a "Christian" civilization has betrayed the ideals of chivalry in mistreating the Jews, Klein is able in "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" to describe the swastika as "a cross with claws". But he borrows the conventions of mediæval chivalry to express his vision of the quest for Zion that is also the quest for personal integrity.

Both personal love and Zionism are related to the cyclic pattern of nature. In the activities of love and procreation man exists in harmony with the purposes of nature. On the land Israel the Jewish people can exist as an organic unity in a way that it cannot in the ghetto of cultural solidarity. Nevertheless, this cultural unity is also related to the cycle of nature, though at one remove from it. For it is the symbolic expression of the soul of the people in past generations and it needs only to be reunited with the land to take on a new vitality.

Underlying Klein's use of the natural cycle is a concept of the eternal unchanging order of things. Klein believes in an ultimate order, in an absolute justice that will ensure Jewry's recovery. Thus he often employs the figure of the circle, the perfect expression of the world's unity, and speaks in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" of the One creation that is contained in God:

For thou art the world, and I am part thereof; he who does violence to me, verily sins against the light of day; he is made a deicide.⁶

Man is a part of the One, a fragment praying unto perfection.

As a circle that must periodically re-establish itself as a circle, the moon is a fit symbol for the fluctuating human power of creativity. Klein's moon focuses within itself all the welter of human emotions with which wholeness must be fashioned. The poet of "Business" is "a hawk of the moon", and Klein speaks in "Preface" of poetic fame as a matter of setting one's thumbprint on the moon. The moon is identified with an amazing variety of objects — charming or grand or sinister — in Klein's early poetry. It is usually an indicator of his mood and the focus of his poetic universe.

In "Greeting on this Day" terrified Jews "see the moon drip gore." In "Design for Medieval Tapestry" the moon is "a rude gargoyle in the sky" of a Christian and Judæophobic world. But in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" the moon is God's "little finger's fingernail", and in "Haggadah" it is a golden platter in the sky.

In "Letters to One Absent" the moon is a mirror in which lovers find each other, and in "Psalm XXI" it is the seal of God upon his open writ; it appears to be the creative lens for both God and man, that area of the soul in which man and God are joined. The force that enables man to love and to create works of art analogous to God's creation is the God within him. The moon may then be said to function in Klein's early poetry as a symbolic expression of the creative world-soul.

It is significant, then, that in the time of his greatest disillusionment and doubt about the nature of the order in the universe Klein's moon becomes a "smooth hydraulic dynamo." For the poetry of the middle and late thirties suggests that if there is a God man has no meaningful contact with Him. The tetragrammaton, the talisman that once enabled man to exercise the creative power of the God within, has been shredded and has lost its efficacy.

The figure that dominates this poetry is the golem or mechanical man. In this perfectly mechanical and materialistic age the poet, who represents creative

man, has become obsolete. In "Barricade Smith: His Speeches", which contains the image of the hydraulic moon, the poet is caricatured as a fool wasting his energies on "stars archaic and obsolete dew".

In "Manuscript: Thirteenth Century" Klein's fair princess, once the symbolic expression of love's fulfillment, gives herself to a villain and is brought to ruin, and in "Barricade Smith: His Speeches" she is demoted to debutante. Barricade Smith, like a true knight, loves her "from afar", but she marries first "the tenth cousin of the Czar" and then a "closer relative of a deposed king", whom she eventually divorces and gives two million dollars as "a little tip".

The poetry of the early forties, however, expresses the recovery from this disillusionment in a reassertion of the figures that dominated the earliest poetry. The Jew as wanderer or spiritual seeker, the fair princess, the Utopian land of Israel, the moon-mirror and the natural cycle are all restored to their original significances.

There are changes and new features, however. The notion of a cosmic court of law by which Jewry's enemies are to be condemned is introduced in order to suggest the justice that must ultimately prevail in the universe. Related to this is the curious fact that the comic dwarf and the mindless golem (or automaton) seem now to be combined in Hitler, the arch-villain and chief disruptive influence in Klein's universe. What had seemed mechanical and inhuman is not, it appears, of any ultimate significance. Hitler is nothing more than a frustrated little man on the rampage, even though the restoration of harmony in Klein's universe is now dependent upon his destruction.

It is interesting that Klein now refuses to see the Jew as a comic dwarf. The Jew as martyr and seeker after perfection has eclipsed the Jew as clown, and the godlike Uncle Melech is lurking in the wings.

In the poem "Autobiographical" (1943), which seems to mark the midpoint of Klein's development, the poet's personal quest for the "fabled city" of innocence and security foreshadows the career of Uncle Melech, but the city sought by this particular wandering Jew is not the actual Jerusalem (or even Safed); it is the enchanted Montreal of his childhood. This realization leads us inevitably to the truth that any city can be a fabled city, that each man has a personal Zion of the imagination.

THIS NOTION, which was at least implicit in Klein's earlier poetry, now brings him to the exploration of the Canadian scene that dominates the poetry of the late forties. This study of Canada provides another opportunity to express his view of man's place in the universe. The belief in man's divine creativity, his ability to unite himself to other men and even to God through self-expression, underlies the experiments in a bilingual poetry. Language is a substantial magic that can unite men in sympathy.

In the poetry of the "Canadian" period the figure of the dwarf-clown is found again, but he is not now a villain or a specifically Jewish hero. He is Everyman. He is individual man as a minority of one — as martyr and clown and wanderer and hero combined. He is the beleaguered and yet comical French-Canadian of "Political Meeting", the Indian in his "grassy ghetto", the lone bather immersed in animal delight, the isolated poet, and, finally, the "nth Adam", who is not only the poet but every man with the creative power of God lying dormant in him.

Because Klein is feeling his way into the problems of a Christian society in his French-Canadian poems he now gives to Christian symbols a more positive significance than he once did. This is, of course, a necessary consequence of the belief that Montreal may be as much a fabled city as Safed. Man's hopes can be centred upon the Oratoire de St. Joseph as well as Safed, or, more practically, upon a Saskatchewan grain elevator. Klein's discovery of his favourite middle-eastern landscape in the "Josephdream" of the grain elevator signifies his realization that Utopia might be anywhere, though it is probably in Israel for the Jew. This enables us to see the Utopian Israel of *The Second Scroll* as a symbolic expression of every man's imagined home.

In this poetry we lose sight of the beautiful princess. Love is presented as a memory, a remembered magic at the top of Mount Royal. The creative moon, too, has vanished (though it reappears in *The Second Scroll* which concludes with "new moons, festivals and set times"). But the figure of the circle remains very prominent. We find (in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape") "the mirroring lenses forgotten on a brow", and the poet wearing his zero as an ambiguous garland; we find both the natural cycle and its cultural equivalent in the movement of the rocking chair and the Anjou ballad.

For the first time water becomes very important. Since the sea is a traditional symbol for birth and renewal, it is curious that Klein, who was always concerned with various kinds of resurrection, did not use it before.⁷ In *The Rocking Chair* he does so in order to suggest both the neglected state of the submerged poet and

the birth of a shining new world in his imagination. The poet's submersion can be (like the cultural ghetto of the Jew) a kind of protection. It offers the comfort every man may take from the exercise of his imagination, and provides a home in the private world of memories and hopes. Klein writes in "Lookout: Mount Royal" of

the photographer's tripod and his sudden faces
 buoyed up by water on his magnet caught
 still smiling as if under water still . . .

The deep well of memories, instincts and creative impulses can become one with the creative lens; thus, water serves the function the moon served in the early poetry.

The suggestion is that man can express his personal experience of the universe in the work of art, a distinct and communicable microcosm. In *The Rocking Chair* Klein re-creates childhood memories; in "And in That Drowning Instant" he submerges himself once again in racial and cultural memories, but surfaces, so to speak, in the re-creation of the experience as poetry.

In the poetry of *The Rocking Chair* geometry tends to replace law as the system used to suggest the ultimate order of the universe. This is a subtler way of expressing faith in the stability and unity of creation since it is less dependent than law upon human notions of morality. The further suggestion of the use of the alphabet and of scroll imagery is that the universe may contain a message from God.

Man's organized perception can at least approximate God's creativity. In "Krieghoff: Calligrammes" the artist employs a magic language to communicate with God, to participate in His creation. By ordering the "blank whiteness" of his experience he enables himself and his world to be known.

This brings us back to the solitary man who is Everyman. In *The Second Scroll* we find a protagonist, Uncle Melech, who, as the successor to Childe Harold, Solomon Warshawer and Yehuda Halevi, is the wandering Jew, and, thus, Jewry itself. He is also Abraham Klein. And beyond this he is the creative man, and, thus, the Messiah. For the Messiah can finally be identified as the creative man who seeks and discovers God in himself.

Klein's chief heroes — Spinoza, Yehuda Halevi, Euclid, Michelangelo — have always been creative men reaching to God and attempting to establish His order. Man is the nth Adam, a solitary individual whose task is that of every individual before him — to perceive and express and thus re-create the universe in order

to define it as a context for himself. The God within, the lens, must focus in itself the whole of the God without. All self-expression, whether it result in a system of geometry, the Anjou ballad, a rocking chair, a Hebrew brand-name or the Sistine Chapel, is a means to this end.

Klein's own interpretation of the Sistine paintings is an exercise of language as magic. The ceiling is seen as geometry and expressed in language that vividly re-creates its physical presence at the same time as it describes the glory and the dangerous limitation that is the human condition. Man is depicted by Michelangelo ("say rather the Archangel Michael") as a potential god caught in the perilous wheels that seem to determine suffering and death. He is able to achieve divinity in an art that may communicate its infinite meaning to individuals of succeeding generations. Klein contends:

It well may be that Michelangelo had other paradigms in mind: there is much talk of Zimzum and retraction; but 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 or imagined. Such art is eternal and to every generation speaks with fresh coeval timeliness. In vain did Buonarrotti seek to confine himself to the hermeneutics of his age; the Spirit intruded and lo! on that ceiling appeared the narrative of things to come, which came indeed, and behold above me the parable of my days.

Melech-Klein finds in the ceiling a prophecy both of the Jewish suffering of the twentieth century and of the Messianic era that is to follow. Here we certainly have art as a communication with God.

Klein's own art in *Gloss Gimel* involves the creation of a rich prose heightened by effects of sound, rhythm, sensual imagery and metaphor to the power of poetry, a language like that he employed in parts of "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens." With "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape", these are surely his most powerful and moving performances. Few English poets of the twentieth century have been capable of such sustained and concentrated and controlled passion. But then, few modern poets have retained the kind of belief in man and God that would enable them to see their own utterance as fiat.

FOOTNOTES

¹ A. M. Klein, "Desideratum", *Contemporary Verse* (June-Sept. 1943), 3.

² "Cabbala", *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, 614-15.

³ *Ibid.*, 618.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 619.

⁶ The passage, “he who does violence . . . a deicide”, which is strikingly similar to Melech’s remarks about deicide in *The Second Scroll*, does not occur in *Hath Not A Jew . . .* but only in the poem’s original publication in *The Canadian Forum*, XI (1931), 453-54.

⁷ Milton Wilson has called *Hath Not a Jew . . .* “the driest book in Canadian poetry” (*Canadian Literature* No. 6, 12) because it has virtually no water imagery. But in *The Rocking Chair*, as Wilson notes, water is related to man’s submerged life in such poems as “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape”, “The Break-Up”, “Dress Manufacturer: Fisherman”, “Lookout: Mount Royal” and “Lone Bather”.

