

THE MYTH OF EXILE AND REDEMPTION IN "GLOSS GIMEL"

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The finest description of A. M. Klein's art as a response to the pressures of his age occurs in Gershom Scholem's *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*:

The more sordid, pitiful, and cruel the fragment of historical reality allotted to the Jew amid the storms of exile, the deeper and more precise the symbolic meaning it assumed, and the more radiant became the Messianic hope which burst through it and transfigured it. At the heart of this reality lay a great image of rebirth, the myth of exile and redemption. . . .¹

Scholem is, of course, not discussing Klein, of whom, quite possibly, he has never heard. His concern in this passage is with the Kabbalah, the central Jewish mystical tradition, especially as reformulated in the sixteenth century by Isaac Luria. In both *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* and his earlier *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*,² Scholem argues that the mystical system of Luria was an attempt to come to terms with the terrible shock of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the worst disaster to befall the Jewish People since the beginning of the Exile. As Scholem shows, Lurianic Kabbalah grows out of a conviction that the experience of exile, the central Jewish experience, is an essential part of a process which leads to redemption. This "myth of exile and redemption" is as central to Klein's vision as it is to Luria's. It underlies, for example, his two finest poems, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" and "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape." Nowhere, however, is the myth more important than in *The Second Scroll*, which describes, as Miriam Waddington puts it, "the Jewish *Galut* (exile) and eventual *Geolah* (liberation from exile)."³

¹Trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1960), p. 2.

²(Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941).

³A. M. Klein, *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1970), p. 92.

It is in the most Lurianic section of *The Second Scroll*, "Gloss Gimel," that the myth of exile and redemption achieves its most powerful expression. "Gloss Gimel" is a response to a historical disaster even greater than the expulsion from Spain: the destruction of most of European Jewry by the Nazis. Melech, the uncle of the narrator of *The Second Scroll*, describes Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in which, like Scholem's Kabbalists, he sees the terrible events of his day transformed into "a great image of rebirth, the myth of exile and redemption." In elaborating this image, Melech shows that he is familiar with the essential elements of Luria's system. This would be clear if only from his reference to the concept of "zimzum and retractations" (p. 106),⁴ Luria's main contribution to the Kabbalah. Luria's predecessors had developed a theory of creation through emanation according to which God in His innermost being, known as *En-Sof* or the Infinite, is hidden beyond human apprehension. But He makes His presence known throughout the universe by a process of emanation or unfolding through ten distinct stages known as *sefiroth*. The *sefiroth* in their entirety are known as *Adam Kadmon* or Primordial Man. That is, when God is fully manifest to man, he appears as man in his purest form. What is new in Luria is his mythic account of the dynamics of this process of emanation. According to Luria, the process begins with the *tsimtsum* (Klein's "zimzum") or withdrawal of God into Himself, which creates a "primordial space . . . and makes possible the existence of something other than God and His pure essence."⁵ A light, consisting of the *sefiroth*, then emanates from *Adam Kadmon*, God in his creative aspect, and is captured in vessels designed to complete the process of creation. But a cosmic disaster occurs, known as *shevirath ha-kelim* or the Breaking of the Vessels, and the vessels shatter under the impact of the light. This is the origin of evil. Evil will be defeated and the universe will be redeemed only when the fragments of the broken vessels have been gathered together and restored, and this process of restoration, known as *tikkun*, depends on men acting in accordance with Divine Law. Scholem points out that both *tsimtsum* and *shevirah* are images of exile, *tsimtsum* of the exile of God "from His totality into profound seclusion"⁶ and *shevirah* of the exile of the Creation from its Creator. In terms of this

⁴All quotations of *The Second Scroll* are from the New Canadian Library edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1969).

⁵Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 111.

⁶Scholem, *Major Trends*.

myth, the Exile of the Jews, so cruelly exacerbated by the expulsion from Spain, can be seen as a holy mission — to go to every corner of the universe so as to hasten the process of *tikkun* by gathering together all the fragments scattered by the *shevirah*.

Klein is very clear about the link between Melech's account of the Sistine Chapel in "Gloss Gimel" and Lurianic Kabbalah. In the last chapter of *The Second Scroll*, "Deuteronomy," Melech has made his way to "the Synagogue of Rabbi Isaac Luria" (p. 87) where he discourses on the two great Kabbalistic themes: *Maaseh Breshith*, the story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis; and *Maaseh Merkabah*, the vision of God's chariot in the Book of Ezekiel.⁷ When the narrator of *The Second Scroll* tells us that "it is standing beneath the figure of Ezekiel" that Melech views Michelangelo's "scenes of the first chapter of Genesis" (p. 51, italics mine), he is deliberately linking "Gloss Gimel" to both *Maaseh Merkabah* and *Maaseh Breshith*.⁸ Surprisingly, however, Melech's one explicit reference to Luria is dismissive: "There is much talk of zimzum and retractations," he says, before going on to elaborate his own interpretation in which, he implies, "zimzum and retractations" play no role. What are we to make of this? We must begin by recognizing that, in fact, Melech never does make use of the concept of *tsimtsum* in his account of the Sistine Chapel. For reasons that should become clear, *tsimtsum* is not as useful for Melech's interpretation as the other two aspects of Luria's system, *shevirah* and *tikkun*. There can be no question, however, of Melech's rejecting Kabbalah as a whole. In fact, Melech is nowhere more of a Kabbalist than when, to the casual observer, he seems to turn his back on Kabbalistic interpretations of the ceiling. He argues that, even if Michelangelo did seek to illustrate the doctrine of "zimzum and retractations," as some have suggested, there is no reason to limit oneself to that interpretation:

⁷Scholem, *Major Trends*.

⁸G. K. Fischer (*In Search of Jerusalem: Religion and Ethics in the Writings of A. M. Klein* [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975], pp. 200-01) notes the link between Melech's position under Ezekiel and *Maaseh Merkaba*. The narrator's comments about where Melech stands and what he sees are inconsistent with "Gloss Gimel" itself. First, there is nothing in "Gloss Gimel" to suggest that Melech is standing beneath the figure of Ezekiel. Second, the paintings described in "Gloss Gimel" do not portray "the first chapter of Genesis." All of them are based on the Book of Genesis, but only the three at the west end of the chapel are based on its first chapter, the chapter which is the theme of *Maaseh Breshith*. The effect of these inconsistencies is to emphasize the links between "Gloss Gimel" and the two Kabbalistic discourses.

... Inspiration's very substance and entity proliferate ... with significances by [the artist] not conceived nor 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 appears the narrative of things to come, which came indeed, and behold above me the parable of my days. (p. 106)

This view of Michelangelo's painting as a text with as many meanings as readers is, in itself, profoundly Kabbalistic. To the Kabbalists the text is the Torah, the Pentateuch, which, as the Word of God, has an "infinite capacity for taking on new forms." The Torah "eternally sends out new rays of light. . . . no single interpretation of the Torah in human language is capable of taking in the whole of its meaning" since it is "the living incarnation of the divine wisdom."⁹ This is precisely Melech's attitude to the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Paradoxically, because Melech holds this text in such high esteem, he feels perfectly free to "misread" it, recreating his own vision of the divine wisdom which it incarnates. On one level Melech may appear to contradict Michelangelo's intention, but on another, profounder level his misreading of Michelangelo's text is no more or less valid than "the hermeneutics of [Michelangelo's] age." Each interpretation is only one of an infinite number of rays sent out by the living incarnation of the divine wisdom.

Melech's most audacious misreading of Michelangelo's text is seen in his decision to read it backwards, in reverse chronological order, beginning with *The Drunkenness of Noah* over the entrance and ending with *The Separation of Light and Darkness* over the altar. In the enormous body of literature on Michelangelo, there is only one precedent for this approach. In his classic study of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Charles de Tolnay claims that it is a "unified whole" which makes sense only when the central panels are read "in a sequence opposed to their chronological order."¹⁰ This is only one of many ideas which Klein borrows from de Tolnay and uses for his own purposes, for, as even a very brief account of de Tolnay's interpretation shows, his concerns and Klein's are very close. De Tolnay (pp. 40-45) sees Michelangelo's painting as a vast, coherent Neo-Platonic allegory illustrating the circular process of *emanatio* and

⁹Scholem, *Major Trends*.

¹⁰Charles de Tolnay, *The Sistine Ceiling: Michelangelo* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1945), II, 22. De Tolnay emphasizes that he is the first of Michelangelo's commentators to have formulated this interpretation (pp. 129-30).

remanatio, the emanation of God, the One, down into the world of material existence and the return upward of the human soul, imprisoned in the body, to God. This return movement, *remanatio* or *ascensio*, is a *deificatio*, a progressive deification of man as he realizes his innate faculties. In de Tolnay's account of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, this return movement begins with scenes of chaos and corruption, the first of which is *The Drunkenness of Noah*, and ends with a vision of deified man in the final scenes near the altar. Melech speaks of the "magic circles" (p. 112) he sees on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and this phrase applies equally well, on the one hand, to the Neo-Platonism which de Tolnay describes and, on the other, to the Kabbalah. The Neo-Platonic circle of the emanation, answered by a return which reaches a climax in the deification of man, has obvious similarities to the Kabbalistic circle of the emanation of the *sefiroth* which leads, first, to the breaking of the vessels and, then, to the eventual restoration through *tikkum* of *Adam Kadmon*, God in the form of man. Detailed comparisons between Klein and de Tolnay are very rewarding, not only because they clarify the occasional obscurity, but also because they show how Klein has transformed de Tolnay's clear and elegant analysis of the Sistine Chapel ceiling into a prose poetry "proliferating with significances" like the ceiling itself.

Melech's letter is preceded by a quotation from the Book of Zechariah. Klein begins with Zechariah because Michelangelo has placed Zechariah directly over the entrance to the chapel. As the viewer moves towards the altar on the opposite side, he passes under the nine panels at the centre of the ceiling depicting scenes from Genesis. Of these nine panels, the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth are each flanked by a Prophet and a Sybil. Over the altar itself, directly opposite Zechariah, is Jonah. For each of these twelve figures — seven Prophets and five Sybils — Klein has provided a quotation from the Old Testament, all the quotations but Jonah's in the medieval Latin translation of the Vulgate.¹¹ The quotation for each Prophet, which is taken from the book of the Bible bearing his name, comments, sometimes directly and sometimes quite obliquely, on the section of Melech's letter which it accompanies. The quotation for each Sybil is taken from the book of the Prophet with whom she is

¹¹Zechariah - Zechariah 2.1; Joel - Joel 2.20; Delphic Sybil - Joel 3.6; Erithraean Sybil - Isaiah 20.5; Isaiah - Isaiah 1.11,13; Ezekiel - Ezekiel 38.2-3; Cumaeen Sybil - Ezekiel 32.29; Persian Sybil - Daniel 8.20; Daniel - Daniel 3.25; Jeremiah - Jeremiah 50.19; Lybian Sybil - Jeremiah 46.9; Jonah - Jonah 2.5-6,9.

paired. These quotations, too, comment on the text, but the main reason for their choice is that they each contain a reference to the Sybil's country. Thus, in the quotation for the Delphic Sybil, we find *GRAECORUM*; for the Eritrean, *AETHIOPIA*; for the Persian, *PERSARUM*; and for the Lybian, *LIBYES*. The one apparent exception is the quotation for the Cumean Sybil. Cumae is a town in central Italy and neither it nor Italy itself is mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel (the Cumean Sybil's pair) or in the Old Testament as a whole, for that matter. The quotation which Klein has chosen refers not to Cumae but to *IDUMAEA*, that is, Edom. One could simply say that Klein has made the best of a bad job and found a name which at least rhymes more or less with Cumae. As we shall see, though, Klein turns to his advantage this second best solution into which he has apparently been forced with a stroke of truly Kabbalistic ingenuity.

The subtitle of "Gloss Gimel" informs us that it is an excerpt from a letter, and, as such, it begins in mid-sentence. Melech's nephew says that the first page of the letter, which he received from a priest, Monsignor Piersanti who tried to convert Melech, is missing, but he does not know why (p. 43). In actual fact, however, "Gloss Gimel" is not an excerpt, but a complete, self-contained work of art. It is the first six words — "... to the Sistine Chapel; and so" — which suggest that something is missing. Specifically, the phrase "... to the Sistine Chapel" is grammatically incomplete since it lacks a subject and predicate, and the phrase "and so" is logically incomplete since it introduces a conclusion for which the argument is missing. In both cases, as we shall see, the difficulties disappear if we read the first sentence of "Gloss Gimel" as a continuation of the last. In other words, the structure of "Gloss Gimel" is circular, imitating the "magic circles" which Melech claims to have read in Michelangelo's ceiling, "magic circles" which symbolize the process of exile and redemption, *shevirah* and *tikkun*. When, as readers, we restore the fragmentary first sentence of "Gloss Gimel" to wholeness by bringing it together with the last, we are, in effect, performing the act of *tikkun*, the restoration of the broken vessel: "The remnant [is] whole again" (p. 111).

The "great image of rebirth, the myth of exile and redemption," is immediately introduced in the opening paragraph of "Gloss Gimel" describing Melech's passage through the corridors leading to the Sistine Chapel. The dominant symbol is water: Melech is compared first to the Jewish People crossing the Red Sea "between

walls of wind" (Exodus 14.21) on the way to freedom and then to Christ "walking on water." The corridors through which Melech passes symbolize death — "a ghostly gauntlet . . . a spectral escort" — but death is overcome by life as the corridors become a "long umbilical cord," and Melech, "with infant eagerness," experiences his vision of spiritual rebirth in the Sistine Chapel. "I lifted my eyes," says Melech, translating Zechariah's *ET LEVAVI OCULOS MEOS*, and what he sees is what Zechariah sees, man (*ECCE VIR* — "behold a man") and geometry (*ET IN MANUS EIUS FUNICULUS MENSORUM* — "and in his hands a measuring line"). The floor of the Sistine Chapel is decorated with geometric patterns which de Tolnay identifies as "*Opus Alexandrinum*" (p. 11). Klein picks up this minor detail and has Melech call the floor "alexandrine." Is he perhaps making a pun on the Greek word *alexandros* meaning defender of man, and so reading the message of man's redemption even in the apparently decorative geometry of the floor of the Sistine Chapel? In any case, what he sees on the ceiling itself is "theorems made flesh," geometry as man, the divine eternal order manifesting itself in humanity.

Before turning his attention to the nine central panels in which the working out of God's plan can be observed, Melech considers the male adolescents, the *ignudi* on the tops of the pilasters flanking the Prophets and Sybils, and the pairs of childlike *putti* on the sides of the pilasters. In these figures he sees the statement of what his nephew identifies as "his basic premise: the divinity of humanity" (p. 51). To Melech, the *ignudi*, men "like gods," mark the beginning of the process of emanation. On the "murderous medallions" at their feet are painted scenes of horror from the world of *shevirah*, the world of "cicatrice and brand-mark"; above their heads unfolds the vision of God's creativity which "proclaims divine origins." The *putti*, like the *ignudi*, also reflect the divine creative impulse but in "a less spiritual" way. As their doubleness — "the idiom of twins and doubles" — suggests, they are further from the divine Oneness from which all creation emanates, more involved in the world of change, "the dialogue of being."¹² The language of these passages is the most vivid in "Gloss Gimel." For example, when Melech says of the *putti* "they brace. They embrace, ambivalent *bambini*," the words themselves mimic the *puttis*'

¹²Melech's interpretation of the *ignudi* and *putti* recalls de Tolnay's. See especially pp. 63-67.

gestures of "embracing," "conjugation," "coupling," "contact," "touching." "Brace" is taken up into embrace; embrace is echoed by *ambivalent*, and *ambivalent* is in turn echoed by *bambini*. The words, like the *putti*, are "belly to belly, to buttock buttock, hand by thigh, and on nipples palm." It is appropriate that in the descriptions of the *ignudi* and *putti* our attention is drawn again and again to the sound of the words, to the sensuous forms in which meaning comes to life, for in this passage not only are words seen as living beings; living beings are seen as words: "Each body [of the *ignudi*] is a song echoing the Creator's voice. *Fiat!*"; the *ignudi* are "men writ big — this is the flesh majuscule." The pairs of *putti* are, in a typical Klein pun, "conjugations." They are "the idiom of twins and doubles," "the dialogue of being," "*tête-à-fêtes*," "diphthongs."

The climax of this section of "Gloss Gimel" is the "one word. . . : *The Flesh*." The Ceiling as a whole becomes a synthesis of the Word and the Flesh. As the Word, the ceiling is "a psalter," "a parable," "a testament," "the Law and Prophets." As the Flesh, it is "the human form divine," "limbs, parts, and members of the body," "organs and sinews," "living skin," "blood." Klein is clearly alluding to the Word made Flesh in John 1.14, but the concept is Kabbalistic as well. The Kabbalists link God's Word in the form of "the 613 injunctions of Holy Writ" (p. 19) to the 613 organs and members of the human body. They argue that the 613 injunctions are therefore equivalent to the body of *Adam Kadmon* and that the fulfillment of God's word leads to *tikkun*,¹³ the reconstruction of the scattered body of *Adam Kadmon*. After alluding to this belief in the phrase "the six hundred and thirteen, *curriculum taryag*" (*taryag* being formed from the Hebrew letters Tet, Resh, Yud, Gimel, which, in traditional notation, represent 613), Melech concludes this section with a vision of the Sistine Chapel ceiling as a single body, the body of *Adam Kadmon*: "One colour dominates this ceiling — the colour of living skin; and behind the coagulation of the paint flows the one universal stream of everybody's blood."¹⁴

¹³See Scholem, *Major Trends and Kabbalah*, p. 128.

¹⁴This sentence echoes, in thought and expression, both de Tolnay and Scholem: "Michelangelo's coloristic unity is not in the surface of the colors, but 'behind' them. . . . All other colors, sometimes condensed, sometimes diluted, seem to float like a liquid above [the] original color. . . . the effect of the whole is monochromatic" (de Tolnay, p. 99). "The Torah is to [the Kabbalists] a living organism animated by a secret life which streams and pulsates below the crust of its literal meaning" (*Major Trends*).

After achieving this "lofty concept," Melech turns to "the events of recent history" which seem to stand in such terrible contrast to "his basic premise; the divinity of humanity" (p. 51). "The human form divine" which he has just seen in Michelangelo's *ignudi* and *putti* reminds him of "the human form divine crippled" by the Nazis in their death camps. In the vision of evil which he calls up, that which should be whole has been broken, "reduced and broken down to its named bones, femur and tibia and clavicle and ulna and thorax and pelvis and cranium." "This wreckage," as Melech calls it, is *shevirah*, the breaking of the vessels at its most horrible, and just as the Flesh is broken, so is the Word. Melech speaks of "scattering of limbs" and of "disjected members." The Latin phrase *disiecta membra*, literally "scattered limbs," refers to disjointed, fragmentary quotations, hence the breaking of the Word. The phrase is derived from a passage in Horace, where he discusses whether a certain poet's work would be recognized as poetry if its words were rearranged and its metrical pattern destroyed. This passage, which Klein, who translated Horace,¹⁵ may well have known, throws an extremely interesting light on "disjected members," for Horace's actual words are *disiecti membra poetae* (*Satire* 1.4.62), "the scattered limbs of the poet." Horace, like Klein, presents the breaking of the Word in terms of the breaking of the Flesh; specifically he alludes to the myth of Orpheus who was torn apart by maddened Bacchantes. A similar nexus of associations seems to be at work in another "disjected members" passage at the beginning of "The Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," where the reference to "bartlett" ("Not an editorial writer bereaved with bartlett") evokes for one perceptive critic "an Orpheus dismembered into Bartlett's Quotations."¹⁶

Melech now turns to the heart of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the nine central panels, "so that [he] might understand the meaning of this wreckage." Melech reads the first four panels, which he calls "painted homilies of sin and crime," as a single unit. In this, he is following de Tolnay, who also makes a division between the first four panels and the rest (p. 20). Although Melech's specific historical

¹⁵Usher Caplan ("A. M. Klein: A Bibliography and Index to Manuscripts," in *The A. M. Klein Symposium, Re-Appraisals: Canadian Writers*, ed. Seymour Mayne [Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975], p. 120) lists three unpublished translations of Horace.

¹⁶Milton Wilson, "Klein's Drowned Poet," in *A. M. Klein, Critical Views on Canadian Writers*, ed. Tom Marshall (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1970), p. 94.

parallels are completely original, his reading is similar to de Tolnay's in that they both see the first four panels as representing a world of chaos and corruption. For Melech, these panels portray the "sordid, pitiful, and cruel fragment of historical reality allotted" to him and his fellow sufferers under the Nazis. In *The Drunkenness of Noah* he sees "the great drunkenness" of murder that "intoxicated [his] generations men of blood." *The Flood* is the deluge of the uncontained blood "overwhelming Hitler's victims." *Noah's Sacrifice* "speak[s] . . . to [Melech] . . . of recent furnaces and holocausts." The last of these panels, *The Expulsion from Eden*, portrays the wretchedness of the refugees from the Holocaust. Although this panel does not portray the Nazi horrors at their worst — it does, after all, represent survivors — it is the one in which the theme of Exile is most explicit. Hence, it is a fitting climax to this section of "Gloss Gimel."

With *The Expulsion from Eden*, the first movement of Melech's account of the nine panels is complete. Having seen in the first four panels the experience of the Jewish People under Hitler, "we approach now a fuller explication — an unfolding — of the ugly heinousness of killing." The first of the panels in this second movement, *The Creation of Eve*, is flanked by the Prophet Ezekiel and the Cumean Sybil. The punning phrase "explication — an unfolding" (explication is from the Latin *explicatio* the literal meaning of which is "unfolding") points us to Michelangelo's Ezekiel who holds an unfolding scroll. Thus Melech continues the metaphor of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling as a holy text, a Torah scroll unfolding before our eyes. *The Creation of Eve*, as Melech describes it, is itself a vision of unfolding: Eve, who rises out of Adam's side, represents the unfolding of "the chain of generation." Each man "may between his thighs compass eternity," and the murder of one man is therefore the murder of the numberless generations that would have descended from him. The fate of those who have murdered their fellow men is symbolized by the two medallions flanking the panel, which illustrate the theme of God's ruthless justice. It is in relation to this theme that the quotation assigned to the Cumean Sybil takes on special significance, for the phrase, *IDUMAEA ET REGES EJUS*, "Edom and its kings," recalls the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Kings of Edom (listed in Genesis 36) as symbolic of God's "stem judgment untempered by compassion."¹⁷ With *The Creation of Man*, "the

¹⁷Scholem, *Major Trends*.

heinousness of killing” is fully explicated. In the act of Adam’s creation, Melech sees a vision of man and God as one: “in his eyes is imaged God.” The implied charge which Michelangelo is bringing against murderers is clear: Melech “read[s] it plain and spell[s] it out — summation and grand indictment — the unspeakable *nefas* — deicide.” Melech’s reference to deicide as “the unspeakable *nefas*” is an etymological pun, for the Latin word *nefas*, meaning an impious or wicked deed, originally meant that which could not be spoken.¹⁸ At first glance this pun might seem to be an ill-conceived bit of self-indulgence, especially at such a solemn moment, but, as the beginning of the third movement of Melech’s “parable” makes clear, Klein is never more serious than when he is punning.

Melech’s reading of Michelangelo’s text has reached a crux, a word — “deicide” — which cannot be read, which is, as he says, “unspeakable” because “its syllables contradict each other.” This is perhaps the most important moment in “Gloss Gimel”; it is certainly the most problematic. Melech seems to be arguing that there is a logic in his reading of Michelangelo’s text which leads inevitably from despair to hope. Since man is God-like and God cannot be murdered, man cannot be murdered: “this is the evil possible only in its attempt, not in its perpetration.” This syllogism is very neat and totally unconvincing. In what sense is murder possible “only in its attempt?” Surely Melech has seen enough murders to know that, in a literal sense at least, this is untrue. Can it be taken in another sense? Perhaps Melech is distinguishing between individual men who can be destroyed and mankind which cannot. But there is no support for such a distinction in “Gloss Gimel,” where it is each individual man who is seen as divine, not just the species taken as a whole. The more we consider this passage, the more we realize that its logic is specious. The fact is that, despite appearances, logic has nothing whatever to do with the hope which Melech begins to express from this point on. What has really happened is that logic has been replaced by faith. Melech believes that God will not allow man to be destroyed, but, despite his show of logic, he cannot prove that what he believes is true. From the point of view of logic, then, there is a hole at the centre of Melech’s argument, a hole which he tries to paper over with a “finicky legalism” (p. 26). Is this hole in Melech’s

¹⁸There are precedents for this wordplay on *nefas* in Roman literature. Horace speaks of the *nefas* of killing children *nescios fari* (*Ode* 4.6.17-18), “unable to speak”; Vergil’s Turnus is horrified at the *nefas* of being forced to abandon his followers to *infande morte* (*Aeneid* 10.673), “unspeakable death.”

argument a flaw in "Gloss Gimel?" I think not. It is simply the most striking manifestation of what Tom Marshall calls the "precarious"¹⁹ quality of Melech's attempt throughout "Gloss Gimel" to find corroboration for his beliefs in Michelangelo's "text." More than that, it raises an issue that is central to Klein's work as a whole: the struggle to wrest some solid assurance from life that it has a meaning, the attempt — pathetic and heroic at the same time — to prove what can never be more than a matter of faith. In a passage such as this, Klein seems to speak most directly to us of his own spiritual struggle, a struggle which soon after the writing of "Gloss Gimel" was to end in tragedy.

However, at this point in "Gloss Gimel," nothing could be farther from Melech's mind than tragedy. He recalls "the covenant [which] stands between man and his destruction" — the rainbow — which he proceeds to "read" beginning the third movement of "Gloss Gimel," the restoration of "the human form divine," or *tikkun*. Melech goes through the colours of the rainbow twice, first from red to violet and then back again from violet to red:

Though bloody coursed the red and orange fevered bright,
 though the pus yellow yeasted, the gangrene green and the
 smitings waxed bruise-blue contused to indigo and the virulent
 violet, violet waned, the indigo fled, the veins throbbed azure,
 and green was the world once more and golden, high
 sanguinary and the body ruddy with health.

Melech has joined two rainbows end to end, creating, in effect, a "magic circle" in which *shevirah*, the breaking of a human body, is answered by the promise of *tikkun*, its restoration: "The remnant would be whole again."

What reminds Melech of "the covenant of sea and sky" is the panel before him, *The Separation of Heaven from the Water*, or, as he puts it, "God's palms stablishing sea and sky." But, as Melech casts his eyes over the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as a whole, he sees God's rainbow everywhere. "And that this would come Michelangelo signified it, writing on a ceiling his seven-sealed token." This puzzling reference is cleared up by de Tolnay's statement that Michelangelo used seven colours on the Sistine Chapel ceiling (p. 99). It is fascinating to observe in detail what Klein makes of this fact which, in itself, does not seem very important. To begin with, the

¹⁹"Introduction" to A. M. Klein, p. xvii.

seven colours which de Tolnay mentions are *not* the seven colours of the rainbow; this is Klein's invention. Simply to have made de Tolnay's seven colours into the rainbow and, hence, a symbol of redemption would have been striking enough, but Klein does much more. The rainbow becomes a "seven-sealed token." The phrase "seven-sealed" alludes to the book in Revelation 5.1 "sealed with seven seals." (Melech once more alludes to the book sealed with seven seals — *sigillis septem* in the Vulgate — when he speaks of Michelangelo's "sigils" [p. 112].) This continues the central metaphor which identifies the paintings which Michelangelo is "writing" as a book. In Revelation, the apocalyptic vision results from the breaking of the seven seals, but for Melech, as we have seen, the supreme vision of truth is associated with the very opposite, not with breaking what is sealed, but with sealing what is broken, with *tikkun*. As Klein's pun on "ceiling" and "sealed" indicates, "sealing" is precisely what Michelangelo's ceiling represents: the sealing of the seven-sealed token which, through an even more brilliant pun, we recognize as the token of *tikkun*.²⁰

The reading of the ceiling's seven-sealed token of *tikkun* is the most complex passage in "Gloss Gimel": "ADAM PALSYN ZAHAV YEREQ KOHL ISOTHYS ADAM-SAPIRI." These seven words (the last two items on the list make up a single hyphenated word) represent the seven colours of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. The central three present no problems: ZAHAV, YEREQ, and KOHL are the Hebrew words for yellow, green, and blue. ADAM, the first of seven, is Hebrew for red, but it also, of course, means man (traditionally created out of red clay). The rainbow, then, is an image of man, as we have already seen from Melech's earlier reading of its colours in terms of the human body. PALSYN derives from a Yiddish word for orange, *apelsin* (compare German *Apfelsine*). Why, however, does Klein drop the initial *a*, and

²⁰In defence of this reading which may strike some as overingenious, I quote Klein's own defence against the charge of "forced ingenuity" in his exegesis of "The Oxen of the Sun" from Joyce's *Ulysses*: "It is a rule touching the interpretation of documents that a document ought to be understood in that sense whereby *all* of its words receive meaning." ("The Oxen of the Sun," *Here and Now*, 1 [1949], p. 41.) The token-*tikkun* pun is no more farfetched than the Tarot-Taroh pun in the "Deuteronomy" chapter of *The Second Scroll* (p. 71). A footnote to "The Oxen of the Sun," p. 34, shows how far Klein will go in his multilingual punning. Klein argues that "the Oxen of the Sun as a symbol of fertility may be linguistically established through Semitic speech: *por*, an ox, provides the root for *pru*, multiply (Genesis 1:28); and *shemesh*, the sun, becomes the verb *shamaish* 'to serve,' and is converted into the noun *tashmish* — copulation."

why does he use a Yiddish word in a text which, we are told, is written in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic (p. 50)? The answer seems to be that, by transforming *apelsin* to PALSYN, Klein creates a pun on the Aramaic word *pulsin*, meaning blows²¹ or, to use the word from Melech's description of the rainbow, "smitings." In this way Klein introduces the idea of *shevirah*. The second last word on the list is ISOTHYS, a Hebrew word for indigo, though not the most common one. Klein's transliteration is unusual to say the least. The usual transliteration of this word, and of the Greek word from which it is derived, would be *isatis*. ISOTHYS looks much more like another Greek word, *isotheos*, meaning god-like. That Klein had this pun in mind is shown by the quotation from Daniel which accompanies this passage. Daniel uses the phrase *SIMILIS FILIO DEI*, "like the son of God." Klein could not have found a closer equivalent to *isotheos* in all the Bible. ISOTHYS, then, recalls what Melech had earlier perceived in Michelangelo's *ignudi*, that men can be "like gods." The "basic premise: the divinity of humanity" is reasserted. Of all the colours, the most interesting is the last, ADAM-SAPIRI, Hebrew for reddish-sapphire. There is a perfectly good Hebrew word for violet, so that Klein must have a special reason for this roundabout way of achieving violet by combining red and sapphire blue. For one thing, it allows him to end his rainbow as he began it, with ADAM, man, thus completing the magic circle. Less obvious but even more important is the similarity between *sapiri* and *sefirah* (the singular of *sefiroth*). In fact, as Klein was no doubt aware, it has been suggested that the word *sefirah* is actually derived from *sapir* (the sapphire being a symbol of God's radiance).²² Klein is alluding to the Kabbalistic "symbolism which identifies [the] God of the *sefiroth* with man in his purest form, *Adam Kadmon*, Primordial Man."²³ To sum up, then, ADAM PALSYN describes *shevirah*, the shattering of Primordial Man (ADAM) by the "smitings" (PALSYN) of evil; and ISOTHYS ADAM-SAPIRI describes *tikkun*, the restoration of "the human form divine" (ISOTHYS) of Primordial Man, who embodies the ten *sefiroth* (ADAM SAPIRI). This "magic

²¹For *apelsin*, see *Yiddish-English Dictionary*, ed. Alexander Harkavy, 22nd ed. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1896). For *pulsin* (singular *pulsa*) see *Milon Chadash* [A New Dictionary], ed. Abraham Even-Shoshan (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher Ltd., 1961). The Yiddish and Aramaic puns in PALSYN were suggested to me by my father, John Pollock.

²²See Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 26. Scholem gives a different derivation, from *safar*, to count (*Kabbalah*, p. 100).

²³Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 104.

circle" of *shevirah* answered by *tikkun* is symbolized at the end of the passage by the coming together of the seven colours of the rainbow into the unbroken white light of which they are fragments. "All colours melled to hope; the spectrum fused to white."²⁴

In the two panels which follow, the process of *tikkun*, which has taken place in the microcosm of man's body, extends, first, to the macrocosm of the universe and, then, to the divine source of Creation itself. In *The Creation of the Sun and the Moon*, the heavens become whole along with man their beholder: "Oh, the proliferation in the heavens as the dry bones stirred!" In *The Separation of Light from Darkness* we see *En-sof*, "the form of formlessness, unphrasable, infinite, world-quickenning anima, the shaped wind!" The vision ends with "ascensions, aliyoth, resurrections, authorizing Days. . . ." The phrase "ascensions, aliyoth" suggests various implications of the "resurrections" which have taken place. "Ascensions" recalls the Neo-Platonic *ascensio*, the return to the divine oneness which de Tolnay sees as the central theme of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. "Aliyoth," Hebrew for ascensions, has two relevant connotations here. First, it establishes that the redemption of exile is complete, for *aliyah* is the term used for the return of the Jews to Israel. The narrator speaks of his "ascension" (p. 71) to Israel, translating *aliyah* by the word Melech uses in this passage. *Aliyah* also refers to being called up to read from the Torah. The word is used in this sense earlier in *The Second Scroll* (p. 33). This linking of the ascent to God with the reading of a text is further suggested by the reference to God as "authorizing days" which echoes the phrase "the Author of their Days" at the beginning of the passage: if God is an "author," the best way to approach him is to read his text. The similarity between the beginning and the end of this passage is, of course, intentional: the magic circle of exile and redemption is completed in a sentence which is itself a circle.

After having completed his vision of *Maaseh Breshith* in Michelangelo's scenes from Genesis, Melech briefly considers the four corner spandrels which he calls "the quadruplicate communiqué from heaven," alluding perhaps to that other Kabbalistic topic *Maaseh Merkebah*, Ezekiel's vision of the four-sided chariot of God. The spandrels, like Jonah's prayer which follows, all celebrate God's

²⁴Compare de Tolnay, p. 44: "[The ceiling] is . . . flooded like Olympus with a 'white glow' . . . The Olympus of the ancients was basically the image of the accumulated hopes of the race . . ." (italics mine).

covenant with the Jews and with man in general, his promise that out of death will come a new birth, that the exiled will be redeemed. Jonah's prayer is the only one of the passages from the Prophets which is translated into English and is actually part of Melech's letter. It is an essential part of the letter, not only because its eloquent words of hope and thanksgiving are a fitting climax to Melech's reading of Michelangelo's "sigils, talismans, and magic circles," but also because it returns us, through its water imagery, to the opening of "Gloss Gimel." Jonah's prayer — "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: . . . yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption" — recalls the comparison of Melech to the Jewish People passing through the waters of the Red Sea to a new life.

In the last paragraph of "Gloss Gimel," Melech is leaving the Sistine Chapel, which in the first paragraph he had entered. The last thing he looks at is "the series of rams' skulls of which the poet had made a device to signify, some say, descent to mortality,"²⁵ recalling the "ghostly gauntlet" and "spectral escort" which marked his first approach to the Chapel. Melech, however, has achieved a vision which transcends death: "But to me, through the long marble corridors hurrying back, they were rams' horns, sounding liberation." In this final misreading of the "poet" Michelangelo's text, the rams' heads become *shofars*, rams' horns blown in synagogues to herald the New Year. This final moving sentence take us back to the sentence with which "Gloss Gimel" began. "But to me through the long marble corridors" echoes "so to me the long passage through the marble corridors"; and "the rams' horns sounding liberation" recall the "walls of wind . . . blown" to ensure the liberation of the Jewish People from Egypt. But the relationship between these two sentences is even closer, for the second provides what is missing from the first. It is only when the two ends of "Gloss Gimel" are joined together forming a great "magic circle" that the first sentence becomes whole and the logic behind the phrase "and so" can finally be understood. When we read "they were rams' horns sounding liberation to the Sistine Chapel," we see that the ostensible beginning of "Gloss Gimel" is, in a sense, *preceded* by a statement of the central theme of the work, sounded by the rams' horns and echoed by the whole of the Sistine Chapel, the theme of liberation. To put it

²⁵Compare the phrase "descent to mortality" with de Tolnay's comments identifying the rams' skulls as "symbols of death" and linking them to the "lowest zone" of the ceiling, "dedicated to the generations of mortals" (p. 77).

another way, Melech's knowledge of the Sistine Chapel, in effect, precedes his conscious experience of it; the experience itself seems to "unfold" something that has always been there, from before the beginning. In Michelangelo's "new world," Melech is about to rediscover what he, in some sense, already knows. "And so" Melech approaches the Sistine Chapel with "infant eagerness," for, even when death and exile seem to be the whole of his reality, he senses "at the heart of this reality," just waiting to take shape, "a great image of rebirth, the myth of exile and redemption."

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