

A Note on W. H. Auden's "Detective Story" and A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"

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The vast range of allusions in A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" reveals Klein as a poet clearly engaged with literary history and the modern poet's place within the literary tradition. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Milton's "Lycidas," Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" and "The Unknown Citizen" are just some of the more significant texts that have been commented upon in relation to Klein's poem.¹ However, there is another poem of Auden's that has not been mentioned in this context even though Klein's poem contains obvious echoes of it. "Detective Story," which first appeared in *Letters From Iceland* (1937), in many ways stands behind some of Klein's more puzzling references, particularly in the first part of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape." For the purposes of this discussion, I quote Auden's poem in full:

Detective Story

For who is ever quite without his landscape,
The straggling village street, the house in
trees,
All near the church, or else the gloomy town
house,
The one with the Corinthian pillars, or
The tiny workmanlike flat: in any case
things
A home, the centre where the three or four
in
That happen to a man do happen? Yes,
Who cannot draw the map of his life, shade
spot
The little station where he meets his loves
And says good-bye continually, and mark the
discovered?
Where the body of his happiness was first
always
An unknown tramp? A rich man? An enigma
And with a buried past but when the truth,
The truth about our happiness comes out
How much it owed to blackmail and
philandering.

The rest's traditional. All goes to plan:
 The feud between the local common sense
 And that exasperating brilliant intuition
 That's always on the spot by chance before
 us;
 All goes to plan, both lying and confession,
 Down to the thrilling final chase, the kill.
 Yet on the last page just a lingering doubt:
 That verdict, was it just? The judge's
 nerves,
 That clue, that protestation from the
 gallows,
 And our own smile . . . why yes . . .
 But time is always killed. Someone must pay
 for
 Our loss of happiness, our happiness itself.

The affinity between Klein's and Auden's poetry has been touched on and explored briefly by Margaret Avison (57) and John Sutherland respectively (30-34). Neither critic, though, mentions "Detective Story," despite the fact that Klein's poem is in some ways a response to Auden's poem. Indeed, one of the many things Klein does in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is to consider Auden's somewhat Christian view of the detective story in order to reinterpret the genre according to his own belief.

Dated July 1936 by Edward Mendelson in *The English Auden*, "Detective Story" allegorizes the individual's loss of happiness in terms of the typical classical detective story that Auden later described and analyzed in his 1938 essay "The Guilty Vicarage." In the poem, which Auden said was "about why people read detective stories" (*Letters* 121), elements such as the map (8), the "local common sense" (17), and the "brilliant intuition" (18) correspond to elements in novels such as those by Agatha Christie: the map is both the scene of the crime, which was often printed on the dust jacket or else on the book's flyleaf, and the particular landscape that any individual inhabits; the "local common sense" stands for the hard-working, but usually ineffectual police; and the "brilliant intuition" alludes, of course, to the detective and his amazing powers of intellect. The murder victim in the poem is "happiness" while the murderer is "time," and yet we cannot be sure of this. Auden's poem enacts the process it describes: just as the "last page" brings a "lingering doubt" (22) so does his last line cause the reader to doubt the guilt of "time." "Happiness" itself must pay for the loss of happiness (27), even though the victim's character is at best questionable (15), as Auden in "The Guilty Vicarage" says it must be (152). As the shift from the third-person singular to the first-person plural suggests, we are all in some way implicated in the crime of slaying our happiness and so we are all somehow guilty.

Such a reading of the poem is very much in keeping with Auden's developing sense of the detective story in the 1930s. In "The Guilty Vicarage" he suggested that "the typical reader of detective stories

is . . . a person who suffers from a sense of sin" and that "[t]o have a sense of sin means to feel guilty" (157). The classical detective story offers the reader an escapist

fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law. The driving force behind this daydream is the feeling of guilt, the cause of which is unknown to the dreamer. The fantasy of escape is the same, whether one explains the guilt in Christian, Freudian, or any other terms. One's way of trying to face the reality, on the other hand, will, of course, depend very much on one's creed. (158)

In this way, the classical detective story is similar to a modern morality play in that it ritualistically presents the discovery and expulsion of guilt from an "Eden-like" setting through the agency of an individual -- the detective -- "who is . . . in a state of grace." As Auden observes, "the miraculous intervention of genius from outside . . . removes guilt by giving knowledge of guilt" (158). The result is the restoration of a "state of grace" to the "Great Good Place." Obviously, by 1938 Auden prefers to read the detective story in a Christian context, yet even as early as 1932 he was developing parallels between the detective and an agent of divine salvation: in *The Orators* figures such as Poirot and Holmes take their places in a ritualized liturgy as they are appealed to in the refrains of prayers: "O Poirot deliver us . . . O Holmes deliver us" (67). In this respect, the final line of "Detective Story" takes on a Christian meaning since atonement for the fall, for the crime that resulted in the loss of happiness, is made through the sacrifice of Christ, who is the agent of salvation and a restored happiness within the Christian myth.

For obvious reasons stemming from his own creed, Klein could not accept Auden's Christian interpretation of the detective story, yet Klein, himself, had a keen interest in this particular form of what he called "hammock literature" ("Writing" 216), as is demonstrated by *The Second Scroll* and two somewhat parodic short stories, "Detective Story, or A Likely Story" and "The Trail of 'Clupea Harengus' The Scientific Detective Story and How She is Writ for Summer Reading." In this respect, we can assume that Klein's interest in the detective story would no doubt have led him to Auden's essay and poem. What Klein has to do, however, is reinscribe the detective story by refiguring the detectivewhom Auden claims is responsible for the restoration of innocence in the "Great Good Place" in terms of his own creed. As Bentley observes in discussing Klein's use of Dante (9), Klein felt no compunction about passing over those aspects of a text that reflect a specifically Christian point of view while using the rest for his own purposes.

In terms of the poem itself, it is certainly true that the genre of the detective story furnishes a "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" with "a minor constellation of images" (Bentley 12), but I would argue that Auden's poem stands as the north star within this constellation. We know, of course, that Klein originally called his poem "Portrait of the Poet as Nobody" when it appeared in *First Statement* in 1945, and it is probable that he changed the title in order to shift the poem's emphasis from negation to affirmation (Bentley 15); but another by no means exclusive reason for the new title may be that Klein wished to draw attention to Auden's poem by suggesting that his poem answered

Auden's.

In addition to the echo of Auden's opening line in the title, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" recalls "Detective Story" in a number of other ways: both poems offer an implied comment on the world's guilt, though they see it stemming from different sources; both note a loss of happiness; both refer in their closing lines to a book that is or is to be written; and both also refer to the idea of atoning for some crime whether it be murder, as in Auden's poem, or "the daily larcenies of the lung" (157), as in Klein's poem. As well, Klein may allude to Auden's poem in the puzzling simile of line 10, "like the corpse in a detective story," and in both poems the body, whether of happiness or of the poet, is the source of uncertainty because it marks an enigmatic presence which is also an absence.

In reworking Auden's sense of the detective story, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" answers Auden's opening question. For Auden the question is rhetorical with its implied answer being that no one is without his or her landscape: we all inhabit the world and so all of us share the guilt for the crime. In Klein's view, such is not the case. Klein's poet is, in a sense, without his landscape because he cannot locate himself within it; instead, in lines that greatly expand the range of Auden's "An unknown tramp? A rich man?" (12), Klein's poet sees imposters in his place (101-118). Ultimately, he does not so much inhabit or possess the landscape as permeate it, though we only come to realize this at the end of the poem. In the meantime, he is said to be "ignored / like the mirroring lenses forgotten on a brow / that shine with the guilt of their unnoticed world" (29-31). The simile is a complex one, but one of its senses is certainly that the poet reflects the guilt within the world, though Klein's sense of the poet's task goes beyond that of mere reflection. The world's "guilt" is due to a variety of causes, but Klein makes the neglect of the poet primary among them, not original sin in its Christian sense. (Within Judaism, the heritage of Adam and Eve's sin is not spiritual death for humanity, who is then redeemed by faith in Christ as the messiah, but physical death itself [Epstein 142].) However, it is important to note that Klein, like Auden, sees a widespread guilt in the world; and, as Auden remarked, no matter how this guilt is explained, the fantasy of escape in the detective story remains the same.

"Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" begins by invoking the tradition of the pastoral elegy mourning the loss and presumed death of the modern poet, who "from our real society / . . . has disappeared" (15-16). As in Auden's poem where the body of happiness paradoxically marks both a presence and an absence, the poet in Klein's poem is absent from the modern world though the traces of his presence remain rendering him enigmatic:

. . . if he is at all, a number, an x,
a Mr. Smith in a hotel register, --
incognito, lost, lacunal. (26-28)

The correspondences between the two poems deepen when we consider that although Klein's poet is not dead: he is without happiness. In this way, Klein follows Auden by including the poet among those who have lost their happiness. However, Klein differs from Auden by not implicating the poet in some original crime, though this does not make Klein's poet free from sin. One of his roles is, of course, "the

convict on parole" (58), and part three of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" describes many of the sins to which the modern poet may fall. However, Klein's poet commits none of these; rather, he is guilty of retreating from society. The only "sure" thing is that "from our real society / he has disappeared" (15-16). The world may be guilty of neglecting the poet, but the poet's disappearance, as Klein's phrasing suggests, is the result of his own action or, perhaps, inaction. His disappearance is not solely a case of society being blind to his presence, but rather of him withdrawing from society so that he cannot be seen. The poet, then, is as responsible for his lost happiness as is the world's neglect: both are implicated. Such a reading is compatible with Klein's Judaic faith, for in Judaism sin is the failure to respond to God's call and, consequently, results in "alienation from God, with all the frustration and ruin of life this entails" (Epstein 142). However, these effects are not irrevocable since regret and penitence, spurred by the frustration -- "the stark infelicity" (129) -- of a life without God, can eventually restore the harmony between God and the penitent. In Klein's poem, the recovery of happiness begins when the poet's "stark infelicity / . . . stirs him from his sleep" (129-130) into the imaginative realm of poetry where he can recreate the earthly paradise.

Within Auden's Christian framework, happiness, itself, pays for the crime of its murder with the result being a shared sense of guilt among all people. In this context, Christ is the ultimate detective who restores grace to the world. For Klein, however, the source of redemption, of a renewed Eden, does not lie in "the miraculous intervention" (Auden, "Guilty" 158) of an incarnated third party's corporal presence, but in an interrelationship of world, poet and language, wherein the poet bonds language to the world because he is intimate with both. He is at once both of the word and of the world. The intimacy the poet enjoys with language, figured in sexual terms in lines 41 to 46, is transferred through the poet to the world in the act of naming which renders the world in linguistic terms (135-39). Hence, Klein's sought-for poet is discovered to be "the nth Adam" (135) naming, praising, and thus recreating the world:

. . . to praise
the world--he, solitary man--is breath
to him. Until it has been praised, that part

has not been. (139-42)

The poet himself, then, restores the "Great Good Place" by a process analogous to, but distinct from, that employed by Auden's detective who "removes guilt by giving knowledge of [that is, by naming] guilt" ("Guilty Vicarage" 158). There is no Audenesque detective in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" except the poem's speaker, himself a poet, who leads the reader through a range of speculations to the conclusion of the poem's sixth and final part. In naming, the poet draws his own map, but it is not the kind of map that Auden's unidentified "who" draws in the opening lines of "Detective Story"; Klein's poet maps "not the world's, but his own body's chart" (145) because his body is the world and the text of his poem. Through his study of language and of texts, the poet becomes the animating presence, the spirit of creation, shining *within* the renewed landscape: "his secret shines / like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea" (162-63). This new landscape is, of course, the imaginative realm

of poetry.

"Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is a much richer poem than Auden's "Detective Story," but by making reference to Auden's poem, Klein critiques Auden's incarnational aesthetic and reinscribes the detective story by relocating the crucial figure of the detective. In other words, while finding "a new function for the d閛class craft" (152) of poetry, Klein also finds a new function for the detective story and "by necessity and indirection bring[s] / new forms to life . . . new creeds" (155-56). Whereas in Auden's poem happiness pays for the crime of its own murder, in Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" the poet, who is initially presumed to be "like the corpse in a detective story" and, therefore, also a victim, is the agent of a renewed innocence. In both cases, the victim is responsible for the recovery of innocence. For Auden, this reflects a Christian point of view, but for Klein the idea is refigured in terms compatible with his own belief.

Notes

1. D.M.R. Bentley has discussed many of these allusions in his article "A Nightmare Ordered: A.M. Klein's 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,'" 7-14. [\[back\]](#)

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