

Sidney J. Stephen

## ADAM IN EXILE: A. M. KLEIN'S PORTRAIT OF THE POET AS LANDSCAPE

Tom Marshall ends his introduction to *A. M. Klein* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1970) by expressing the opinion that

Klein has bequeathed to his successors the task of creating their country. The emphasis on space and landscape in "Grain Elevator" and "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is echoed in the work of Margaret Atwood and Margaret Avison. Klein's "nth Adam", the unacknowledged legislator of a new Canada of the spirit, may be found in the poems of Gwendolyn MacEwen and Joe Rosenblatt, and even in Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (p. 25).

Marshall's point is well taken, even if one does not completely agree with his closing remark that Klein is "the man who has come closer than any other Canadian Poet to greatness" (p 25). The phrase "nth Adam" is taken from "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape", and this poem, coming as it does after nearly twenty years of writing and publishing poetry<sup>1</sup> appears to present a view on what a poet's role might be in the society in which he finds himself. For this reason alone, if for no other, the poem might be accorded a close reading, an exploration of the idea of the "poet-as-Adam" which seems to have been a personal reflection of the poet.

Much of Klein's work is soundly based in Jewish tradition, and his knowledge of (and esteem for) that tradition is always evident, though as M. W. Steinberg has noted:

His was a continuing struggle between belief and disbelief, an attempt, not really successful, to reconcile his ancestral faith with his acceptance of his sceptical, contemporary society.<sup>2</sup>

An attempt at a reconciliation of this sort is dominant in "Portrait of the Poet", and this is done by way of drawing on the Jewish concept of Adam as he appears in both the Old Testament and in the Book of Zohar, a tract which is central to the doctrines of the Jewish Kabbalah. Klein was quite at home

with the Kabbalah; he mentions the "cirque of the Cabbalist" in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens", and alludes to the "wonders" of Baal Shem Tov, one of the leading Kabbalists of the eighteenth century in "Of Kith and Kin". Further, in his "Desideratum" the poet states, "I am no contradictor of Cabbala. . . ."

Probably the greatest influence on present-day Kabbalah is the school of thought fostered by Isaac Luria of Safed, who taught in that city in the mid-sixteenth century. He placed great emphasis on the magical manipulations of words, symbols, letters interchangeable with numbers, as a means of communication with God, or as a means of influencing events on earth.

Luria taught that *Adam Kadmon*, the physical "reflection" of the Creator, had had a hand in the creation of all life and forms, but that in bringing about this creation an imbalance had occurred between the powers of judgement, which resulted in a chaotic beginning for the world of original forms. Luria refers to this chaos as a result of the "breaking of vessels", or the creation of everything in a flawed state, the result of which was, as Gershom Scholem puts it, that "since that primordial act, all being has been a being in exile, in need of being led back and redeemed".<sup>3</sup>

This "redemption" was to have been carried out through Adam, the original man of Genesis, who was a "great soul", entrusted with the duty of collecting the strayed emanations of *Adam Kadmon* and restoring order in the universe, by virtue of his meditation and spiritual actions. However, Adam was himself the microcosm of *Adam Kadmon*, and his "fall" or failure, parallels the "breaking of the vessels". Adam's failure was the result of a premature union between the male and female aspects of the "great soul", and Adam, who had been clothed in "the garment of light", an indication of his perfect state, was stripped of his garment and placed in exile into this world with the stature of an ordinary human being, except that in his soul he remained the microcosm of *Adam Kadmon*.<sup>4</sup> Thus for Luria, and the modern Jewish Kabbalist, each of Adam's successors is also responsible for the redemption of man. In effect, *all* men are Adam, possible Messiahs, in exile but capable of redeeming mankind.

It is this exile which is described in the first section of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape". The poet does not even have the solace of death, since while "It is possible that he is dead", it is equally "also possible that he is alive". Worse than that: he is an exile,

is, if he is at all, a number,  
an x, a Mr. Smith in a hotel

register,—incognito, lost,  
lacunal.

In the second section, we see the exiled poet living among other men but clearly not one of them, set apart as it were by virtue of his profession as poet.

As was the case with the original Adam, the poet has been "exiled" because of a sin. His was a sin of pride, of trusting his "quintuplet senses" rather than God his creator. Like the original Adam, who knew that the fruit was forbidden but ate in spite of that at Eve's insistence, the poet knew that he should have trusted in God rather than in his senses, "in whom he put, as he should not have put, his trust", but at the insistence of his Muse (generally represented as female, at least for the male poet) he "ate of the fruit" and was damned.

In explicitly sexual terms, Klein tells of the first encounters with poetry and language. In "his travels over that body", the poet recognizes "his own", since the poem is created from within the poet, as Eve was created from within Adam, from his rib. "And then remembering how this made a change in him/affecting for always the glow and growth of his being", are lines that would appear to indicate the changes felt by Adam when, having failed to gather the lost emanations of *Adam Kadmon*, he was stripped of his garment of light and reduced to what Scholem refers to as his "present dimensions".<sup>5</sup>

The "change in him" also refers to the fact that the poet can now be aware of "the integers of thought; the cube roots of feeling", since he has eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge. His human dimensions also allow him to sense the possibility of human achievement, "zoomed to zenith", filled with the *hubris* of man in a world which he thinks he understands—but aware too, that he is at the same time "the convict" sinner "on parole", the pun working to heighten the poet's awareness that his brief escape from the reality of his exile is owed to the words with which he writes his poetry.

Section three shows the poet aware that there are others who share his predicament: "pins on a map of a color similar to his". These men find themselves in exile too, and they react to their condition in different ways, "some go mystical, and some go mad." Only other poets can understand the mutual solitude of their kind, yet they "quarrel and surmise/the secret perversions of each other's lives", sharing the knowledge of a common sin and the resulting fall.

Although every individual must share the work of *tikkun*, the Kabbalistic restoration of order, not all are capable of doing so. Yet these others are

accepted in the world of men, whereas the poet in exile is not. In section four of "Portrait", the poet considers his surroundings and sees other men who appear to have taken his place in the world. They "have come forward to pose/in the shivering vacuums his absence leaves." The poet, in a "poetic ghetto" to use Milton Wilson's term,<sup>6</sup> must ask himself why this is so, and he concludes (in section five) that it is "stark infelicity" rather than the pursuit of "Fame, the adrenalin" which has placed him outside the realm of other men. Having grasped the possibility of redemption, the poet cannot rest until he has created the world in a perfect state. The means by which he shall do this is poetry—the mystic arrangement of word and symbol which is central to the Kabbalistic doctrine of man working with God in the process of Creation.<sup>7</sup>

In section six of "Portrait", we see for the first time the "poet-Adam" at work. The term "nth Adam" implies an infinity of Adams; and by choosing this metaphor, and that of "Landscape", which itself implies a picture or state of scenery on land which has been captured and recorded by paint, film or memory, but which is involved in a perpetual cycle of change, Klein indicates that the present Adam is but one point on a continual cycle which reaches back to the original Adam and goes forward into infinity. As the present Adam, the poet "seeds illusions", doing what he can to move mankind closer to a return from exile in this world.

Not the least of the poet-Adam's responsibilities is the creation of himself as a redeemed man. Since "to praise the world . . . is breath to him", then to praise man in his poetry is to re-create man. Doing so, the poet-Adam breathes air into his own nostrils, "air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart", the phrase bringing to mind the description of Creation in Genesis 2:7-8.

Part of the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition holds that God first created Adam as *golem*, a man of clay and earth who was shown the earth and all its future generations by the Creator while he was in this mute, inanimate state.<sup>8</sup> This was done on the second day of Creation, before Adam was enjoined to "name and praise", and so it is only "in imagination" that the poet-Adam is able to view the earth in "its total scope", though this experience is not without precedent. Now, however, Adam is poet-Adam, and "this he would like to write down in a book!"<sup>9</sup>

The poet-Adam's task is pronounced in concrete terms in the stanza,

To find a new function for the  
declass craft archaic like the

fletcher's; to make a new thing;  
to say the word that will become  
sixth sense;

The sixth sense would be the means by which the poet-Adam would be able to "bring new forms to life, anonymously, new creeds—", for this is what is required of him if he is to fully participate in the re-creation of fallen Man. The "new forms" would be redeemed men, collected from exile away from the ordered world of the original Creation by the poet-Adam's correct use of the words and symbols at his disposal. Creating poetry, that is "naming and praising" the world "anonymously", the poet-Adam hopes to "pay back the daily larcenies of the lung!" to justify his own existence by giving as much *to* life as he *takes* from it.

Finally, the poet-Adam "makes of his status as zero a rich garland/a halo of his anonymity". The image of the "zero" may be interpreted in several ways. It is first of all an indication of the poet's position in the world, as was made clear in the opening stanzas: the poet as "dead", "beyond recognition", "a dot in a government table". It is also an indication of the relationship between the poet and the cycle implied in the secondary metaphor of the poem, that of a changing landscape apprehended in a "portrait", just as the poet himself has been shown in various stages of his own cycle. Most important, however, is the "zero" as signifying a circle, a line without beginning or end, the form of which has long been recognized as a symbol for Unity, the same Unity towards which the original Adam and all succeeding Adams must strive, until all men are redeemed. By embracing his "status as zero", and making of it a "halo", the poet turns exile into the means by which he may bring men closer to *tikkun*, making a negative "status" into a positive starting point: the Kabbalists's "idea of negative existence" being that "negative existence bears hidden in itself, positive life."<sup>10</sup>

Reconciled to his role, the poet is left "alone, and in his secret shines/like phosphorus." This image is very interesting in that it is clearly the poet himself who "shines". Like phosphorus, which sheds light as a product of decay, the poet too is in a sense regaining his "garment of light" by virtue of his returning to a more basic condition. Klein is indicating that only by embracing "anonymity", rejecting "*Fame*, the adrenalin", and working "alone" at his craft can the poet come to "shine". The final phrase, "At the bottom of the sea" first strikes the reader as unduly pessimistic, perhaps, in view of the generally positive closing stanza; however, if one takes "the bottom of the sea" as the ultimate destination of the poet, the line forms a connection and summing up

for the two central metaphors of the poem, and provides a very hopeful conclusion. The sea-bottom is the eventual resting-place for all "landscape" in the natural cycle as well, but in the same cycle it is also the mother of mountains to come.

## NOTES

1. David Rome, *Jews in Canadian Literature, A Bibliography* (Montreal, Jewish Public Library, 1962), pp. 24-98.
2. M. W. Steinberg, "Poet of a Living Past: Tradition in Klein's Poetry", *Canadian Literature No. 25*, (September 1965).
3. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, Schocken, 1965), p. 112.
4. Erwin R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light*, (Amsterdam, Philo Press, 1969), p. 367.
5. Scholem, p. 115.
6. Milton Wilson, "Klein's Drowned Poet", *Canadian Literature*, No. 6, (1960), pp. 5-17.
7. Scholem, p. 36.
8. Scholem, p. 161.
9. The relationship between Jew and books is commented on by Ludwig Lewisohn, "The Jew and the Book", in Samuel Caplan, ed., *The Great Jewish Books* (New York, Horizon, 1952), pp. 11-17. The poet-Adam is acting completely within tradition, wishing to write down what he observes, "in a book!"
10. S. L. MacGregor Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (Chicago, deLaurance, 1938), pp. 18-19.