

A Portrait of the Artist as Landscape: F.H. Varley and A.M. Klein

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The modern poet is so anonymously sunk into his environment that, in terms of painting, his portrait is merely landscape.
—A. M. Klein, a note to “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape”

Twentieth-century Canadian painting and poetry documents, to a startling extent, what Hugh Kenner has called “the Case of the Missing Face.” Published in *Here and Now* in 1948, Kenner’s account of the “pristine facelessness” of the Group of Seven’s landscape paintings and the “inarticulate” or “frozen” countenances found in Canadian modernist poetry suggests that the Canadian landscape has effaced the Canadian face—or perhaps more accurately, has *become* “the Canadian Face” (Kenner 208): “Nobody ever appeared in those pictures, no human form except occasionally a tiny portaging figure hidden by his monstrous canoe. Nobody was needed. The Canadian Face was there right enough, rock of those rocks, bush of those bushes” (Kenner 206). This scarcity of the human face and figure in Canadian modernist visual and verbal art attests to the predominance of landscape in our cultural imagination, something Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood have discussed at length. Indeed, the preoccupation with landscape in Canadian painting and poetry has, in a sense, “de-faced” our criticism as well. Atwood and Frye, as well as David Bentley, Douglas Jones, Tom Marshall, and W. H. New have discussed the prominence of landscape in Canadian modernist poetry, and Sandra Djwa has noted the influence of the Group of Seven’s landscape aesthetic on the “rugged” imagism of modernist poems by A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, E. J. Pratt and W. W. E. Ross.¹ These studies have not, however, pursued the “Case of the Missing Face,” its relation to the interartistic climate of

modernism, and specifically, to an important innovation of the portrait and landscape genres in Canadian painting and poetry.

The history of portraiture in twentieth-century Canadian art is synonymous with the fate of Kenner's fugitive "face." As Diana Brydon notes in "Landscape and Authenticity," the "best known Canadian paintings seem to be landscapes without people," and "[e]ven our portraits depict man as landscape" (Brydon 284, 287). Painterly self-portraits and their literary counterparts have been largely unexamined in the context of Canadian criticism, and discussions of artistic self-representation in relation to landscape have been similarly neglected. Many critics have found it sufficient to conclude, as Barker Fairley did in 1948, that Canadian artists "have landscape painting on one plane and figure painting on another and cannot easily merge them" (37). Fairley refers to painting, but his comment is arguably representative of a trend in modernist poetry as well—one that deserves the same kind of critical reassessment.

This study seeks to counter Fairley's claim through an interdisciplinary analysis of two exemplary modernist artists—Frederick H. Varley and A. M. Klein—whose self-portraits attempt this very convergence. In particular, Varley's 1937 painting, *Mirror of Thought*, and Klein's 1945 poem, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," transform the conventional functions of the portrait and the landscape by conflating the two genres. By introducing a new paradigm or sub-genre to the field of modernist representation—the portrait of the artist as landscape—these works effectively reconstitute both the portrait of the artist and the nature of interartistic studies in Canadian modernism. Moreover, they encourage an important reconsideration of the self-portrait by foregrounding the artist's desire to identify with the anonymity or ambiguity of landscape. Kenner characterizes this impulse as the Canadian artist's "pathological craving" to merge with, or be subsumed by, landscape (203). This transformation of self into landscape, portrait into panorama, conceals a further pathology in Canadian modernist art, however—one that significantly complicates Kenner's "case." In their movement towards self-effacement, Varley's *Mirror of Thought* and Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" reveal a reverse movement towards self-portrayal: that is, each artist compulsively figures in his landscapes. These works depict a subordination of the artistic self that paradoxically provides a means of self-revelation or expression—one that affords the artist a tentative identity as "landscape." This tension between the will to self-portrayal and the wish to remain faceless—"incognito, lost, lacunal" (Klein, CP 2: 635)—is strikingly exemplified by the self-portraits of Varley and Klein,

and thus invites the kind of interartistic comparison that has been too little pursued in Canadian studies.²

Though he was an original member of the Group of Seven, Varley did not consider himself a landscape painter; instead, his interest was in portraiture, and he developed an evocative colour theory to express the various moods or qualities of his subjects. From a modernist perspective, the most interesting of these subjects is Varley himself. My discussion of *Mirror of Thought*, then, will consider the relationship between the painter's self-portrait and his "psychic landscape" (Zemans, "Varley" 70). By superimposing his self-portrait on the landscape, Varley implies that landscape is not only something one sees—a "view" or "prospect" (*OED*)—but also a *way of seeing*, a mirror in which the artist sees himself. Varley's visual representation of the self-portrait as landscape will help to frame and focus the autobiographical and aesthetic innovations of A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape."³

Klein's poem, like Varley's painting, is a study in boundaries, in the dialectical tension between interiority and exteriority. In the poet's profound identification with landscape, the boundaries of self are threatened by the boundlessness of landscape. The poet's desire for integration, for salvation from self-dispersal or self-division, for panoramic or total vision, ironically becomes a fear of such incorporation, since in fusion with landscape the poetic self *becomes* panoramic or infinitely dispersed. Klein's poem reveals that the very technique that at first prevents self-dispersal becomes the cause of that dispersal. For Klein, like Varley, the difference between physical landscapes and psychological landscapes becomes indistinct. This fusion of self and landscape leads to a certain *confusion* in Klein's poem, however, and thus distinguishes his self-portrait from Varley's. While the painter thinks about or reflects on fusion in *Mirror of Thought*, the poet makes it literal in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape." Klein introduces this motif in several poems from the 1930s, and develops it throughout the 1940s, using the term "landscape" to describe a deeply personal crisis of self-doubt, alienation, and ultimately, silence.

In "Landscape and the Poetry of Self," Mark Strand suggests that landscape both incorporates the self and provides a form of escape—a "way out" of the confines of selfhood:

Landscape incorporates and suggests, and its horizons are never final. It represents an escape from particularity of the sort associated with limited settings, cities, say, or interiors. [...] For it is just such relief from naming and knowing that one seeks in landscape. It may be that landscape is not merely a way out of the confines of the city and the deplorable

conditions which flourished along with progress, but a way out of the exhausted and claustrophobic limitations of the self; and not necessarily a self without mystery or purpose, but one so pampered, so examined, so named and renamed, that it must go elsewhere to reconstitute its energies. Landscape is a way of finding another self, larger, and, possibly, more basic. (Strand 181-182)

Strand's sense of landscape as an extension of interiority, a way to transcend the conventional limitations of the self, to merge self and world, is fundamental to the portrait of the artist as landscape. Like other portraits of the artist—James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a notable example, especially given its great influence on Klein—these Canadian portraits self-consciously consider the relationship between the artist and his craft, and this is perhaps the central reason for their status as modernist works. The portrait as landscape differs, however, in that it depicts the artist's identification with the transformative and integrative possibilities of landscape; the trope of "landscape" serves as an analogue for art and art-making. These modernist portraits establish a shift in thinking about landscape as a "designation of *locality* to a (perhaps more abstract) designation of *activity*" (New 6, emphasis mine), namely the act of self-portrayal.

In 1918, Frederick Horsman Varley went to Europe as an official war artist for the Canadian War Records, and his dark portraits of soldiers and nightmarish battlefields won him considerable recognition. His firsthand experience of World War I forced Varley to find new ways of representing what he observed. As Heather Robertson suggests in *A Terrible Beauty: The Art of Canada at War*, paintings such as Varley's *The Sunken Road* were "intensely personal statements about war" (15): "Many painters were inspired by the situations into which they were thrust. War broke down old preconceptions, old inhibitions; it offered subject matter—death, mutilation, destruction—they had never dealt with before. They had to render the obscene tolerable, the ugly beautiful, create life out of death" (15). Varley's 1919 *Sunken Road* is an important early depiction of his blurring of the portrait and landscape genres. The soldiers' corpses blend in tone and shape with the contours of the earth on and in which they lay; their anonymous bodies occupy the forefront of the canvas while green fields, blue sky, and a rainbow fill the background in an eerie juxtaposition of death and promise. During this period, Varley's paintings first began to reflect the penetrative, psychological approach for which his work is celebrated and, as Christopher Varley notes, the war and Varley's role in documenting it left a profound and lasting impression on him (34).

Upon his return from the war in 1919, Varley painted his first formal self-portrait, an arresting autobiographical study that shares several important similarities with *Mirror of Thought*. *Self-Portrait* presents half of the artist's body in light and half of it in shadow. Varley's upper body fills the frame and, as with *Mirror of Thought*, his gaze is directed squarely at the viewer. One eye is hooded and dark, the other looks out with what Peter Varley describes as "quiet determination" (Zemans, "Varley" 59). Shades of green and orange blend the figure into the abstract background, and he is simultaneously associated with its abstraction and distinguished from it in the painting's detailed rendering of his face. The portrait thus presents a young artist whose divergent self-portrayal suggests a desire to be both recognized and disguised in his work: Varley's body is half in light, half in shadow, one eye is "determined," one fearful, his face is clearly recognizable but its tones blend with those of the background. *Self-Portrait* reveals Varley's early interest in the relationship between the artist's interiority and the external world; however, as we will see with *Mirror of Thought*, when he blends the portrait and landscape genres together, Varley departs from the more conventional "figure-in-a-landscape" style. Like Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," Varley's self-portraits depict the artist's relationship to his art.

Though he is generally associated with certain landscapes painted in the Group of Seven's trademark Post-Impressionist style, Varley was, by disposition, a portrait painter. His portraits are numerous and varied, and they are certainly more difficult, more boldly personal and experimental, than his landscapes. As Joyce Zemans attests,

It is ironic that Frederick Varley, Canada's greatest portrait painter, is known to most Canadians primarily as a landscape painter. His most famous painting, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, has become a symbol of the Group of Seven, and is, according to A.Y. Jackson, one the three greatest paintings in the history of Canadian art. Although Varley shared the Group's desire to throw off the garb of European drabness and to seek new meaning for painting in Canada, his aesthetic goals paralleled the Group's for only a brief period. (51)

Zemans indicates that Varley positioned himself on the edge of the Group both personally and professionally and that he defined himself and his work largely by what it was not: "In a country dominated by landscape painters, Fred Varley became a painter of people. While the Group of Seven sought rugged, barren landscapes that would speak of our northern souls and our spiritual heritage, Varley's constant ambition was to integrate the human figure into the landscape" (51). For Varley, however, the artist is a marginal figure, a loner. As he

reveals in a letter dated 1942, this isolated position affords him a unique perspective: "The artist is an outsider, beyond the materialism of his age, one who sees differently—a bloody fool, he cannot be changed. He serves as a foil to others' sanity" (qtd. in Zemans 52). Prone to the same kinds of self-doubt and struggle experienced by Klein, Varley regarded the self-portrait as a means to convey how the artist "sees differently."

In 1926, Varley received an appointment to teach at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts, and in 1934 he moved into a cottage in British Columbia's Lynn Valley. As a teacher Varley began formulating his aesthetic theories, and chief among these was his sense of the complex relationship between representation and the artist's perceptions. Art, he claimed, was "not merely recording surface life—incidents, emotions. The Artist divines the causes beneath which create the outward result" (qtd. in Varley, *F.H. Varley* 78). With its emphasis on features of the mind, this final point conveys the literary nature of Varley's aesthetic: like a novelist, Varley strove to understand the underlying psychology of his subjects, to document a kind of inner landscape composed of intellect and emotion. Varley, like Klein, regarded landscape as a kind of language, a mode of self-expression. A more conventional approach to painting (with its focus on line, colour, texture and so on) would not satisfy this intent, nor would the more straightforward landscape paintings of his peers; instead, Varley sought in the confluence of the portrait and landscape modes a kind of psychological depth and breadth that allowed him to explore the complexities of his subjects.

If, as we will see shortly, Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is a mid-century rebuttal to the sentimental nature poetry that A. J. M. Smith disparages in 1936, then Varley's 1937 *Mirror of Thought* offers a parallel countermeasure in Canadian modernist art history, chiefly in its divergence from the "facelessness" of the Group of Seven's landscapes. Varley's painting not only attempts a mapping of the artist's interiority onto the landscape, but it also depicts the artist's relationship to the land *as he perceives it*. *Mirror of Thought* manifests a compelling engagement with the very problems Klein later poses in his poetry: in the conflation of the self-portrait and landscape genres, Varley creates a portrait of the artist that interrogates artistic vision and its complex association with representation. In the same way that Klein is concerned with the artist's self-definition in language, Varley's painting privileges ocularity or artistic vision, suggesting that what the artist sees determines who he is. Thus, while its title, *Mirror of Thought*, refers to such invisible things as intellect, reflection, and self-reflexivity, its composition emphasizes the visible.

Mirror of Thought is a self-portrait that shows the visage of a middle-aged Varley, cigarette hanging from his lips, enclosed within the frame of a mirror that hangs against the window frame in his second-floor apartment [Figure 1]. The window looks out over British Columbia's Lynn Valley—the subject of many of Varley's 1930s landscapes and the inspiration for some of his best work. The most striking aspect of the painting is Varley's careworn face, doubly-framed and superimposed on the landscape, its image in the mirror hanging against the struts of the window frame as if on a cross. While the mirror's edge seems to circumscribe Varley's face and separate him from the landscape, the same colours used on his face (tones of orange, gold, and green) are used to depict the bright autumnal leaves on the trees to his right. This merging of the details of his face with those of the landscape is Varley's trademark gesture—and a preliminary reason that *Mirror of Thought* can be called a portrait of the artist as landscape.

As both the title of the painting and its central image suggest, this is a painting about its painter, about what he sees and how he sees it. In the lower right corner of the landscape stand two figures—a man and a woman—intimately leaning toward each other. Varley's eyes, as reflected in the mirror, seem to fall on this couple—an interesting feature



Fig. 1. Frederick H. Varley, *Mirror of Thought*, 1937.

of the painting in light of its autobiographical implications: at the time of its painting, Varley's romantic relationship with his former art student and model Vera Weatherbie was ending, and he was preparing to leave his Lynn Valley studio for the last time because of financial constraints. As Zemans states, *Mirror of Thought* is a "compendia of memories and feelings. [It is] Varley's psychic landscape. [Its] aesthetic power lies in [the] expressionistic use of formal elements, mood and emotion" (70). Perhaps to echo or emphasize the artist's own suffering at the time of its composition, the portrait offers various representations of a cross motif: the reflected cross behind Varley's head in the mirror, the wooden cross of the window frame, the crossed beams of the telephone pole and, in the distance, several dead trees whose branches intertwine horizontally against their vertical trunks.⁴ Troubled by the failure of his marriage, increasing financial destitution, and difficulty selling his work, Varley uses formal elements such as the cross, the mirror, and the window separating him from the couple to signify the despair, self-doubt, and isolation he increasingly felt. He writes in a letter to Vera that same year, "[it is] lunacy to continue the torture of struggling as a painter under such adverse conditions" (qtd. in Varley, *Frederick H. Varley* 70). *Mirror of Thought* is, then, an allegorical rendering of Varley's own psychic state. Increasingly unable to identify with others, and tortured by the demands of his art, Varley finds solace in landscape. Like a mirror, the landscape reflects the artist's own face or "thoughts"; it is a surface on which he first projects and then reflects on artistic vision. Unlike other self-portraits, *Mirror of Thought* formally depicts the artist's identification with landscape. It stages or, more precisely, reproduces the subject-to-subject or "intersubjective" encounter the painter has with what he sees—his own face in the mirror, and the landscape on which that mirror is superimposed (de Man 196). To look at one is to look at the other; to paint the landscape is to paint the self. By aligning his face with the landscape, and by presenting his "thoughts" or perceptions to its reflective surfaces, Varley suggests that it is possible to express interiority, to convey a portrait of the artist, but only through the welcome abstractions of landscape.

The landscape depicted in *Mirror of Thought* is one Varley returned to repeatedly with a kind of imaginative nostalgia. With the same mountains looming on the left, and Lynn Valley with its winding road and bridge on the right, Varley painted the scene in various manifestations of weather and season, using its natural transformations as a language for his own tumultuous moods and experiences. One example of this is *Weather—Lynn Valley* (painted c. 1935-1936), with its similar inclusion of two figures on the lower right corner of the canvas, its dark, moody swirls of colour and the ghostly outline of a dead tree in the foreground; another is *Winter, Lynn Valley* (circa

1935) with its snowy textures and thick, calm strokes. Two figures are again painted in the lower right corner, but this time they are “quiet, separated in wonder in the still moonlight” (Varley, *Frederick H. Varley* 137). Having left British Columbia eleven years earlier, Varley painted a 1947 landscape entitled *Moonlight After Rain* with similar topographical features, but this time a lone, male figure—presumably Varley himself—stands on the bridge looking out at the valley. The scene is rendered in deep blues and greens and, as Peter Varley states, “it is full of nostalgia for Lynn [Valley]” (*Frederick H. Varley* 188). *Mirror of Thought* thus encourages a reading of these Lynn Valley landscapes as self-portraits; Varley clearly transposes the psychological elements of *Mirror* to them, emphasizing his nostalgic identification with the landscape in its various meteorological incarnations. By painting the same scene several times, each time with the same artistic perspective or point of view but different painterly tones or moods, Varley treats these landscapes like self-portraits since, as Harry Berger Jr. says of the portrait, they emphasize the likeness of an *act*—the act of artistic representation—and not the likeness of the artist. Varley thus transfers not only the psychological contents or intentions of the self-portrait to the landscape, but also its very capacity to represent or stand in for the artistic self.

Mirror of Thought highlights typically modernist concerns—namely, a preoccupation with issues of subjectivity, formal experimentation, and artistic self-reflexivity, but it also serves as Varley’s response to the sympathetic or “intersubjective” relationship between artist and landscape that was first modelled by the Romantics. Moreover, while Varley emphasizes an urgent need for self-expression in his self-portraits, he also underscores the tentative nature of representation. These features of his art distinguish him from the landscape-painting Group of Seven and align him with modernist poets such as Klein. While his work is usually characterized as Post-Impressionist, his self-portraits draw from Expressionism with their emphasis on the expression of inner experience rather than realistic portrayal. Varley explores various modes of subjectivity in his self-portraits, and he experiments with the boundaries of genre in order to present new ways of articulating self and landscape. Consequently, his technical and aesthetic hallmarks are psychological in nature: whether it is Lynn Valley or a self-portrait, Varley’s subjects are painted as equally psychic terrains.

Though many modernists avoided landscape in their works because they wanted to leave behind what Stephen Spender calls the “nostalgic aestheticism of the end of the nineteenth century,” and specifically the nineteenth-century Romantic landscape tradition, Varley and the Group of Seven were open to that tradition (257). This

openness is, however, better expressed in Varley's lesser known self-portraits and landscapes than in his more well-known landscape paintings; that is, his self-portraits and his Lynn Valley landscapes are so powerfully evocative of both self-portraiture *and* landscape art that they seem to subordinate the innovations of his celebrated "Group of Seven" landscapes, such as *Stormy Weather*, *Georgian Bay*. This is, unfortunately, an underestimated and hence undeveloped approach to Canadian modernist visual art and, specifically, to Varley's work. Djwa has suggested that the paintings of Fred Varley and the Group of Seven "provided for Canadians a new way of seeing" and a "resonant symbolic language for many poets of the period" (Djwa 16, 15). She argues that the most significant legacy of the Group of Seven aesthetic is reflected in the lasting use of landscape as a central image or trope in modern Canadian poetry (16). Paintings such as Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine* and Varley's *Stormy Weather*, *Georgian Bay* provided a "shock of recognition" (Djwa 16) and encouraged poets such as A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, A. M. Klein and P. K. Page to find a language that suited the subjects of their poetry. As Margaret Atwood suggests, "in a lot of early Canadian poetry you find this desire to *name* struggling against a terminology which is foreign and completely inadequate to describe what is actually being seen. Part of the delight of reading Canadian poetry chronologically is watching the gradual emergence of a language appropriate to its objects" (Atwood 62). Djwa, Atwood, and others have helped to lay the groundwork for interdisciplinary work in Canadian modernism, and particularly for this account of Varley's anticipation of the innovative mid-century self-portrayals of modernist poets such as Klein. In its expressionistic merging of interior and exterior, face and landscape, artist and outlook, *Mirror of Thought* is a compelling visual counterpart to Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape."

In 1943, Ernst Neumann made a drawing of Abraham Moses Klein, portraying him in suit and tie, his dark eyes serious behind the fine frame of his glasses. One of Klein's heavy eyebrows is cocked expressively, and his gaze is angled directly at the artist, as if suspicious of what is being rendered. Not surprisingly, as he notes in his diaries, Klein found Neumann's portrait "most unsatisfactory": "Showed me grim and mean. Which I am not always. . . I told him that the face he did had its geography correct, but its climate was all wrong" (Klein, *Notebooks* 15). The notion that a face's "geography"—the relative placement or topography of its features—could be "correct" but its "climate" all wrong is intriguing, chiefly because Klein's notion of "climate" seems to refer to the same elusive qualities of representation

he alludes to in his poetry. In Klein's view, Neumann's sketch portrays an "A. M. Klein" who is somehow misjudged or misunderstood, whose reproachful gaze appears to discourage discernment rather than welcome it. Klein's concern about the portrait's capacity for misrepresentation, and his suggestion that a face's topography or surface could be represented accurately while its underlying conditions or "climate" might go unrecognized, are issues central to his own poetic self-representations.

As a poem that self-consciously fuses the modes of portraiture and landscape art both to reveal and to subsume the artistic self, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" emerges as Klein's superlative portrait of the artist. For in this fusion Klein depicts a kind of confusion: the poet, whose self-portrait becomes "merely landscape" (qtd. in Bentley, "The Notes" 153), is a *terra incognita*, an unknown or unrecognized region where the "correctness" of the "geography"—its reassuring *terra firma*—belies a "climate" of crisis and self-doubt. Thus, Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," like Varley's *Mirror of Thought*, reconfigures the figure of the artist: his portrait of the artist is self-revealing and self-concealing at once. His *terra firma* suggests a troubling *terra incognita*, and in the artist's confrontation with this unknown landscape of self he portrays creative activity as both crucial and traumatic.

The poet of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is a composite figure, a collection or culmination of Klein's poetic alter egos as depicted in his poetry from the 1930s and 40s. Like Klein himself, this poet takes stock of his earlier poetic attempts at self-representation and finds in them something essentially absurd or suspect. Despite his numerous attempts at self-representation—his "portraits" or "exegeses," his "maps" and "green inventories"—Klein's poet remains an uncharted, "lacunal," or "secret" terrain; he knows himself only as a dubious "landscape." Thus, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" reflects a key aspect of Klein's modernist aesthetic, namely his recognition that while he may strive for a self-portrait as a "somebody," one who is authentic, or whole, what the poet ultimately achieves is a portrait of the poet as a "nobody," one who is "eccentric, not solid," "incognito, lost, lacunal" (Klein, *CP* 2: 635).

"Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is Klein's most explicit expression of this fusion of personality and impersonality, of the portrait and the landscape, and this is announced in the poem's title: though on the one hand Klein presents a "*portrait* of the poet" it is a portrait "*as landscape*"—a strange and disorienting self-portrait indeed—one that interrogates the very feasibility of self-representation for Klein, as well as its capacity to assure artistic self-actualization. The "richer"

anonymity his poet seeks in landscape is somehow impoverished by his experience of self-doubt and self-effacement: that is, Klein's self-conscious *integration* of "portrait" and "landscape," poet and landscape, is simultaneously suggestive of a poetic and psychic *disintegration* or collapse—a dialectical tension that is at the heart of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape."

In a series of notes Klein wrote about "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" one finds his most direct statement of this tension between self-portrayal and self-effacement, integration and disintegration: "The modern poet is so anonymously sunk into his environment that, in terms of painting, his portrait is merely landscape" (qtd. in Bentley, "The Notes" 153). This is a curious statement coming from a poet, as it refers us to his poem and its origins "in terms of painting." Like other mid-century Canadian poets such as P. K. Page and Anne Wilkinson, Klein frequently refers to such painterly genres as the portrait and the landscape. As "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" and several other works published in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* suggest, Klein's poetry of the 1940s emphasized the centrality of the image and the techniques and modes of visual art as a means to express the complexities of his poetic vision in innovative ways. A key example of this is found in the pairing of "page" and "paysage" in "Krieghoff: Caligrammes" (1947), a poem that demonstrates Klein's familiarity with Canadian landscape art and transfers its visual hallmarks to his poetry.

In her introduction to *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein*, Miriam Waddington posits that "Klein's landscapes were, right from the start, human and psychological" (Waddington x). This is an accurate assessment, and one that clearly aligns Klein's intentions with those of Varley, whose "psychic landscapes" correspond to Klein's interest in the psychological nature of portraiture, and to his emphasis on the macrocosmic, broadly defined, and even transcendental aspects of "landscape." As Strand conceives it, landscape offers the artist "an escape from particularity," a "relief from naming and knowing," and ultimately, a "way out of the exhausted and claustrophobic limitations of the self" (181). This is accomplished, Strand suggests, through incorporation. The "portrait of the poet as landscape" model is perhaps Klein's most innovative expression of this incorporation. In "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," the poet is incorporated by landscape, yet he also becomes a landscape in his own right—a *corpus*—the sum or body of his poems, his genealogies.

In Klein's poetry, the poet's body is a specifically Jewish body. It is a genealogical landscape that both generates and houses the history of his forefathers; he is both prophet and gatekeeper of their stories. However, as one finds in the traumatic landscapes of several of Klein's

most powerful poems from the 1940s—many of which address the poet's sense of the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust and his ensuing helplessness and fear—the poet's role as truth-teller and caretaker of the history of his people is a responsibility of crushing magnitude.⁵ The poet who *becomes* the landscape of his people, who feels that his poems must give birth to an "entire genesis," must transcend the confines or limitations of selfhood, must somehow redress or "pay back the daily larcenies of the lung" ("Portrait of the Poet"), is a self in profound crisis. For in experiencing the self as multiple, the poet's own "stable selfhood" is imperilled (Trehearne 128). As Klein writes in "Meditation on Survival," this "frightened, tattered, hysterical" poet feels "that the golgotha'd dead / run plasma through my veins" so that "I must live / their unexpired six million circuits, giving / to each of their nightmares my body for a bed - / inspirited, dispirited" (CP 2: 663). The poet's "inspirited" (inspired and spirited) breath must breathe for the dead, his body must house their "nightmares" and their blood, until he too becomes "dispirited"—unable to speak or write, exiled from his community, his craft, and his body.⁶ In this disturbing context of the Holocaust Klein composed "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape."

Written between 1944 and 1945, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is widely considered Klein's best work, a poem expressing the poet's struggle to achieve public recognition and to articulate a unified vision of self and world. As the title of the poem suggests, it can be read as Klein's definitive statement of the poet's relationship not only to his art or to his community, but also to the poetic tradition, and finally, to landscape.

With its allusions to the works of Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Rilke, Joyce and Auden, Klein's poem is a complex portrait of the poet and the poetic vocation. It outlines his attempt to reconcile the past and the present, the creative individual and his community, in a bid for self-definition. Like many of his other works, "Portrait" is founded in the Jewish tradition; in the fourth stanza he identifies the poet as one who "unrolled our culture from his scroll" (CP 2: 635). However, Klein's earlier self-identification as a prophet or creator in poems such as "Diary of Abraham Segal, Poet" and "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is dramatically reconstituted in "Portrait."

As its title suggests, Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" reflects the influence of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Like Stephen Dedalus, Klein's poet welcomes the "reality of experience" and sets out to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (Joyce 275-76). By the end of his poem, however, Klein's poet seems to have failed in his original intention to reveal or "unroll" his culture to the world because he, unlike Dedalus,

has incorporated the “uncreated conscience” of his race so profoundly that it renders him silent (the Jewish Holocaust serving as a kind of literal and figurative “uncreation,” though its full extent was still unknown at the time of the poem’s composition). As David Bentley suggests in “A Nightmare Ordered,” the “‘nightmare’ which the poet fears, and in fearing, accepts as his identity, carries suggestions of the...concentration of the Jews in Nazi Germany...” (29).

Klein’s poem, then, is a self-representation that locates the poet both within an established poetic tradition and outside it: though he incorporates the poetry of both the “ancient bards” and the modernists—Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Auden—he does so by emphasizing how ultimately inappropriate or insufficient for his own portrait of the artist. This is, I believe, because of his Jewishness. Unwilling to give up on the “shattered shards” of his people, on his role as spokesman for their “unnegatable negation,” and yet threatened by this great burden of poetic “inspiring,” Klein resorts to “landscape” as a tentative mode of self-expression, as a “relief” or escape from “naming and knowing” (Strand 181). Numerous critical responses to Klein’s poem have been written, yet none explicitly considers the relationship between the poem’s two central modes of representation—the portrait and the landscape—or how his portrait of the artist is expressed in terms of “landscape,” and why this might be relevant to a modernist aesthetic more generally.

Klein’s “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” interrogates the assumption that portraiture (and chiefly, self-portraiture) is an expression of a clearly demarcated, discernible self; it is thus an anti-portrait of sorts. By presenting his self-portrait *as landscape*, Klein not only comments bitterly on the modern poet’s marginal status, but he also makes that marginalization literal by depicting the poet’s *disintegration* into landscape. Though he is compelled to permeate the landscape so that he is no longer “without,” though he both becomes a landscape and becomes part of the all-encompassing or unifying principle of “landscape,” this integration also forecasts Klein’s own ultimate disintegration or psychic breakdown.

We see the first signs of this disintegration in the opening stanzas of Klein’s poem. Here the poet’s “rostrum-rounding roar,” which once made heaven “articulate,” has died out. The poet has become a “lacunal” or missing person; he has, the poem’s narrator suggests, “disappeared” from “real society,” has become “somebody’s sigh” (CP 2: 634-635):

O, he who unrolled our culture from his scroll –
 the prince’s quote, the rostrum-rounding roar –
 who under one name made articulate
 heaven, and under another the seven-circled air,

is, if he is at all, a number, an x,
 a Mr. Smith in a hotel register, –
 incognito, lost, lacunal. (CP 2: 635)

By the poem's end, the outcast poet is so impersonal, so anonymous that he becomes "not solid" (CP 2: 635). A kind of floating wreckage, he exists as a fluid *element* of both the narrative and the landscape; he has been "refined" to a glow of phosphorus shining in a murky seascape: "Meanwhile, he / makes of his status as zero a rich garland, / a halo of his anonymity, / and lives alone, and in his secret shines / like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea" (CP 2: 639).

This final image of the drowned poet is already implicit in the images of the poet's mysterious disappearance in the poem's opening lines. Here Klein takes Milton's *Lycidas* as a model for his archetypal poet. As the pastoral elegy conventionally expresses grief at the loss of a friend or person of importance, for Klein's purposes this person is the modern poet himself—a "shelved *Lycidas*"—one who is, however, *not* "mourned" or read:

Not an editorial-writer, bereaved with bartlett,
 mourns him, the shelved *Lycidas*.
 No actress squeezes a glycerine tear for him.
 The radio broadcast lets his passing pass.
 And with the police, no record. Nobody, it appears,
 either under his real name or his alias,
 missed him enough to report. (CP 2: 634)

The language of neglect and negation that characterizes these lines introduces the poem's central concern: the poet's anonymous position in society. As one who "simply does not count," the poet has been rendered nameless, faceless, and inconsequential: "[He] is, if he is at all, a number, an x, / a Mr. Smith in a hotel register..." (CP 2: 635). In a striking departure from the conventional function of the portrait, Klein's poet is identified by his anonymity rather than his personality or subjectivity. Instead of a likeness of his subject, Klein portrays his poet in (and as) a lacuna, a gap. His realm is that of a *mise-en-abyme*; he is a "shadow's shadow" (CP 2: 636). As the following stanza reveals, Klein's poem is elegiac because it is a lament for the modern poet whose *figurative* demise causes him to go "unnoticed" by his public:

The truth is he's not dead, but only ignored –
 like the mirroring lenses forgotten on a brow
 that shine with the guilt of their unnoticed world.
 The truth is he lives among neighbours, who, though they
 will allow
 him a passable fellow, think him eccentric, not solid,

a type that one can forgive, and for that matter, forego.

(CP 2: 635)

This emphasis on the poet's anonymity explains why Klein entitled an early version of the poem "Portrait of the Poet as Nobody." The difference between the two qualifiers, and specifically Klein's decision to shift his initial characterization of the poet as a "nobody" to his final statement of the poet as "landscape," is worth considering. A note written by Klein about the first version of the poem reveals his original intention. It reads: "Describe being a poet. Who wants him in this age, the day of gasoline and oil? Cursed be the day I penned my first pentameter. What prompted me. Vanity, mimesis, afflatus. But here it is. That's what I am" (Klein, *Notebooks* 32). This conflation of self and craft is an important feature of Klein's poem—and one that aligns with Varley's own approach in *Mirror of Thought*—because it suggests that the act of representation is always inherently self-reflexive. While this is a common theme in modernist poetry, what makes Klein's poem remarkable is its suggestion that the poet's anonymous position in society results in a paradoxical *identification* with that anonymity. As most critics have argued, Klein's poet accepts his status as a "nobody," acknowledges his isolation, and uses it to "retreat within himself as part of a process of self-discovery" (Pollock 4).

Though this interpretation may be accurate, it does not quite capture the climate of crisis inherent to Klein's late poetry. In "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," for example, the poet is ultimately reduced or diminished—he becomes "*merely* landscape" (emphasis mine). He learns to associate the practice of his art with an awareness of the fragility or ineffectiveness of its means. In the artifice surrounding him—the glycerine tear of the actress, the disembodied voice of the radio broadcaster—Klein's poet begins to see himself. By the end of the poem, he has "sunk" into a seascape. With his drowning, Klein's portrait of the poet as landscape is realized: instead of an authentic self-representation, a portrait of the poet as a "somebody," Klein's poet submits to silence, submersion, and anonymity. In his naming of the world, the poet becomes an indistinguishable part of it; because of his status as a "nobody," he *becomes* language in the created world of the poem. Klein's poet wants to "praise" (and thus "map" or "chart") every "item" in the world now incorporated within his body, "pulsating" in his "breath," "lungs," "blood," and "heart." World and poet are now identified as one landscape:

For to praise

the world – he, solitary man – is breath
to him. Until it has been praised, that part
has not been. Item by exciting item –

air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart. –
 they are pulsated, and breathed, until they map,
 not the world's, but his own body's chart! (CP 2: 639)

Brian Diemert argues that Klein's poet becomes the "animating presence, the spirit of creation, shining *within* the renewed landscape" and that this "new" landscape is "the imaginative realm of poetry" (6). While Diemert's claim is essentially accurate, it implies that the "imaginative realm of poetry" lends itself to solely *romantic* notions of self-creation and "renewal." That is, its innately optimistic view of the poetic act misses something fundamental to Klein's text. Klein writes:

To find a new function for the déclassé craft
 archaic like the fletcher's; to make a new thing;
 to say the word that will become sixth sense;
 perhaps by necessity and indirection bring
 new forms to life, anonymously, new creeds –
 O, somehow pay back the daily larcenies of the lung!
 (CP 2: 639)

These, he suggests, "are not mean ambitions. It is already something / *merely* to entertain them" (CP 2: 639, emphasis mine). While this desire to "make a new thing" is decidedly modernist (and certainly grows out of the romantic tradition), Klein's poet also emphasizes his sense of obligation, marginalization, and futility when he states that he must "anonymously" bring new forms to life "by necessity and indirection," must somehow "pay back the daily larcenies of the lung." Overwhelmed by these "not mean" (and hence significant) "ambitions" and the toll they have already taken ("it is already something / *merely* to entertain them"), Klein's poet alludes to the antithesis hidden in the language of his more overtly positive thesis of renewal: the horrors he has "witnessed" as poet—those "daily larcenies of the lung"—have become part of his physiological and psychological landscapes, have taken their toll, and can *never* be repaid or repaired.

In "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," Klein's poet merges with several landscapes: the urban landscape, the mountain landscape, the seascape, the *corpus* or genealogical landscape, the landscape of the poem, and the world-as-landscape. This progression from the chiefly physical landscapes of Klein's earlier poetry towards the more metaphysical landscapes of psychic incorporation or embodiment recalls a similar development in Varley's work, and mirrors an important shift in the poet's self-portrayal: the self-revelation and self-actualization enabled by the poet's initial integration with landscape is ultimately replaced by a self-threatening disintegration into landscape. In his impossible quest to incorporate the world, the poet becomes

“merely” landscape: inconspicuous, dispersed, element but not *elemental*.

In an editorial in April 1953, Klein comments on the artist's role as witness and the result such a role ultimately engenders. While his language emphasizes the “divided” nature of public “taste” or value, the tone of the piece seems to underscore the poet's own “unhappiness,” his sense of neglect, isolation, and self-division:

The lot of the artist in contemporary society is not a happy one. [...] If he caters to what his audiences expect from him, he is thereby deemed to be no artist, but a mere graphologist in public relations; if he sticks to his bent and paints as his own mind conceives and his own eye sees, he is dubbed peculiar, erratic, even surrealist. (qtd. in Caplan 190)

The poet's defiance of the barriers which keep him from poetic experience and expression, his compulsive and compulsory need to “speak the things unspeakable” (“Hitleriad”), to “paint as his own mind conceives and his own eye sees,” all lead to his final dissolution or disintegration in “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape.” One senses that for Klein, the encyclopaedic or “total” scope of his vision cannot be sustained, and thus his poet finds himself in a landscape of silence, fragmentation, and self-doubt. Though he “makes of his status as zero a rich garland, / a halo of his anonymity,” he does not arise from the ocean floor.

The image of A. M. Klein's drowned yet luminous poet projects a provocative ambiguity, and thus serves as an appropriate analogy for the legacy of the Canadian modernist portrait of the artist. Despite the largely clichéd opposition between the portrait and landscape genres sustained by modernist criticism, Klein's “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” and Varley's *Mirror of Thought* forge new and innovative definitions of landscape. In doing so, Klein's poem and Varley's painting furnish a new mode of artistic self-representation in Canadian art, one that breaks open the platitudinous or banal state of landscape art and infuses it with the complexities of portraiture. The traditional bounds of portraiture are similarly vexed in Klein's poem, however, so that self-representation is made possible through what looks like self-effacement. That is, the poet's identification with landscape provides an ideal setting for artistic surveillance, not only of the world, but also of the self in relation to that world. Thus if, as Hugh Kenner and Barker Fairley suggest, portraiture in Canadian modernism is subordinated by the overwhelming presence of landscape, artists such as Klein and Varley have taken this quite literally, examining in their works what it means to be, as Gwendolyn MacEwen puts it, “left in the landscape” (“Finally Left in the Landscape”).⁷

Landscape, in this sense, is no mere backdrop. In fact, these modernist portraits of the artist follow in the tradition of Romantic landscape painting and poetry by foregrounding landscape “as a living mirror to the soul” (“Romanticism”). By directly or indirectly designating their portraits as landscapes, Klein and Varley express their willingness to explore traits the ambiguities, the inner weather of selfhood, while simultaneously displacing or evading direct self-expression. The modernist portrait as landscape is thus not mimetic, not defined by likeness, for “[s]uch a portrait is reductive; it fixes the person irrevocably in place and time, symbolically asserting the ideal nature of the [artist’s] existence, of his identity, in its ver singularity” (Brilliant 129). Instead, these portraits expand the singularity of the self, and unsettle or interrogate the very notion of an “ideal” artistic existence or identity. This is perhaps the central reason for their development at mid-century: in its endorsement of ambiguity, its suggestion of both fusion and confusion, integration and disintegration, this modernist sub-genre serves as an appropriate counterpart to the climate of war, instability, and relative obscurity in which these artists lived and worked.

List of Figures

Fig. 1: F.H. Varley, *Mirror of Thought* (1937), oil on canvas, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria 1978.104.001, Gift of Harold Mortimer-Lamb. 2005 @ Estate Kathleen G. McKay.

Notes

1. See Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*, David Bentley’s *The Gay]Grey Moose*, Sandra Djwa’s “A New Soil and a Sharp Sun’: the Landscape of a Modern Canadian Poetry,” Northrop Frye’s *The Bush Garden*, Douglas Jones’s *Butterfly on Rock*, Tom Marshall’s *Harsh and Lovely Land*, and W. H. New’s *Land Sliding*.
2. See Brian Trehearne’s *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* for a discussion of the ironic relation between biography and impersonal modernist poetics in mid-century Canadian literature.
3. While Klein does not explicitly refer to Varley’s work in his writings, his poetry demonstrates a keen interest in painterly representations of the Canadian landscape, as well as an awareness of the techniques, modes, and movements of visual art. See especially

- "Portrait," "Spring Exhibit," "The Provinces," "Grain Elevator," and "Krieghoff: Caligrammes."
4. In *Stormy Weather*, Maria Tippett's biography of Varley, she notes that after Varley's departure from British Columbia, he wrote countless letters to Vera Weatherbie. His signature at the end of these letters consisted of what he called "the mystic sign" of the cross in a circle (Tippett 247)—the same image depicted in *Mirror of Thought*.
 5. See, for example, "In Re Solomon Warshawer," "And in That Drowning Instant," "Sonnet Unrhymed," "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," "Sestina on the Dialectic," "Meditation upon Survival" and "Elegy."
 6. This kind of creative crisis is also expressed in Klein's long poem, "Yehuda Halevi, His Pilgrimage" (written c. 1941). See *Collected Poems* 2: 544.
 7. Other mid-twentieth-century Canadian poets whose work interrogates similar questions of self-representation in relation to landscape include P. K. Page, Anne Wilkinson, Dorothy Livesay, F. R. Scott, and A. J. M. Smith. The profound influence the modernist portrait of the artist as landscape has had on Canadian poetry is reflected in the wide-ranging list of Canadian poets whose work follows in the wake of these modernists and who similarly explore the relationship between self-portrayal and landscape. These poets include Earle Birney, Margaret Avison, Irving Layton, Phyllis Webb, George Bowering, bill bissett, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Atwood, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Fred Wah, and Al Purdy.

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