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**Frederick H. Varley's Self-Portraits Unmasked by his Autobiographical Writings:
A Reflection of the Effects of War, Religious/Spiritual Influences and Communion
with Nature.**

Alice Dind

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art History

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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Alice Dind



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ABSTRACT

Frederick H. Varley's Self Portraits Unmasked by his Autobiographical Writings: A Reflection of the Effects of War, Religious/Spiritual Influences and Communion with Nature

Alice Dind

The objective of this thesis is to support Frederick H. Varley's self-portraits with his autobiographical writings thereby creating a dialogue which closely reflects his feelings and intentions at the time he painted these portraits. In Chapter I, Varley's *Self-Portrait* (1919) and *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* (1945) will be discussed within the context of his experience as a war artist in the First World War and his pre-occupation with the Second World War. In Chapter II, I will address the spiritual in Varley's art and specifically how the influence of Albrecht Durer contributed to its expression in his self-representation of *Liberation* (1936/1937). In Chapter III, Varley's attachment to nature and the landscape of Lynn Valley, British Columbia will be the focus of my discussion of *Mirror of Thought* (1943).

The criteria developed by Philippe Lejeune for his autobiographical pact, Richard Brilliant's study on portraiture, and Ernst Van Alphen's examination of portraiture within new conceptions of subjectivity will be important sources in this effort.

Dedication

To my family in appreciation for their enthusiasm and support.

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At the Art Gallery of Ontario I owe thanks to Amy Marshall, Special Collection Archivist, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, for locating all the archives on F.H. Varley. I also wish to thank the staff at the National Gallery of Canada for their kind cooperation in providing important documents for my research: Cyndie Campbell, Head, Archives, Documentation and Visual Resources Library and Archives, Sharon Odell, Storage Technician and Jane Robertson, Documentation Assistant, in Collections Management.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I The Influence of War on Varley's Self-Portraits.....	11
CHAPTER II The Religious/Spiritual in Varley's Self-Portraits....	38
CHAPTER III Varley's Communion with the Landscape.....	66
CONCLUSION.....	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY	90
FIGURES	99

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Frederick H. Varley. *Self-Portrait*, 1919, oil on canvas, 61.0 x 50.8 cm., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 2. Frederick H. Varley. *Comme C'a - What a Thug!*, 1942, ink sketch 2.2 x 1.5 cm. Reproduction from National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Varley Archive, letter F.H. Varley to son Jim, December 1942.

Figure 3. Frederick H. Varley. *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943*, 1945, oil on canvas, on masonite, 49.5 x 40.7 cm., Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 4. Frederick H. Varley. *Lieutenant G.B. McKean, V.C.*, 1918, oil on canvas, 102.0 x 76.0 cm., Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 5. Frederick H. Varley. *Canadian Soldier*, 1942, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 81.3 cm., Art Collection Society of Kingston. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 6. Augustus John. *Canadian Soldier (I)*, 1917, oil on canvas, 32 x 24 inches, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Reproduction from Exhibition Catalogue, *Augustus John*. Dalhousie Art Gallery. Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1972.

Figure 7. Augustus John. *Portrait of T.E. Lawrence as Aircraftsman Shaw*, 1935, oil on canvas, 27 ¾ x 20 ½ inches, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Reproduction from Exhibition Catalogue, *Augustus John*. Dalhousie Art Gallery. Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1972.

Figure 8. Frederick H. Varley. *The Christ Tree*, 1918, pencil and watercolour on paper, 17.6 x 25.3 cm., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 9. Frederick H. Varley. *Endpaper* for Wilson MacDonald's book *The Miracle Songs of Jesus*, 1921, lithograph white on light blue background, 8 x 10 inches. Reproduction from MacDonald, Wilson. *The Miracle Songs of Jesus*. Toronto: W. MacDonald, 1921.

Figure 10. Frederick H. Varley. Pendentive painting of *The Nativity*, 1923, approx. 15 feet wide x 10 feet high, Saint Anne's Church, Toronto. Reproduction from pamphlet *Saint Anne's Church 1862-1987*.

Figure 11. Frederick H. Varley. *Liberation*, 1936-37, oil on canvas, 213.7 x 134.3 cm., Art Gallery of Ontario. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 12. Fredrick H. Varley. *Liberation*, 1943. oil on canvas, 71.0 x 61.5 cm., Private collection. Reproduction from Varley, Christopher. *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*. Exhibition Catalogue. Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981.

Figure 13. Albrecht Durer. *Head of Dead Christ*, 1503, charcoal on paper, 31.0 x 22.1 cm., British Museum, London. Reproduction from Bartrum, Giulia. *Albrecht Durer and his Legacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Figure 14. Albrecht Durer. *Head of Suffering Man*, 1503, charcoal on paper, 31.0 x 22.1 cm., British Museum, London. Reproduction from Bartrum, Giulia. *Albrecht Durer and his Legacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Figure 15. Albrecht Durer. *Nude Self-Portrait*, c. 1503, pen and brush, heightened with white on green grounded paper, 29.2 x 15.4 cm., Staatliche Kunstsammlung, Weimar. Reproduction from Koerner, Joseph Leo. *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Figure 16. Albrecht Durer. *Proportional Nude as Atelier Mannequin*, 1526, black pen and ink with yellow wash on background, 45.0 x 24.8 cm., British Museum, London. Reproduction from Koerner, Joseph Leo. *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Figure 17. Albrecht Durer. *Self-Portrait*, 1500, oil on wood, 67.0 x 49.0 cm., Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Reproduction from Koerner, Joseph Leo. *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Figure 18 . Albrecht Durer. *Self-Portrait as Man of Sorrows*, 1522, metal point on green prepared paper, 40.8 x 29.0 cm., Bremen Kunsthalle. Reproduction from White, Christopher. *Durer - The Artist and his Drawings*. London: Phaidon Press, 1971.

Figure 19. Albrecht Durer. *Adam and Eve*, 1504, pen and ink with brown wash, 24.2 x 20.1 cm., Pierport Morgan Library, New York. Reproduction from Anzelewsky, Fedja. *The Drawings and Graphic Works of Durer*. London, New York, Sydney, Toronto: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1970.

Figure 20. Albrecht Durer. *Apollo and Diana*, ca. 1501-1502, pen and brown ink, 28.5 x 20.2 cm., British Museum, London. Reproduction from Anzelewsky, Fedja. *The*

Drawings and Graphic Works of Durer. London, New York, Sydney, Toronto: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1970.

Figure 21. Albrecht Durer. *Male Nude*, 1513, pen and brush in brown and green with touches of pink, 27.5 x 20 cm., Sachsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden. Reproduction from White, Christopher. *Durer - the Artist and his Drawings.* London: Phaidon Press, 1971.

Figure 22. Albrecht Durer. *Ill Durer*, ca. 1510, pen and ink with watercolour, 13.2 x 11.5 cm., Kunsthalle, Bremen. Reproduction from White, Christopher. *Durer - the Artist and his Drawings.* London: Phaidon Press, 1971.

Figure 23. Frederick H. Varley. *Mirror of Thought*, 1937, oil on canvas, 50.7 x 60.9 cm., Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 24. Caspar David Friedrich. *The Monk by the Sea*, 1808-1810, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm., Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Reproduction from Schmied, Wieland. *Caspar David Friedrich.* New York: Harry H. Abrams, 1995.

Figure 25. Caspar David Friedrich. *Morning in the Riesengebirge*, 1810-1811, oil on canvas, 108 x 170 cm., Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlosser und Garten, Berlin. Reproduction from Schmied, Wieland. *Caspar David Friedrich.* New York: Harry H. Abrams, 1995.

Figure 26. Frederick H. Varley. *The Open Window*, c. 1933, oil on canvas, 102.9 x 87.0 cm., Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 27. Frederick H. Varley. *Weather, Lynn Valley*, 1935-36, oil on panel, 30.5 x 38.1 cm., Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Figure 28. Frederick H. Varley. *Night Ferry, Vancouver*, 1937, oil on canvas, 82.3 x 102.2 cm., Private Collection. Reproduction from Varley, Christopher. *F. H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition.* Exhibition Catalogue. Edmonton: The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981.

Figure 29. Edvard Munch. *Night in Saint-Cloud*, 1890, oil on canvas, 64.5 x 54 cm., Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo. Reproduction from Lippincott, Louise. *Edvard Munch: Starry Night.* Malibu, California: Paul Getty Museum, 1988.

Figure 30. Edvard Munch. *Self-Portrait with Cigarette*, 1885, oil on canvas, 110.5 x 85.5 cm., Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo. Reproduction from Eggum, Arne. *Edvard Munch: Paintings, Sketches and Studies*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1983.

Figure 31. Edvard Munch. *Self-Portrait with Cigarette*, 1908, lithograph, 56 x 45.5 cm., Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger. Reproduction from Stang, Ragna. *Edvard Munch - The Man and his Art*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1977.

Figure 32. Edvard Munch. *Self-Portrait in the Glass Verandah II*, 1940, oil, black crayon, and spray technique on board, 18 x 21 7/8 inches, Munch Museet, Oslo. Reproduction from Prelinger, Elizabeth. *After the Scream: The Late Paintings of Edvard Munch*. New Haven and London: High Museum of Art (Atlanta) in Association with Yale University Press, 2001.

Figure 33. Edvard Munch. *Melancholy*, 1891, oil on canvas, 72 x 98 cm., Private Collection. Reproduction from Eggum, Arne. *Edvard Munch: Paintings, Sketches and Studies*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1983.

Figure 34. Edvard Munch. *The Lonely Ones*, 1895, drypoint, 15.5 x 21.3 cm., Fram Trust. Reproduction from Howe, Jeffery, ed. *Edvard Munch: Psyche, Symbol and Expression*. Exhibition Catalogue. Boston College, McMullen Museum of Art. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Figure 35. Edvard Munch. *Jealousy*, c. 1907, oil on canvas, 75 x 97.5 cm., Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger. Reproduction from Eggum, Arne. *Edvard Munch Expressionist Paintings 1900-1940*. Exhibition Catalogue. Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art and University of Wisconsin, 1982.

Figure 36. Edvard Munch. *Starry Night*, 1916-1923, charcoal on paper, 70 x 62.5 cm., Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger. Reproduction from Lippincott, Louise. *Edvard Munch: Starry Night*. Malibu, California: Paul Getty Museum, 1988.

Figure 37. Edvard Munch. *Starry Night*, 1922-1924, oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches, Munch-Museet, Oslo. Reproduction from Prelinger, Elizabeth. *After the Scream: The Late Paintings of Edvard Munch*. New Haven and London: High Museum of Art (Atlanta) in Association with Yale University Press, 2001.

Figure 38. Edvard Munch. *Starry Night*, 1923-1924, oil on canvas, 121 x 100 cm., Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Oslo. Reproduction from Stang, Ragna. *Edvard Munch - The Man and His Art*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1977.

Figure 39. Frederick H. Varley. *Moonlight after Rain*, 1947, oil on canvas, 61.2 x 71.1 cm., Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Reproduction from Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to provide an analysis of Frederick Horsman Varley's (1881-1969) self-portraits by connecting them to autobiography. My intention is to affirm how his words and his images act in concert to communicate an array of feelings and influences beneath the surface of the canvas. Contrary to his assumption of "holding back the speaking things within,"¹ his self-portraits reveal personal issues, social concerns, religious beliefs and artistic intentions.

No comprehensive study of Varley's self-portraits has been undertaken, although reference to, and comments on them as individual works appear in several publications. Maria Tippet comments on several of Varley's self-portraits within her biography of F.H. Varley.² Joyce Zemans analyses Varley's underlying emotional turmoil in these portraits through his arrangement of composition, brush work and interpretive color.³ Marielle Aylen considers *Mirror of Thought* (1943) and *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* (1945) within the context of "modes of consciousness" and "difference between personal and social identities in temporal terms."⁴ Ann Davis looks at the "mystical form" in Varley's works, and discusses *Self-Portrait* (1919), *Liberation* (1936/1937) and *Mirror of Thought* (1943) from the perspective of how mysticism, transcendentalism and Theosophy influenced Varley's ideas.⁵ Andrea Kirkpatrick includes *Self-Portrait* (1919) in her M.A.

¹NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Len and Billie Pike, 14 March, 1941.

²Maria Tippet, *Stormy Weather: F.H. Varley, A Biography* (McClelland & Stewart, 1998).

³Joyce Zemans, "An Appreciation," in *Frederick H. Varley*, ed. Peter Varley (Toronto: Kay Porter Books, 1983), pp. 51-75.

⁴Marielle Aylen, *Making Faces: Canadian Portraiture Between the Wars* (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 1996).

⁵Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

Thesis on *The Portraiture of Frederick H. Varley 1919 to 1926*.⁶ Her approach is an analysis of Varley's portraits of members connected with Toronto's arts community as well as several personalities in professional or political positions during that time.

My intention is to link Varley's self-portraits to his autobiographical writing, his notes and correspondence with family members and friends, located in the archives at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. With this approach I will try to refrain from entering into psychological interpretations of Varley's self-portraits to avoid what Colin Eisler refers to as "art-historical flight from personality." His concern is that so much of 20th century scholarly attention has distanced itself from the artist and replaced the creative character of the artist with that of the critic/scholar who is now perceived as the "creative I." "We lost the Who in pursuit of the What", depriving the viewer of the remotest understanding of the artist's intention.⁷

Varley's correspondence considered for this essay spans the years from 1910 to 1961 and can be divided into three parts: 1) letters between 1910 and 1961 written to, and received from his sisters Ethel and Lil with whom he shares childhood memories and his spiritual and religious sentiments which had their origins in their upbringing in Sheffield, England, 2) letters to and from his family, between 1918 and 1951, especially his wife, Maud Pinder, to whom, amongst domestic and financial problems, he confides

⁶Andrea F. Kirkpatrick, "The Portraiture of Frederick H. Varley, 1919-1926" {M.A. thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1988}.

⁷ Colin Eisler, "Every Artist Paints Himself: Art History as Biography and Autobiography," *Social Research* 54 (Spring 1987): 80-87.

his hope for success and his feelings of rejection as an artist. Above all, it is to her that he reveals his feelings of horror and despair while serving as a war artist in France in 1918, 3) letters to and from friends, especially correspondence between 1940 and 1945 with Len and Billie Pike, in which he reveals deep concern about the Second World War, his loneliness, his financial problems, and his failure as an artist.

Varley's letters reflect a character rather restless and contradictory. While on the one hand his commitment to family, religion, and his art remain firm, there are times when he admits his neglect, his doubts and his failure in all these matters. The correspondence with his sisters in England was frequently interrupted by long silences. He was prone to bouts of heavy drinking which caused his work to suffer and he was forever in financial difficulty and depended on the support from his wife and friends. Yet, this seemingly irresponsible and unreliable image shadowed a human being who was sensitive and caring and deeply troubled by the horrors of war. In some of his letters to family and friends, interspersed with every-day trivia, emerge philosophical outpourings and his admiration for art, literature, music and nature, at times prophetic or derived, as he claims, "from my life work."⁸

There is little doubt that his religious faith, love for nature and art can be traced back to his childhood in Sheffield, England where he was born on January 2, 1881. It was there where his upbringing in the Congregational, and later in the Anglican Church, formed his religious beliefs, and where his walks with his father through the Sheffield

⁸NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to son Jim, undated, end 1946.

countryside awakened his love for nature. The influences during his formal studies at the Sheffield School of Art (1892-1900), considered one of the finest art schools in Great Britain⁹, and the Academie Royal des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp (1900-1902) exposed him to a wide range of art forms including works from Antiquity and the Renaissance to the Impressionists and the Fauves. It is likely that he became familiar with the works of Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) and J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) among other artists at the St. George's Museum near Sheffield which John Ruskin had built in 1875 for his vast art collection. Reading through Varley's correspondence one recognizes that his knowledge of art was profound and was expanded by his love for music and literature.

Varley's emigration to Canada in 1912 and his friendship with colleagues at Rous and Mann, where they all worked as lithographers, lead to their painting trips to Algonquin Park and later their forming of the Group of Seven. With Arthur Lismer (1885-1969), Lawren Harris (1885-1970), J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932), A.Y. Jackson (1882-1974), Frank Johnston (1888-1949), and Tom Thompson (1877-1917) Varley painted the landscape in Algonquin Park. His contribution to Canadian art is usually assessed within the repertory of the Group of Seven and he initially shared and collaborated in their interests to promote the Canadian landscape, notable with his *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay* (1920-1921). However, because of his interest in portraiture and his individual nature "he did not join the Group's search for an intrinsically Canadian style and rarely took part in their sketching expeditions. His contributions to the Group's

⁹Maria Tippet, p.14.

exhibitions consisted mainly of paintings of figures set in the landscape.”¹⁰ Varley moved to Vancouver in 1926, becoming the only member of the Group outside of Toronto.

In 1918 Varley was appointed to the War Art Program of the Canadian War Records. This experience during which he followed the advancing Allied armies in their final offensive against the Germans exposed him to the horrors of the First World War and left him with deep psychological scars. He produced some of the most devastating illustrations of that conflict which serve as visual testimonies of death and suffering and a desolate and destroyed landscape. His portrait of *Lieutenant G.B. McKean, V.C.* (1918) captures an expression of anguish and despair evoked by a senseless war.

Following his return to Toronto in August of 1919, and until he left for Vancouver in 1926, portraiture became his main interest. Amongst Varley's vast inventory of portraits of important members of Toronto society is his well-known portrait of *Vincent Massey* (1920). However his portrait commissions could not sustain his family, Maud Pinder whom he had married in England in 1909 and their four children, Dorothy, John, James and Peter. In 1926 he received an appointment as instructor of drawing and painting at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Art, and later in 1933 he and Jock MacDonald (1897-1960) opened the British Columbia College of Arts which was forced to close in 1935 because of lack of funds, eventually requiring Varley to move back East to Ottawa in 1936.

¹⁰Christopher Varley, F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981), p.54.

The years in British Columbia between 1926 and 1936 were to be his “happiest and most productive.”¹¹ Not only was it the landscape of Lynn that cast a spell over him. Vera Weatherbie, his model and former student became a strong influence in his personal and professional life. However, this relationship, as well as his marriage to Maud Pinder, ended during 1936/1937.

Within the rich and varied repertory of his art, Varley’s self-portraits can be considered as markers of important stages in his personal and professional life, the fragments which, together with excerpts from his correspondence, form a literary and visual narrative as chapters in Varley’s autobiography. “If I can’t express myself in paint by Jove I’ll write”¹² appears frequently in Varley’s correspondence. I intend to demonstrate that he succeeded in both these efforts, thereby supporting his autobiography in paint with his autobiographical writings.

In this study I will focus on six self representations: *Self-Portrait* (1919), *Liberation* (1936/1937), *Liberation* (1943), *Mirror of Thought* (1937), *Comme C’a - What a Thug!* (1942), a sketch within a letter to son Jim, and *Self Portrait, Days of 1943* (1945). I will also bring *The Christ Tree* (1918) into my discussion. My objective is to analyze these portraits according to three relevant themes which dominate his art within the context of his correspondence, devoting a chapter to each: The consequences of his experience as a war artist in France during World War I; his religious/spiritual beliefs; and his love for, and communion with nature.

¹¹ NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 27 May, 1918.

¹² Ibid.

Reference to critical texts on portraiture and autobiography will include Richard Brilliant's pivotal study on portraiture based on his analysis of the authority of the likeness, the technique of self representation, fabrication of identity and its social emplacement, and the imaginative interchange between the portrait image and the viewer. This study is about the concepts that generate ideas of personal identity and lead to their fabrication in the imagery of portraits, influencing their creation and their reception.¹³ Ernst Van Alphen examines portraiture as a genre in 20th century art within new conceptions of subjectivity and new notions of representation. He responds to the breakdown of traditional views of personal identity which, challenged by the rejection of figurative imagery, has assumed a more creative, liberating alternative vision of the self.¹⁴

To substantiate my observation of the influence of Albrecht Durer and Edvard Munch on several elements of style in Varley's self-portraiture, I will refer primarily to Joseph Leo Koerner and his extensive study of the motivating factors in Albrecht Durer's self-portraits,¹⁵ Robert Rosenblum's important work on *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*,¹⁶ and a publication accompanying an exhibition of works by Edvard Munch edited by Jeffrey Howe, entitled *Edvard Munch: Psyche, Symbol and Expression*.¹⁷

¹³ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Ernst Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1975).

¹⁷ Jeffrey Howe, ed., *Edvard Munch: Psyche, Symbol and Expression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

As my thesis is grounded in Varley's autobiographical material, Philippe Lejeune, an authority on autobiography and author of the *Autobiographical Pact*, is an important source of inquiry. While the *Autobiographical Pact* is primarily composed of criteria applicable to the literature of autobiography, including diaries and memoirs, self-portraiture fulfils several of these criteria.

Lejeune's definition of the *Autobiographical Pact* is a form of contract between author and reader. He considers autobiography a retrospective prose narrative concerning a person's existence in which there is identity of name between the author, the narrator of the story and the character who is being talked about. The self-portrait shares many of these aspects. Lejeune maintains that the focus of such a narrative should concern the person's individual life and the story of his/her personality. He makes allowance for the author's use of a pseudonym, involving the narrator and principle character in a narration in the third person, a style used for reasons of discretion or to cover up deceptions. Lejeune considers any work that meets these conditions as an autobiography and includes the genre of self-portraiture as meeting these criteria.¹⁸ By using the titles *The Christ Tree*, *Liberation*, and *Mirror of Thought* as labels for his self-portraits, Varley demonstrates the application of the use of pseudonyms.

Lejeune's approach will support my argument that Varley's autobiographical texts confirm the narrative that is embodied in the self-portraits, revealing knowledge and

¹⁸ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c. 1989), p.3.

meaning as well as his intentions, his psychological, spiritual, and philosophical reflections, aspects which generally remain concealed from the viewer.

In **Chapter I** I will discuss Varley's *Self-Portrait* (1919) and his portrait of *Lieutenant G.B. McKean, V.C.* (1918), related to his experience as a war artist during the First World War. Varley's *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* (1945), his sketch *Comme C'a - What a Thug!* (1942) and *Canadian Soldier* (1942) will be discussed within the context of his pre-occupation with the Second World War and feelings of loneliness at that time. I have selected two works by Augustus John for comparison of style and communication of mood and state of mind: *Canadian Soldier* (1), (1917), and *Portrait of T.E. Lawrence As Aircraftsman Shaw* (1935). In this chapter I will apply Lejeune's autobiographical formulation to demonstrate the application of his theoretical definition of autobiography to self-portraiture.

In **Chapter II** I will address the spiritual in Varley's art, beginning with his pencil and watercolor sketch of *The Christ Tree* (1918). I will expand on this theme with his endpaper illustration of a book (1921), his mural painting of the *Nativity* (1923) in Saint Anne's Church in Toronto, and his two *Liberation* themes in oil, painted in 1936/37 and in 1943. *Liberation* (1936/37) and Varley's identification with its christological image will be the main focus of my discussion in this chapter. I will attempt to trace the origins for its inspiration and support my presumption that this work may have been the screen for the resolution of an earlier profound deception. In this chapter, as well as in Chapter III, Varley's awareness of, and influence by art developments, not only at home but also

abroad, seem evident. Joseph Leo Koerner's interpretation of Albrecht Durer's identification with Christ and Jordan Kantor's essay on *Durer's Passions*¹⁹ were insightful and revealing in substantiating my speculation that Varley's *Liberation* (1936/1937) not only in its formal presentation, but also in its communication of feeling and intention, shares similarities with several works by Durer.

In **Chapter III** Varley's attachment to nature, especially his worship of the landscape of Lynn Valley, British Columbia, will be the focus in my discussion of *Mirror of Thought* (1943). His face reflected in the shaving mirror against the landscape that he revered convinces of his attachment to this landscape, however the symbolism of transience within the landscape and in Varley's depiction of himself expose his reflections on the passing of time. Evidence for this perception can be detected in several references in his correspondence around this time. Again, as in the previous chapter, I intend to justify my impression of the influence of other artists on Varley's art. With Jeffrey Howe's extensive work on *Edvard Munch: Psyche, Symbol and Expression*, and Ragna Stang's findings in her important book on *Edvard Munch - The Man and his Art*,²⁰ I will attempt to expose Munch's influence on Varley's art. With Varley's autobiographical writings and with selected works and words by Edvard Munch (1863-1944) I intend to explore the symbolic language in *Mirror of Thought* and hopefully arrive at a new and expanded reading of this work.

¹⁹ Jordan Kantor, *Durer's Passions*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museum, 2000).

²⁰ Ragna Stang, *Edvard Munch: The Man and his Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1977).

CHAPTER I

THE INFLUENCE OF WAR ON VARLEY'S ART

“Art to be recognized must quicken the imagination of the onlooker who continues to live it through his or her degree of understanding.”¹

Phillip Lejeune's approach will guide me on a visit to an exhibition of several self-representations by Frederick H. Varley, and will support my analysis of the loneliness, pain, and, above all, the influence of war that Varley has instilled in these works: *Self-Portrait* (1919) (Figure 1), *Comme C'a - What a Thug!* (enclosed within a letter to son Jim at the end of 1942) (Figure 2), and *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* (1945) (Figure 3).

Seeing these three portraits exhibited on a museum wall raises curiosity in the spectator's mind about the identity of the person represented. The signature on two attests to their having been painted by the same artist and the label identifies two as self-portraits. By examining their formal composition the spectator will try to establish a connection between these works.

Self-Portrait (1919), (National Art Gallery of Canada) (Figure 1).

While approaching this frontal and half length portrait of the artist, as indicated by the label, the spectator perceives that the composition is divided into areas of light and dark. Light fills the top right and bottom left of Varley's figure leaving the bottom right and top left in shadow. His brushed back and neatly trimmed red hair touches the top of

¹ NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 28 April, 1919.

the canvas. Below his neck and white shirt collar the broad shoulders spread out to the left and right side of the frame. The horizontal line which runs across the canvas on the left of the spectator, continues on the other side of Varley's neck and accentuates the broad shoulders. The white shirt collar around Varley's neck and the glare in his left eye catch the spectator's gaze. Other than the reflection of light on the right side of Varley's forehead and some lighter shades in the background, the canvas is in somber shades of brown and green. Overall this is a rather stiff and composed half-length portrait, the body slightly turned toward his left side and cut off above the waist. Except for what might be a window curtain to the left and what might be paintings on the wall on the right of Varley's head, suggesting that he may be in his studio, there is nothing in this portrait to distract the spectator from Varley's head and upper body. Not much detail has been given to his apparel in hues of brown and green which could be a painter's smock or a loosely fitting jacket. There are no hands holding the brush and any obvious allusions to his profession are concealed. An indication of a chest pocket on Varley's left side, could be read as a faint association to a uniform. More detail has been given to the face. The right side is kept in shadow while the left side of the face reveals a stern, determined and defiant look in his eye. The lips are firmly pressed together and the chin rests against a heavy neck which is enclosed by the white shirt collar. There is little color variation in the face. The pink/brown from the background to his right carries over across his hair and flows over into the face giving it a clay-like appearance, an impression that is accentuated

by the heavy brush strokes and the reflection of light on the right side of the forehead.

Some onlookers might associate the date of the painting and the brown/green apparel with the First World War, but there are no obvious other clues within the canvas to suggest such a connection.

Self-Portrait, Days of 1943 (1945), (Hart House, University of Toronto) (Figure 3).

The label tells us that this self-portrait refers to a defined time period. Varley again has presented himself in a frontal three quarter pose. This time he has placed himself before a landscape: to the left and right of his face dark clouds are looming in a threatening sky which at the level of Varley's eyes becomes calmer and brighter, bathed in the light of a setting sun on his right. Again, as in the 1919 self-portrait, a horizontal line extends from the spectator's left behind Varley's head just below the lower lip and then carries on to the right, stopping short just before the edge of the canvas. One gets the impression that it serves to hold the head "in place". Varley's right side appears to be leaning against the frame of a window or maybe the edge of the easel or the canvas as he paints himself, causing the right shoulder to look somewhat higher than the left. More space has been given to the head and face, exposing less of his upper body which could be attributed to the fact that the canvas is smaller than that of the 1919 self-portrait. Also more color variations in heavy brushstrokes have been applied. Patches of light blue, gray and light green appear in the sky and are repeated in his shirt and tie. Reflections of light coming from Varley's left cast this side of his face in pink which turns into darker shades of brown in the jacket. Compared to the 1919 self-portrait, Varley's upper body is less

upright, hinting at the effects of the intervening twenty-six years: the shoulders are narrower and drooping, his shirt in gray/blue and the tie fit loosely around the neck unlike the tightly fitting shirt and tie in the 1919 self-portrait. The hair touching the top edge of the canvas looks disheveled and the face seems elongated with its exposed neck. Even though Varley faces the spectator directly, his right eye stares as a dark brown pupil. His left eye looks out in sadness and resignation, a feeling that is emphasized by the pursed lips and downcast corners of his mouth. The spectator wonders what happened in 1943 that would have caused him sadness. Also, the right eye might leave a troubling impression. In *Self-Portrait* (1919) it is hidden in shadow and in *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* (1945) it is left as an empty socket.

The reading of these portraits has made Frederick H. Varley superficially known to the spectator, but without further knowledge these representations tell us nothing about Varley the person and his intentions when he painted these portraits.

Filling the wall space around these portraits with Varley's portrait of *Lieutenant G.B. McKean, V.C.* (1918) (Canadian War Museum, Ottawa) (Figure 4), and *Canadian Soldier* (1942) (Art Collection Society of Kingston) (Figure 5) and two works by Augustus John (1878-1961): *Canadian Soldier (I)*, (1917) (National Gallery of Canada) (Figure 6) and *Portrait of T.E. Lawrence as Aircraftsman Shaw* (1935) (National Gallery of Canada) (Figure 7), a visual context is provided. The spectator is now introduced to the historical circumstances of that time, observing that all these works were produced during the First and Second World War. This will allow a revision or expansion of the first impression of the two self-representations and enable the viewer to reflect on

Lejeune's idea of an art work's context "where it really means something" and where the work provides an occasion for the onlooker "to play psychologist, to compose little novels, to imagine dramas, to read the passage of Time."² Lejeune draws a parallel here with the author of a book who "draws his reality from the list of his other works which figure often in the front of the book."³ He assumes that the reader of a book, like the spectator of a particular painting, gains a better understanding of the work within the context of other works by the same author/artist. Adding yet another layer by expanding this exhibition with a display of autobiographical and biographical information on F.H. Varley, we will have accomplished Lejeune's conditions for both, autobiography and self-portraiture. This also follows Richard Brilliant's contention that with this additional knowledge the visitor is able to go beyond the superficial impression of what the artist looks like to what he is and who he is.⁴

Observing the works again within this broader context offers a connection between Varley's *Self-Portrait* (1919) and his portrait of *Lieutenant G.B. McKean, V.C.* (1918). F.H. Varley had been appointed to the War Art Program by the Canadian War Records in 1918 as had several other Canadian artists, including William Beatty (1850-1941), Maurice Cullen (1866-1934), A.Y. Jackson (1882-1974), and the British artist Augustus John (1878-1961). They were to follow the advancing Allied armies in the final offensive against the Germans in France. From London and Camp Seaford where Varley was

²Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c.1989), p.117.

³Ibid., p.12.

⁴Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.15.

stationed before being called to duty in France, his correspondence speaks of being flattered by the rank of honorary Captain, conferred on him, and the attention and advantages that go along with wearing a uniform.⁵ He feels “pampered”, “spoilt”, and “made a fuss of”. In a letter to his wife on May 24, 1918, he states: “I think the uniform we wear rubs off the corners of harshness, wherever one goes there are friends.”⁶

During this time in London, while waiting to be called to duty, he received a commission from Canadian War Records to paint several officers in the military. The portrait of Lieutenant McKean is one of these. He took great pride in this commission and it is likely that he may have looked upon these men as a “role model” for the brave soldier that he was aspiring to be. Lieutenant McKean had served in the battlefield and had been awarded the Victoria Cross. At the time of this painting he was still in “a state of deep shock” from his war experience.⁷

Lieutenant McKean’s seated figure, almost full length, cut above the knee by the lower frame, is placed into the middle of the canvas. His hands are resting on his lap, the left hand clasping his cap while the right hand holds his cane and gloves. The dark background in heavy brushstrokes in shades of brown with specs of red and blue blends with his uniform. A light on the upper left of the canvas illuminates his head, close to the top of the frame, and lifts the color and details of the uniform from the dark background. The space on each side of the head, shoulders, and arms accentuates his straight and

⁵Christopher Varley, F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981), p.34.

⁶NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 27 May, 1918.

⁷Christopher Varley, p.34.

composed upper body although the positioning of arms and hands suggests a more relaxed and resigned mood in contrast to the tense expression in his face. His eyes are turned away from the spectator, the right eye staring into the distance while the left eye, slightly guarded, looks out with what could be interpreted as both, contempt and defeat. Lips are pressed together and his strong chin, emphasized by its dark shadow below, is contrasted by the light shirt and tie. The display of medals that adorns his uniform, bestowing not only identity as a soldier but also his rank within that profession, does not avert attention from the seriousness in the face.

Varley has captured Lt. McKean in the exemplary role of a soldier projecting the respect that the audience would expect from a person with such rank. The spectator is able to get a sense of what Lieutenant McKean looks like, what he is like and who he is even though this may be based only on superficial knowledge.

Looking at Varley's *Self-Portrait* (1919), painted upon his return to Canada, next to that of Lieutenant McKean, a connection can be drawn between the "army browns and greens" in Varley's smock and the uniform of Lieutenant McKean. Also Varley's stiff composure, the determined and defiant look in his eye, could in some sense be seen as a co-extension of Lieutenant's McKean's portrait. Varley could have portrayed himself in uniform. He had been appointed to the rank of honorary Captain and was proud of his uniform and the privileges that it conferred on him. However, unlike Lieutenant McKean's uniform and medals, Varley's attire is undefined, identifying him neither as soldier or artist.

At the time Varley painted this self-portrait he, like Lieutenant McKean, had taken part in the horrors of the First World War. However Varley had been the observer and recorder of the consequences of the brutal carnage in contrast to Lieutenant McKean, the soldier on the front line. It could well be that Varley was reflecting on the success and heroic conduct of Lieutenant McKean against his own failure in sustaining the horrors of war which he had witnessed on the battlefield between September and November of 1918. A letter to his wife on his return from the Front, attests to his despair:

Oh I'm a wonderful boy - the pride of his parents - a great broad-backed big faced husky being that burnt his fingers with picking up too soon a piece of shell that tried to knock his ear off. Bravery? Tut-tut...France has proved me to be a freak ... I started out wrong on Peace Day and saw too many piteous sights. They haunted me and I couldn't flagwave or get drunk. The pale ghosts of memories are the only companions to so many tens of thousands.⁸

In his *Self-Portrait* (1919) Varley shows himself "broad-backed", "big faced" and "husky", but also deeply troubled as expressed in the foregoing letter. Following another brief visit to the battlefield in France in April of 1919 he revealed to his wife: "I could tell you for a month about Ypres - Sanctuary Wood - Maple Copse - Vimy Ridge, etc. All new ground for me this time but the subject is too big. - It will dribble out in after years. ... Oh, if it were only possible for you people to know what it was like, but you never can."⁹

⁸NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 8 November, 1918.

⁹Ibid., 28 April, 1919.

Varley returned home from his war experience, broken in spirit by what he had witnessed, a far cry from the heroics and prestige that he had anticipated. The experience of war had left him with profound feelings of defeat and horror and his expectations for success in his career were shattered as expressed in a letter to his wife on November 8, 1918: "I can't smell Rous & Mann and a time clock, I can't even smell a studio & paint in Toronto, I can't smell a studio anywhere."¹⁰ In the portrait of Lt. McKean Varley was able to bestow both, disillusionment and defeat as expressed in McKean's eyes, and pride and honor displayed by the medals that adorn his uniform. Varley's self-portrait goes beyond the superficial. By his nondescript attire he expresses in paint his failure as a soldier and the doubt in his career which he confirms in writing in his letters home shortly after returning from the Front.

Andrea Kirkpatrick in her discussion of *Self-Portrait* (1919) expresses surprise about the interpretations of sadness and anxiety by several observers of this portrait. Having "just returned from the successes of his war service" and with "a measure of financial security" while he was still a commissioned officer of the Canadian army, she feels that he should have been "in a positive frame of mind."¹¹ This observation demonstrates the difficulty in recognizing the artist's mood and state of mind in a self-portrait without personal information that would support such interpretation. Varley's spirit had been shattered by what he experienced on the battlefield and his heart-wrenching images of death and destruction captured in paint in his paintings of *For What?*

¹⁰Ibid., 8 November, 1918.

¹¹Andrea Kirkpatrick, "The Portraiture of Frederick H. Varley 1919 to 1926" (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1986), p.113.

(1918) and *Sunken Road* (1919), are among several that he recorded for his countrymen back home. Unlike his self-portraits, these works were foremost for the purpose of recognition as a successful artist. He wanted to impress, to surpass all artists who were trying to capture and recreate on canvas the horrors in the trenches. The response to his war paintings in exhibitions in London, New York, and Ottawa confirmed that he had succeeded in this pursuit.¹²

Augustus John (1878-1961), a British artist, had been commissioned as a major in the Canadian army through the acquaintance with Lord Beaverbrook who as Max Aitken had moved from New Brunswick to England around 1910 and who had created the Canadian War Records Office for the purpose of publicizing Canada's role in the war. At the time of Augustus John's appointment his career as an artist had developed and he was considered the "finest natural draughtsman" and "a brilliant if very uneven portrait painter."¹³ His work had been displayed at several exhibitions in London: at the Carfax Gallery in 1903 and at the Leicester Gallery in 1904. Varley most certainly became familiar with his art while he spent time in London between 1903 and 1905.¹⁴

Varley respected him as an artist and it was with a sense of great pride that he felt included in his circle during their assignment as war artists. On January 20, 1919 he wrote his wife:

¹²Maria Tippet, *Stormy Weather - F.H. Varley: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998), pp. 122-123.

¹³Nigel Viney, *Images of Wartime: British Art and Artists of World War I* (Newton Abbot, Devon: David & Charles, 1991), p.53.

¹⁴Maria Tippet, p.86.

The 'Nation' a weekly paper has an article in - no names mentioned but my horror picture described. In truth, I have crawled from out the horde of swarming fleas and the big bugs class me with them. ... The Chelsea Arts Club have made me a member. ...Next Thursday evening 25 of us are giving a dinner to Konody & presenting him with a £ 25 cigar case. Major Augustus (ahem) John in the chair.¹⁵

It is not known to which of Varley's war pictures the article referred. It might have been *For What?* or *Some Day The People Will Return*, which were amongst those painted in England in 1918 before Varley's return to Canada in 1919. Presumably this article was in response to an exhibition held at the Royal Academy at the end of 1918.

Varley admired Augustus John's work and he, as other artists, among them Walter Richard Sickert, William Orpen and J.A.M. Whistler, no doubt played their part in shaping Varley's approach to portrait painting.¹⁶ Andrea Kirkpatrick acknowledges Varley's affinities with the British tradition and Augustus John but sees few signs of direct influence and notes that in the early 20th Varley's style became increasingly personal.¹⁷ That Varley was recognized as an individualist when it came to painting portraits is confirmed in a tribute to Varley in 1954, when Charles S. Band, a Toronto art collector, noted that "His portraits drawn or painted are always individual expressions."¹⁸

This observation is also perceptible in his war portraits when comparing them to some of Augustus John's war portraits, but then Augustus John, although stationed in the

¹⁵NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 20 January, 1919.

¹⁶Maria Tippet, p.133.

¹⁷Andrea Kirkpatrick, p. i.

¹⁸F.H. Varley: Paintings 1915-1945 (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1954?), p.8.

same war zone, had a very different war experience as described in an excerpt from his

Autobiography:

In 1917 I obtained a commission under Lord Beaverbrook as official artist in Canadian War Records, and having got myself attired as major, crossed to France. It was a curious experience to find myself in so transparent a disguise, but I retained my beard as did one other officer in our Army, the King. ... My rank conferred upon me to facilitate movement in the battle area carried with it the use of a car and a batman. I began the exploration of the Canadian sector, extending from near Bethune to Arras. At this time there was a lull in hostilities: we were treated to only intermittent shell-fire, aerial bombing and occasional gas operations. After visiting all the points of interest, including various batteries along the front, I found a place called Lievin which offered plenty of material for my purpose. Lievin was a completely devastated town opposite Lens, then in occupation by the enemy. A few battered churches stood up among the general ruin. ... From time to time, to break the monotony of the scene, a shell came over, and bursting, threw up its cloud of debris.¹⁹

Referring specifically to the war portraits, Maria Tippet comments that Varley's war portraits "possess a psychological depth and mastery of handling that is absent in John's war portraits."²⁰ Amongst Augustus John's works from that time, primarily ink and pencil sketches of soldiers and shelled buildings in the Canadian Arras sector, is a portrait of *Canadian Soldier (I)* (1917) (Figure 6). Not only did Augustus John see his war through different eyes, his approach to portrait painting may further have contributed to Maria Tippet's observation. Augustus John explained that when painting portraits "the exploration of character must be left to the eye alone" and "must not be taken to imply moral judgment."²¹

¹⁹ Augustus John, *Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 141-142.

²⁰ Maria Tippet, p.101.

²¹ Augustus John, p.191.

By comparing the portraits of Varley's *Canadian Soldier* (1942) (Figure 5), with Augustus John's *Canadian Soldier* (I), (1917) (Figure 6), I will try to illustrate Tippet's observation. These portraits were painted eighteen years apart - John's while at the Front in France in 1917 and Varley's in a studio in Kingston during the Second World War. While they are similar in their formal presentation, they differ in their expressive effect and create a very different response in the spectator. Both are representations of uniformed and helmeted Canadian soldiers placed into the center of the canvas. Both seated figures dominate the canvas, their helmeted heads close to the upper frame and their legs cut above the knee by the lower frame of the canvas. Both hold a rifle. Varley's soldier is placed against a background of heavy brushstrokes of shades of brown and green which are reflected in his uniform. His helmeted head is turned to the right and instead of looking out, his eyes are cast down in a fixed and vacant gaze. His right shoulder leans slightly forward resulting in a relaxed and sluggish pose. The rifle in his hand is held loosely with the end of the barrel cut off by the picture frame, rendering it useless and futile.

Augustus John's *Canadian Soldier* (I) is posed against a neutral background of light olive green. His right hand is clasped around the barrel of a rifle pointing upwards. Like the uniform in Varley's soldier, this soldier's uniform is also painted with heavy brush strokes, showing patches of light brown and shades of green, the only detail being a divisional sign in the form of a blue rectangle. As in Varley's painting, not much detail has been given to the uniform, instead concentrating on the soldier's face. This soldier's

head is also turned to the right, slightly lifted with eyes looking upward. The light that Augustus John has focused on the face is reflected in the eyes giving this soldier a spiritual aura which conveys a less realistic impression of a soldier at war even though Augustus John worked on this painting while surrounded by heavy fighting.

For both artists the images of Canadian soldiers most likely represented a model for Canada's military, a symbol for Canada's soldiers. Varley's soldier was one of the commissioned works by the Canadian Ministry of Information for recruitment advertising while Augustus John may have been free to choose his own model. They were not created without impartiality however. Both seem to embody the sentiments of, and reactions to, the war experience of the two artists. Varley's soldier with the vague and resigned expression in his eyes, the cut off barrel of his rifle, and the omission of the first three letters in the Canada badge suggests a half-hearted commitment and leave the spectator with the impression that the military for Varley had lost its appeal and no longer represented the same respect and honor that it did in 1918 and 1919. For Varley the horrors of war had been futile and senseless. This soldier seems to be posing the question "For What?", the very same question that Varley had so well expressed in his war painting *For What?* (1918), painted in London upon his return from the Front. It depicts a muddy, barren and desolate landscape. In the foreground, a cart discloses the corpses of soldiers with their lifeless legs still in uniform and army boots. Beyond the cart, a soldier is leaning on a spade, surrounded by rows of white crosses. He seems to reflect on the disfigurement and destruction to man and nature.

Augustus John in his *Canadian Soldier (1)* has captured his own experience of war from a privileged position in what might be considered a less realistic and more romanticized image of the character of a soldier.

When comparing these two paintings of Canadian soldiers Maria Tippet's observation of Varley's better "mastery of handling" is apparent. Augustus John's soldier appears rigid and static while Varley's soldier appears in a more natural pose. The swirling heavy brushstrokes of brown and green around his helmeted head create a sense of turbulence which contradicts his resigned and vacant gaze, but provides the painting with movement and renders it more realistic.

A similar observation can be made when comparing Varley's portrait of *Lieutenant G.B. McKean V.C.* and Augustus John's *Portrait of T.E. Lawrence as Aircraftsman Shaw* (1935). T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935), the British scholar and soldier had gained fame as "Lawrence of Arabia" for his leading part in the Arab revolt against the Turks (1916-1918). He joined the R.A.F. as aircraftsman Shaw to escape notoriety. Augustus John has placed him three quarter profile in the middle of the canvas, cut off above the elbows by the lower frame. T.E. Lawrence is dressed in the gray R.A.F. uniform and cap against a black background. The aircraftman's hat covers the upper head and forehead very close to his brows. The uniform, tightly closed around the neck is roughly sketched and looks unfinished, except for a badge on his upper left arm. The face in comparison is finely drawn. His wide lips are closed and slightly pursed, and his chin juts out somewhat. Both eyes are turned away from the spectator in a reflective and contemplative gaze.

This portrait in comparison to his *Canadian Soldier (1)* reveals more than what Augustus John claimed to “observe with his eyes alone” and goes beyond T.E. Lawrence’s role as an aircraftsman. Unlike Varley’s portrait of Lieutenant McKean who had just returned from the battlefield with the experience of gruesome slaughter and destruction, the portrait of T.E. Lawrence is as August John got to know him during his long acquaintance. Both men are dressed in military uniform under very different circumstances. Lt. McKean’s portrait was commissioned by the military in honor of his military achievement and the award of the Victoria Cross. It must also be assumed that this portrait was intended to promote the pride of the military and to serve as an example for future generations. T.E. Lawrence enjoyed sitting for this portrait which he had asked Augustus John to paint only several months before he died in a motorcycle accident. They had met at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919 for which Augustus John had been commissioned by Canadian War Records to paint the participants. This meeting marked the beginning of a long friendship and several portraits, but usually Lawrence posed in Arab costume. T.E. Lawrence’s intentions for this portrait are not known. A review of this painting while exhibited at Messrs. Arthur Tooth and Son’s Gallery gives an interpretation of this canvas as an “entirely sincere and wholly comprehensible desire to present posterity with a representation of the very stuff of which his strange character was composed.”²² The small size gives it an aura of intimacy. By being silhouetted against the stark background of black, emphasis is drawn to the pale flesh tones of the face with the

²²F.D., “A T.E. Lawrence Portrait by Augustus John.” *Burlington Magazine* 77 (October 1940): 133-134.

haunting and searching expression in his eyes. While Augustus John has portrayed T.E. Lawrence in this guise of self-effacement, this portrait of the modest aircraftsman does not efface T.E. Lawrence's dramatic background. Augustus John has captured this illustrious personality with a haunting expression, perhaps reflecting on his past.

Varley too in his *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* (1945) intended to capture himself in a reflection on the past, a time frame which was particularly difficult for him personally, professionally and financially. In his correspondence with friends and family he reveals his loneliness and financial struggles during the years in Montreal and Ottawa between 1940 and 1944. His hope that the move East from British Columbia in 1936 would bring him work, especially portrait commissions of important personalities in Ottawa, did not materialize. He had also recently become aware of the marriage of Vera Weatherbie who for many years had been his student/model/lover, to Mortimer B. Lamb, an art dealer, and one of his long-time friends. However, what seems to have pre-occupied him most of all was the Second World War and its destructive consequences on England, for which he still had a firm attachment. Varley's *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* can be considered as his visual testimony of the consequences of his struggles at that time.

Excerpts from correspondence with friends Len and Billie Pike disclose that memories of the terrors of the battles he witnessed during the First World War are re-awakened. His stay with Wing Commander C.J. Duncan and his wife who had invited him in 1940 to spend some time at their summer cottage near the RCAF base in Trenton may have further contributed to his re-living his frightful memories. On July 2, 1941 in a

letter to the Pikes Varley remarked: "I would gladly give up painting for my work which helped (sic) the necessity of today - and I would rather be in England than anywhere in the world."²³ In a previous letter, written to the Pikes on September 8, 1940 he disclosed: "I cannot forget England. Never was she grander than at the present time. ... The news is so tragic in England. ...If I were in London as a man without a trade I'm certain I should find something to do which would be helpful."²⁴

From the above quotations one might wonder whether he had hoped to be asked to get involved in the war effort, even though he was close to 60 years old. A letter to the Pikes dated December 1940 illustrates his contempt for the enemy. He talks about picking up a German magazine which had a drawing of a beautiful garden which the next morning was discovered mutilated and destroyed by the distraught gardener. Varley remarks: "The German knows the rare beauties - but he is an old man now. The German child for two generations has been starved. He is a machine only - a barbarian - hard boiled, who scorns the sentiment of a beautiful garden - sees nothing in the glorious carving of a window or the wonder of a simple drawing." He goes on "...we through experience now must pull out the weeds and kill, kill, kill the reptiles in our garden. - We must not be like the German gardener and do nothing about it but weep."²⁵ Varley must have reflected here on his experience of the destruction of the French villages and countryside which once beautiful, fertile and productive were destroyed by the Germans in

²³NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Len and Billie Pike, 2 July, 1941.

²⁴Ibid., 8 September, 1940.

²⁵Ibid., December, 1940.

the First World War. England now was undergoing a similar fate during the Second World War.

McKenzie Porter tells us that at the outbreak of the Second World War Varley was so bitter that “he tore up and burned all the World War I sketches and paintings he had not sold. ... Throughout World War II Varley was a shabby shadowy figure moving from one Montreal lodging home to another because he could not pay his rent.”²⁶

It is likely that these memories of war, and his being destitute and lonely contributed to his heavy drinking bouts. One of these might have lead to the injury sustained to his eye following a bad fall in Montreal at the end of November 1942. Although the injury obviously caused suffering and according to his grandson, Christopher, took a long time to heal,²⁷ Varley tried to conceal his suffering by basking in the personal attention that it was bringing him.

A letter to his son Jim in Vancouver dated December of 1942 includes his sketch of *Comme Ca - What a Thug!* and provides the context for this work. This letter also allows us a glimpse into his soul and his feelings of abandonment and loneliness. The very small ink sketch, (Figure 2), is a caricature. On closer observation though, this hasty sketch that Varley drew of himself with a spiky crown of hair captures much grief. The sadness expressed in the line of the mouth, the heavy black marking across the brow and over the closed left eye, and the diagonal cut across the bridge of the nose, halfway to the forehead in the form of “V”, leave the impression that the person behind this face is

²⁶McKenzie Porter, “Varley,” *Maclean's Magazine* 72/73 (November 1959): 31-32,62-66, 71.

²⁷ Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*, p.164.

suffering and in pain. The expression “Comme C’a - What a Thug!” clearly wants to draw attention to something. The word “thug” could be interpreted as “hoodlum”, “sinner” or “culprit”. Varley leaves this to our own imagination. We may also wonder if the spiky crown on his head could be a reference to the “crown of thorns” and whether the “V” is meant to stand for Varley’s signature.

My dear son Jim. What a boy! You have a rare spirit. You can even make the distance between Vancouver & Montreal seem nothing at all. - Einstein can conjure with figures - but you take all time, extract the juices and graciously hand out a sparkling cocktail of today. I find it very refreshing & am thankful almost to embarrassment. You are going to have a wonderful Christmas - because you truly want it - conceive it clearly - & make it so and now - don’t any of you be upset anymore about me - ‘tis true - I was in bad shape & didn’t know anything until I woke in hospital with 12 stitches in my head - & two fractures of the skull over one eye which are so slight that Dr. thought it best not again to operate, as that might lead to complications. - In a day & a half the stitches were taken out & after two weeks I was well enough to leave. - Soon I’ll be singing on top again - at present I move with a camouflaged dignity & practically healed. As a matter of fact I’m branded with V for victory - like this - (drawing of sketch) Jim, I wouldn’t give the police or the hospital a B.C. address. - In fact, I didn’t give anybody’s address. - The papers did that for me, for which now I am glad for I had many visitors & unexpected letters. These and the great kindness shown me at the hospital acted as a powerful tonic. Enough of me - the maimed & sick so often talk about their paltry ailments as incidents worth while. Very soon now I shall commence to work & make up for many years of much frustrated energy leading nowhere because I had no clearly conceived objective... Peter sent me a lovely letter. Exhorting one to maintain a level clear outlook & to be aware of oneself in relation to the outside - holding together as firmly as possible, not letting circumstances drag one from a course laid previously - and then - ‘prospects not being bright we must live to the very fullest to keep cheerful’. That Varley family you speak of Jim is not getting more than their share of ill luck. We are and have been wonderfully blessed. - So called adversities become assets. ‘Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition.’ I am writing Mortimer Lamb and his wife Vera. - They are both happy & pulling well together. ... One of my roommates in Hospital was a young fellow of 78 with a cracked skull - who had 28 offspring actively engaged in war work - he was a French Canadian farmer, couldn’t

read or write - full of wisdom - a young kid he was - I thought the greatest privilege in piling on the years was the opportunity of learning through & from the younger generation. David & his followers will teach you also "umpteens" years from now. - Cheerio Jim - God's blessing. Dad.²⁸

Varley concealed his physical suffering and loneliness behind a screen of sarcasm and irony in this letter, looking upon his mishap and injury more as an asset rather than a tragedy. We also learn that the "V" with which he branded his sketch of himself stands for "Victory". But victory in what? Does Varley imply that he survived another difficult phase of his life, ready once more to commence anew and "make up for many years of much frustrated energy" that he refers to in the foregoing letter? Varley's references to good counsel and wisdom from son Peter sound well intentioned but in reality seem shallow and futile now that we have gotten to know a little about Varley's personality. When we learn from his grandson that except for his youngest son, Peter, who maintained links with the family, "Varley's other three children who remained in Vancouver, virtually never saw him,"²⁹ the loneliness and sadness expressed in his letter and excerpts from letters around that time become even more pitiable and heart-breaking. It becomes quite obvious that the distance between Vancouver and Montreal that Varley refers to in the above letter seems to have been more than just the bridging of miles. This impression is confirmed by several letters written to

²⁸NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Jim Varley, December 1942.

²⁹Christopher Varley, p.176.

his son Jim and his wife Marjory around the same time which refer to his loneliness and longing to see his family, especially his grandchildren. "It must be fascinating to see the subtle changes taking place. ... It must be lots of fun. I'd like to see them of course...but I feel a very long way from such intimacies."³⁰ The longing for "intimacies" with his family were denied him.

It is this personal grief, combined with the re-opened memories of the First World War that Varley tried to capture in *Self Portrait, Days of 1943*. The foregoing correspondence constitutes the narrative that is embodied in this self-portrait and provides knowledge and psychological, spiritual and philosophical reflections that generally remain concealed from the spectator. As in autobiographical texts in which authors express anguish and pain, these foregoing quotations from Varley's letters clearly express the emotions that Varley lived and tried to reveal in *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943*. His choice to position himself before a changing and unpredictable landscape could be interpreted as a reflection of his unstable and precarious way of life. The few rays of light from an otherwise stormy sky may reflect a faint optimism such as his stays with the Duncans during which he seemed encouraged to paint. The whimsical sketch *Comme C'a - What a Thug!* is now transformed into the gloomy looking face with a sad look in his left eye, and the dark empty looking socket of the right eye, a reminder of his injury in the winter of 1942/1943.

³⁰NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to son Jim and Marjory, January, 1946.

Charles S. Band, a Toronto art collector and friend recalls his meeting with Varley in his studio in Toronto in the summer of 1945, watching Varley paint this self-portrait. “We talked about his work and the events of those disturbing days at the end of the war.”³¹ It is rather curious that Varley chose the background of what seems like an uninhabited landscape to express his memories of war. Was he thinking of the English landscape destroyed by war remembering what he saw in France during 1918 and 1919?

What the spectator has discovered from the foregoing information has enabled the bridging of the passage of time between *Self Portrait* (1919) and *Self Portrait, Days of 1943*. Common to both representations is the formal, traditional frontal pose with emphasis on the head and the face implying inner reflection and rumination. In both portraits he has concealed his identity as an artist and in both Varley’s gaze seems awkward and distorted. While the left eye confronts the spectator with a fixed and anxious gaze, the right eye in both portraits is deeply shadowed suggesting inwardness and detachment from his surroundings. In both instances Varley has enclosed himself in a restricted space. While the earlier self-portrait is captured before a permanent background, a wall with window, the latter is posed against an unstable and threatening sky.

A marked difference can be perceived in the palette and brushstrokes. In *Self-Portrait* (1919) Varley has restricted his palette to somber shades of browns and greens. The brushstrokes are more even and primarily applied vertically. In *Self Portrait, Days of*

³¹F.H. Varley: *Paintings 1915-1954* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1954?), p.8.

1943 the palette is varied, changing from light pink to black. Brushstrokes, especially those that fill the background to the left and right of his head, are rough and uneven, expressing a turbulent and changeable mood. Rather than insinuating a change in style, in addition to capturing a reflection of Varley's state of mind while he was painting this portrait, the major time difference between the two portraits certainly contributed to his changed approach.

While the Second World War was troubling him deeply and was a pre-occupation during the painting of this portrait, as we learn from his friend Charles S. Band, Varley did not disguise the effects of the passage of time. In *Self-Portrait* (1919) he portrays himself carefully dressed, with white shirt and tie under his army brown and green colored smock and his red hair is neatly combed back, while in *Self Portrait, Days of 1943* he exposed himself more "drab" looking with elongated face. His hair is disheveled, his left shoulder seems pulled down by what seems a heavy hanging jacket. The shirt collar and tie fit loosely around his neck. His lips are tightly pressed together in both self-portraits although the corners of the latter are turned downward, portraying a pessimistic mood. Two deep ridges separating the brows in this portrait bear testimony not only to that he is older but also that his heavy drinking bouts have contributed to a turbulent and difficult life.

Both self-portraits are an attempt at recovering his lived experience, as described in his correspondence. While in the 1919 self-portrait his features may have been somewhat idealized as noted by Varley's' biographer who remarks that by that time

Varley's features were "deeply bitten with the days and nights of thirty-eight years of turbulent living,"³² *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* seems to reflect a more frank and honest assessment of his features. In both works Varley confronts himself and the spectator directly, and in both we detect a sense of defeat, corroborating the impression from his correspondence that the perception of himself remained constant in the intervening years.

Varley referred to *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* as "Gloomy Gus, a mad portrait of myself."³³ He does not disclose his thoughts in considering this a "mad" portrait, although in a letter to Vera sometime between 1943 and 1944 he makes allusions to doubting his soundness of mind: "I have occasional moments of sanity, at least I believe they are when I know my attitude towards work, if not to environment, is healthy."³⁴

In his correspondence admissions to failure, to being unsuccessful and lonely are almost always countered by assigning these emotions to a temporary and fleeting state of weariness and despair, soon to be followed by renewed energy and successful work. "The present phase is drab but soon I shall have worked through into full activity. Mostly I work in order to dissipate worry. - I am thankful for sufficient energy - for work as far as I have found is the only release. It eases the mind and clarifies vision."³⁵ In *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* what Varley refers to as a "drab phase" could not be erased by a single sentence of retraction as he so often had done in his correspondence. It seems that at age

³²Maria Tippet, p.130.

³³NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 25 August, 1918.

³⁴AGO, Varley Archive, F.H. Varley to Vera Weatherbie, undated from Ottawa sometime between end 1943 and beginning of 1944

³⁵NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to son Jim and wife Marjory, 25 April, 1945.

sixty-four Varley had arrived at a point in his career when he had to admit that the struggle to success had failed him. His reputation began to grow only in the fifties. The Art Gallery of Ontario organized a retrospective exhibition in October of 1954 which subsequently traveled to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal. A stripped down version of this exhibition went on a tour of Western Canada.

The difference in representation between the military men and that chosen by Varley to portray himself can be explained by Brilliant's observation of the sitter's wish how to be perceived and to endure. *Self-Portrait* (1919) was included in several exhibitions among which the Group of Seven U.S. Tour in 1923, and *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943* took part in the Art Gallery of Ontario retrospective exhibition in 1954. However, I am speculating that these self-portraits were foremost intended as private and personal reflections at important stages in Varley's life, - concentrations on the self, not intended for money or fame nor for artistic recognition.

By contrast, the representations of the military men were created for a different purpose. The portrait of Lieutenant McKean was commissioned by Canadian War Records in an effort to obtain portraits of Canadians who had distinguished themselves in the military. *Canadian Soldier* (1942) was commissioned for recruitment advertising.

In conclusion, I have attempted in this chapter to enhance the spectator's understanding of F.H. Varley's self-portraits with the guidance of Lejeune's theory of autobiography and his application of this approach when looking at self-portraiture. By

linking Varley's self-portraits to his autobiographical writing, his correspondence referring to, or coinciding with the painting of his self-portraits, and placing them within the milieu of several relevant other works, Lejeune's conditions for his *Autobiographical Pact* have been met, and, as in the texts of writers, emotions and anguish are more clearly exposed. In addition, Brilliant's concept of emphasis on perception of appearance and character have contributed to getting to know Varley and to answering the questions of : "What Do I look like? What am I like? Who am I?"³⁶

In this chapter not only has Varley's correspondence served to corroborate the spectator's impression of Varley's pre-occupations, isolation, and loneliness, it has also confirmed Varley's prediction made in 1919 that the consequences of the horrors experienced during his service as a war artist in the First World War were going to continue to haunt him and would "dribble out" after years.³⁷

³⁶Richard Brilliant, p.15.

³⁷ NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 28 April, 1919.

CHAPTER II

THE RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL IN VARLEY'S SELF-PORTRAITS

In a letter to his sisters Lil and Ethel, December 1947, Varley recalls several “phases” of childhood and his time of “seeking to find”. “I remember as a kid - about 16 or 17 - every day I stole away from art school for a half hour midday service at St. Pauls (?).” Varley had wished to be ordained at that time but Archdeacon Eyre had “given him an empty flabby hand” and told him “to grow up”. However, he continued to attend meetings for worship every Thursday midday during the week to study the gospels, but abandoned these meetings when members of the University of Sheffield and the Royal College of Arts wanted to be affiliated with their similar movements. “I became the black sheep anyway throughout discussions, and black sheep of course pull away from the flock and remain black.”¹

While religion may not have been a constant pre-occupation, Varley's correspondence suggests a firm religious belief that seems to have been grounded in his Christian upbringing. This may explain why direct references to religion and matters of faith occur mainly in his correspondence with his sisters Lil and Ethel who seem to have shared his faith and his Christian values.

¹AGO, Varley Archive, F.H. Varley to sisters Lil and Ethel, 16 December, 1947.

Within the corpus of Varley's art, the works which could be considered as christological representations are exceptions. That Varley chose christological identification to express his personal despair and hope at crucial moments in his life should underline their significance.

To place Varley's christological works within an art historical context I will briefly refer to some of the literature in which the artist's identification with Christ has been explored. Julia Louise Bernard's intensive research on the Christ-identification themes in late 19th century Europe posits artists within a historical, political, cultural and sociological framework wherein specific aspects of that period may have provided the material for this construction and prompted its employment. She attributes this to "the development of an avant-garde 'bohemian' mentality as well as utopian socialist doctrine within which the artist played a prominent prophet-like role."² In such roles artists were able to unveil moral and political issues concerning state and church as in the example of James Ensor's (1860-1949) *Entry of Christ into Brussels* (1889) or as a more personal statement of isolation and rejection in Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) self-portrayal in *Christ in the Garden of Olive Trees* (1889).

Irit Rogoff argues that self-representations depicting the male artist as Christ or soldier beginning in the 19th century to the present are meant to be seen as statements of cultural authority. She makes reference to several German artists, amongst whom are Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) and Lovis Corinth (1858-1925) who employed

²Julia Louise Bernard, "Identification with Christ in Late 19th Century Self Portraiture: A Modern Conception of the Artist's Societal Role" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, Faculty of Humanities, 1993), p.47.

visual tropes to portray the artist as creative as well as in a role of authority.³ Siegmur Holsten adds yet another interpretation in referring to several examples where artists employed the aura as protection or self-aggrandization, a sign of being favoured by God.⁴ Amongst his examples is Samuel Palmer's (1805-1881) *Self Portrait with Aura* (1826-1828). Horst Schwebel cites World War I and Expressionism as justifications for several 20th century artists' pre-occupation with religious themes. His article "Die Christus-Identifikation des modernen Kunstlers" is an attempt to categorize various examples of christological imagery into indirect and direct identifications with Christ, ending with Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and his performance staged during Holy Week in which he impersonates Christ by washing the feet of exhibition spectators.⁵

Preceding these examples by several centuries is Albrecht Durer's self-representation in the likeness of Christ, his famous *Self-Portrait* (1500) which is the centerpiece of Joseph Leo Koerner's extensive study *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*. According to Koerner, this work demonstrates that "art and artist are consubstantial" and confirms Durer's proclamation that "the artist paints to make himself seen in his work."⁶ This concept is further expanded upon by Jordan Kantor in

³Irit Rogoff, "The Anxious Artist - Ideological Mobilization of the Self in German Modernism," in *The Divided Heritage - Themes and Problems in German Modernism*, ed. Irit Rogoff (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 116-147.

⁴Siegmur Holsten, *Das Bild des Kunstlers: Selbstdarstellungen* (Hamburg: Christians-Verlag und Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1978), pp. 84-87.

⁵Horst Schwebel, "Die Christus-Identifikation des Modernen Kunstlers," in *Zeichen des Glaubens, Geist der Avantgarde: Religiöse Tendenzen in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. P. Schmied (Stuttgart: Elect a-Klett-Cotta 1980), pp.76-77.

⁶Joseph, Leo Koerner, *Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. XVIII.

his essay on *Durer's Passions* through which, according to Kantor, Durer explored “how to inscribe himself into the image.”⁷

As varied as the underlying causes for these christological representations, so are the expressions in their execution, but all are specific in their intent to express particular concerns. What is common to all these self-portraits is that the idea of Christ remained important and that through these artistic expressions the religious and spiritual was brought closer to the everyday lives of individual human beings.⁸

Varley's *Liberation* (1936/37) and its two related works *The Christ Tree* (1918) and *Liberation* (1943) meet several of the foregoing criteria and should rightfully be included in the literature of this particular genre. As my discussion will disclose, christological identification and concepts of suffering and heroism are invested in these works. Varley has also left us his own words “the speaking things”⁹ of the circumstances that prompted their creation thereby providing evidence for my interpretation.

Within the context of religious/spiritual themes in Varley's art, *Liberation* (1936/37), was preceded by three works. I will comment on their formal presentation before elaborating on the religious significance that they may have had for Varley, and how these works may relate to Varley's christological representation in *Liberation* (1936/37).

The Christ Tree (1918) (National Gallery of Canada) (Figure 8), was drawn while

⁷Jordan Kantor, *Durer's Passions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2000), vol. 2, p.24.

⁸Julia Louise Bernard, p. 434.

⁹NGC, F.H. Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Billie Pike, 14 March, 1941.

Varley was serving as a war artist in France during World War I. The spectator is initially confronted by a solid and dark square object, off center to the right in the painting. Looking at the label, the two words “Christ” and “Tree” prompt a search for their symbols. The dark object, a tree trunk, is easily identified and one may assume that it has been cut and that what lies under it and across the canvas in front of the trunk are its torn off branches. The search for Christ is complicated as there is no overt sign of a cross, the symbol usually associated with Christ. Close scrutiny of the torn off branches reveals a head with long hair and a finely drawn face in profile with a cropped beard on the chin. The viewer is introduced into the scene by the severed right arm and hand, and we now begin to realize that what was assumed to be part of the mutilated tree trunk, is actually a dismembered torso with its parts strewn in front of the tree. Still thinking of Christ on the cross, we become aware of the signs of the stigmata in the hands and below the rib cage on the chest of the torso. Varley might have reflected here on the sight of the broken and mutilated bodies of soldiers on the front line, the truncated tree representing the destruction of nature. The broken body separates the scene from what occurs behind it: a marching army, obscure and hardly visible in the dark tones of pencil and water colour.

The endpaper illustration by Varley (Figure 9), of a book by Wilson MacDonald (1880-1967) entitled *The Miracle Songs of Jesus*, first published in 1921, contains an illustration, in varying shades of blue of a young boy kneeling in contemplation on the edge of a cliff overlooking a valley which is enclosed by a mountain range on the other side. The boy’s face is in profile with a head of closely cropped hair. The night sky surrounding the boy and the mountain range beyond is lit up by six brightly shining stars.

From the upper middle of the illustration, descending into the valley on the right, is a wide curved ray of light in the form of a rainbow. The boy wears a loosely draped cloak that falls to the ground at his right. His right shoulder, upper legs and knees are exposed. Both arms are raised against the right side of his chest, giving the impression that he may be praying. The figure of the boy, placed into the foreground, dominates the illustration. It is disproportionate to the surrounding landscape and is further exaggerated by the reflection of the ray of light.

The illustration responds to some of the themes of MacDonald's verses in which Jesus is described as the "poet of Galilee" who fashions the light in his hands and who fled the "learned men" to go to the rain-washed hills to take his verse "far too sweet for the ears of men".¹⁰

The other work by Varley of Christian subject matter is the pendentive painting of the *Nativity* (Figure. 10), in Saint Anne's Anglican Church in Toronto. It is among other interior decorations commissioned in 1923 by Canon Lawrence Skey, Rector of Saint Anne's from 1902-1933. J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932) and a team of artists were commissioned to decorate the interior with Byzantine mural paintings. These paintings represented the final stage of the replacement of St. Anne's Anglican Church from the original Gothic Revival building to a Byzantine structure in 1908.¹¹ In addition to the *Nativity* which is one of four themes displaying the main events in the life of Jesus,

¹⁰ Wilson MacDonald, *The Miracle Songs of Jesus* (Toronto: W. MacDonald, 1921), pp. 11,13.

¹¹ Marilyn McKay, "St. Anne's Anglican Church, Toronto - Byzantium versus Modernity." *Journal of Canadian Art History* XVIII (1997): 6-24.

Varley painted the images of *Moses*, *Daniel*, *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah*, four medallions which decorate the base of the dome.

As the shepherd on the left of the infant Jesus in the *Nativity* scene, this can be considered the first occasion where Varley introduced himself into a religious context. One notices similarities in the pose and features of this shepherd (identified as Varley)¹² to that of the young boy in the endpaper illustration. The shepherd, in praying figure pose is in profile, kneeling on the right side of the Madonna and the Christ Child. His hair is closely cropped, his cloak is loosely draped around his body exposing a rather muscular neck and right arm which holds the staff against his right side. The shepherd kneeling on the other side of the Christ Child is portrayed as a much more delicate figure.

In comparison to the depiction of death and mutilation in *The Christ Tree*, the endpaper illustration and the *Nativity* scene represent hope and new life. The boy's carefully drawn figure and Varley's muscular embodiment as the shepherd convey youth and strength. Within the religious context of the Nativity, the shepherds are also regarded as messengers who spread the word of what "they had heard and seen."¹³

Some thirteen years would pass before Varley produced another religious painting. After several years in Toronto trying unsuccessfully to make a living by painting portraits, he accepted a teaching appointment at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts in September of 1926. He left this position in 1933 but it was not until the fall of 1936 that he moved back East to try once again to become a successful portraitist. Varley

¹²Saint-Anne's Church 1862-1987, (brochure), undated, illustration 4.

¹³"The Gospel according to Luke", in *Good News Bible*, N.T. Luke I, 2.20 (London and New York: Collins/Fontana, 1976), 76.

began work on his canvas *Liberation* (1936/37) in Ottawa soon after leaving Lynn Valley, British Columbia.

In a nostalgic letter to his wife Maud before Christmas 1936, several months after he had moved to Ottawa, and while he was working on this *Liberation* canvas, he refers to Lynn Valley and likens its sights and sounds to a wonder equaled to the “birth of Christ”.

Have you heard the old men talking down the canyon on a windy night? There are four or five of them huddled in the hollowed sides below the suspension bridge and they talk slowly in deep toned song. The sound of their voices comes booming up the gorge as an undertone while above the bridge by you is a Symphony Orchestra let loose & the wind itself carries its own music as it streams up the valley & shakes the trees. Mmm Stay at Lynn. The Birth of a Christ is not grander than that.¹⁴

Within this context then it is not surprising that Varley’s Christ image should have its origin in that landscape.

Liberation (1936/37) (Art Gallery of Ontario) (Figure 11), in oil on canvas, at 213.7 cm. in height and 134.4 cm. in width is imposing and overpowering. Already from quite a distance the spectator is struck by its size, and on approaching, is directly confronted by what appears to be a figure in the likeness of Christ stepping out of his tomb, here shown as a large archway which does not disclose its “beyond”. This figure virtually takes up the whole length of the canvas, separated from the spectator only by the threshold of what could be interpreted as the lid of a tomb or the Renaissance motif for the image of the “doorway”.

¹⁴AGO, F.H. Varley Archive, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, undated, from Ottawa, sometime before Christmas 1936.

The work embodies all the symbols that informed viewers would attribute to the “resurrected Christ”: the naked body, loosely draped below the waist, the traces of marks on the right outstretched hand and the forward-set foot where nails held Christ to the cross. Rays of light around the head seem to indicate a crown.

This is not a frail body but rather muscular, reminiscent of the male marble sculptures of Classical Antiquity or of the male body in Renaissance painting and sculpture. The whole canvas radiates in a fluorescent glow as its main colors, tones of mauve, blue and green, fuse within the figure against the obscure background. To the left a reddish light surrounds the left hand with index finger pointing downward. The left foot is submerged below the threshold in contrast to the right foot which steps forward, giving the impression that the body is moving forward and that it is leaving its former dwelling place, reinforcing the Resurrection image. Whereas in *The Christ Tree* the right hand and right arm have been severed from the torso, in this painting Varley has given emphasis to the right hand which in size is disproportionate to the rest of the body. It reaches out from the body and extends beyond the frame of the archway, radiating in a flash of light with its shadow cast against the archway. The head with long hair and the face, this time facing the viewer directly, seems small in proportion to the large and powerful body. The face, its features rather ambiguous, except for the eyes, brows and forehead, is elongated and gaunt with what seems like a cropped beard around its chin. It bears a strong resemblance to the Christ-like face in *The Christ Tree*.

Before entering into discussion of what may have been Varley’s motivation and intention for this canvas, and a closer investigation of the subject matter, the artist/Christ

identification, I would like to compare this work with Varley's *Liberation* (1943) (Private Collection) (Figure 12) which is a close copy of this earlier *Liberation*.

If one were able to look at these two works side by side, one would immediately be struck by their difference in size. The work from 1943 is 71.8 cm in height and 61.5 cm. in width, and one needs to stand up near to it for closer observation of the details. This in itself may be an indication that Varley's intention for this work was different in comparison to the earlier work, perhaps less in significance but rather in its importance for his career, its intention for display, and the reception by the art world and the viewing public.

It displays the same muscular torso, draped below the waist. The right foot is stepping forward from the threshold, the left arm and left hand with index finger pointing downward is held against the body and the right hand, again, prominent and illuminated. The main difference in its visual presentation are the features of the head. It is more in proportion to the rest of the body. The neck and face are fuller and more youthful looking and more attention has been given to the facial features. The area above the head where in the earlier work a crown may be perceived, is ambiguous here. The marks of Christ's torture are less emphasized in the right foot and right hand compared to the earlier work. The young face and missing crown make it difficult for the viewer to understand its meaning. While the earlier *Liberation* radiates in fluorescent light, this work is more somber, mainly composed of dark brown and dark green which can be associated with the colours of an army uniform, confirming Varley's statement to H.O. McCurry in March of

1943 that this work is “a war picture.”¹⁵ Another difference is the wider archway, with a light source reflected on the figure’s left side. What lies beyond is again obscure, however, in this work something which could be interpreted as a landscape is visible on the viewer’s right side of the archway. Streaks of light reach up to the top of the canvas and could refer to exploding shells. Both works are similar in composition and formal presentation, yet Varley’s intention and motivation in their execution were substantially different, as will emerge during my discussion.

Within Varley’s extensive art production these works stand out. Not only are the two *Liberation* themes the only examples in which Varley exposes the male figure almost naked (in comparison to several female nudes), they are also the only works with the figure as central subject, where he has concentrated emphasis on the body rather than the face. It is however not only in the formal elements that these works differ from the rest of Varley’s art works. In all his portraits not only does he seem to capture the character but also the likeness of his sitters. Therefore one cannot attribute these works to a change in Varley’s style but rather to the difference in painting the portrait of a sitter as compared to creating an “imaginary” portrait. The title further complicates the inquiry as to their identity, and one is tempted to assign these works to what Van Alphen describes as a new concept of representation and subjectivity in contemporary portraiture. Through examples of several works, including the portrait of Daniel Henry Kahnweiler (1910) by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Van Alphen looks at the traditional representation of the

¹⁵ NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to H.O. McCurry, 17 March, 1943.

portrait and its mimetic referentiality and how this concept has been challenged in the 20th century to a point where the subjectivity of the sitter is erased of all mimetic resemblance.¹⁶ Richard Brilliant expands on this mode of representation to include self-portraiture. He recognizes that inquiries after the self do not necessarily result in the artist's recognizable identity but rather evolve into "some outwardly expressive image not previously known."¹⁷ Varley has succeeded to represent himself behind this christological image which, I suspect, in all three works served as a screen that Varley resorted to in order to disguise his personal feelings of horror and disillusionment as well as hope and faith. These works, dissociated from any reference as to their context would also challenge Lejeune's criteria of autobiography and self-portraiture. However, because Varley through his correspondence provided the related information, Lejeune would include these works within the genre of prose narrative where, "for reasons of discretion, the author resorts to the use of a pseudonym."¹⁸

Although Varley's references to the Christ figure are isolated and interrupted by several years, one could speculate on a relatedness between the *The Christ Tree* (1918) the scene of death and brutal destruction, the mural of the *Nativity* (1923) in Saint Anne's Church in Toronto - the Birth of Christ, *Liberation* (1936/37) - the Resurrection of Christ, and *Liberation* (1943) as the representation of a new beginning. This reading

¹⁶ Ernst Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp, 245-246.

¹⁷ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 169.

¹⁸ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c. 1989), p 3.

was most likely not intended by Varley and may be coincidental. Yet, if one were to see these four works in sequence, such an interpretation would not be unwarranted. In isolation however, such association could not be justified, illustrating Lejeune's idea that to establish autobiographical identity, an art work has to be seen amongst other works of the artist where it "really means something, through resemblance and difference, through recall and rupture"¹⁹ This relates to Brilliant who also relies on the artist's personal style, the recognizable signs in the formal elements, for identification of his works.²⁰

Returning now to Varley's christological imagery, we learn from his correspondence that all three works were inspired by emotions and responses to critical events. *The Christ Tree* captures Varley's experience of death and destruction on the Front as a war artist during the First World War. In a letter to his wife around the time he painted *The Christ Tree* he confesses: "Lord I am a pagan - a whole hearted - not a Christian - why - Christianity's as dead as the graveyard I'm painting."²¹ In this canvas not only does Varley express the destruction of man and nature but also his loss in his religious belief and his failure as an artist.

Varley's two *Liberation* paintings, were both created at times when Varley needed to "flee away."²² In both cases he was in financial difficulty and was hoping to find work which may be an explanation for the exaggerated right hand, the painting hand, which in both works is emphasized. In the case of the earlier work he was leaving Lynn Valley,

¹⁹ Ibid., p.112.

²⁰ Richard Brilliant, p.169.

²¹ NGC, F.H. Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 8 November, 1918.

²² NGC, F.H. Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Len and Billie Pike, February 22, 1943.

British Columbia for Ottawa. Not only was he penniless, he also was experiencing much emotional suffering at that time: the break-up of his marriage to Maud and the termination of his relationship with Vera Weatherbie.

Liberation (1936/37) was Varley's hope for recognition, not only in Canada but also in England. He expected that it would be accepted by the Royal Academy in London. The inspiration for this work is revealed in a letter to son John in which Varley recounts his experience while wandering in the mountains of Lynn Valley early at dawn, shortly before he was to leave British Columbia for Ottawa in 1936:

Instead of looking for something to paint I stood with a great fullness as the world poured into me. ... It was a great adventure that held me there and would not go away until I had received the Benediction. Speared and blinded I was with its light and I found myself 'chortling with joy' muttering crazy things about mountains and valleys exalted and clapping of hands and Hallelujahs and wonder of God. I'm still saying them. I think I shall always say them and I go to Ottawa in a few days to say them in my big canvas.²³

While in the process of committing this experience to canvas Varley wrote to his wife Maud likening the landscape of Lynn Valley and its magic to the "Birth of Christ". His claim of being "speared and blinded" by the light of his vision is transferred unto the viewer when first encountering *Liberation* (1936/37).

Already from quite a distance the spectator is struck by the fluorescent reflection of its colors and the life-size body of the Christ figure. The underlying personal experience at the time of this vision and ultimately its visual impact are captured in the execution of

²³AGO, F.H. Varley Archive, F.H. Varley to his son John, undated (excerpt from letter written shortly before leaving B.C. for Ottawa in 1936).

this work. The juxtaposition of colors varying from different tones of green, blue and mauve, applied in heavy brushstrokes, evoke a powerful reaction in the spectator. The yellow-green light radiating from the tomb creates an eerie and hypnotic atmosphere. Here Varley himself has established a link between autobiography and self-representation by transferring the emotions of a vision to paper and ultimately expressing these emotions in paint. From Lejeune's perspective this would be an example of autobiography in which the author/artist instills aspects of his personal life and details about his emotions and spiritual reflections.²⁴

In *Liberation* (1936/1937) Varley combined the theological intention, the message of "life after death" in the recognizable figure of Christ with his own personal concerns, bestowing this work with both divine and human qualities. Divine, in the guise of Christ so that to the contemporary viewer Varley could transmit his intention to "rid his viewers of the fear of death". *Liberation* (1936/37) was to instill in all who saw it the hope of everlasting life. He intended "to hypnotize onlookers ... until they eventually arrive at my meaning and purge themselves of this present death through lack of thinking."²⁵ In order to clearly transmit this intention to the general public, he had to "fashion" himself into a christological image. It was to be his Christ. He remarked "It is really my Christ ... I don't know yet whether I believe in the Divinity of Christ, instead of The Resurrection I call it The Liberation."²⁶

²⁴ Philippe Lejeune, p. VIII.

²⁵ F.H. Varley to Mortimer B. Lamb, June 5, 1936, in Frederick H. Varley, ed. Peter Varley (Toronto: Kay Porter Books, 1983), p.68.

²⁶ McKenzie Porter, "Varley," Maclean's Magazine 72/73 (November 1959): 66.

Varley's personal Christ was invested with the promise of renewed faith and hope for his success as an artist as expressed by the exaggerated "painting hand." (Several photographs show Varley sketching and painting with his right hand). It also represented the promise of a new beginning in Ottawa, and the expectation that the Royal Academy in London would accept this work for exhibition. The significance of this expectation can be understood from his response to the news that it had been rejected: "I have to keep on occasionally but truly I cannot see why. I have never felt more useless than now, and I have to tell you my picture is rejected by the Academy ... my beliefs - really unshakable beliefs have had a setback."²⁷

Varley's Christ appears confident and strong and is invested with a biblical prophesy, the promise of everlasting life, as well as a very human and personal aspiration concealed behind this screen. What may have been the source that influenced this concept of duality in this work are Paul's *Letters to the Corinthians*, the Bible readings that Varley particularly enjoyed, as revealed in a letter to his sister Ethel while a student at the Academie des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp.²⁸ In Paul's *Letters to the Corinthians* Adam and Christ (death and resurrection) are linked together.²⁹ *Paul's Letter to the Corinthians* is the only reference in the New Testament in which the Resurrection theme is taken beyond the Resurrection of Christ to include the Resurrection of the Body.³⁰ This idea of the concept of everlasting life, may refer to what Varley signifies as "receiving the

²⁷ NGC, F.H. Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, April 29, 1937.

²⁸ NGC, F.H. Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to sister Ethel, undated (sent from Antwerp, Belgium in 1900).

²⁹ Carl G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing 1964), p.61.

³⁰ "Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians", in *Good News Bible*, N.T., 218-20.

Benediction” during his vision. The Benediction is a formal prayer of blessing within church services. Often these prayers include the hope for “everlasting life”.

I suspect that *Liberation* (1936/37) may also have reflected Varley’s re-affirmation of faith which was challenged during the First World War, and I am suggesting that the mutilated body of Christ in *The Christ Tree* is also personalized. Varley here expresses the death of Christ and Christianity but also his agony over the horrors of war and his struggle to keep his faith amid these atrocities. Varley may have identified with the suffering of the crucified Christ, lamenting not only the loss in his faith but also the doubt in his success as an artist, symbolized here by the broken off right arm and hand. The fallen Christ with severed limbs is not only a replica of the broken bodies of the dead soldiers on the battlefield but also a statement of his personal feelings of hopelessness and despair and loss in his Christian faith. As in *Liberation* (1936/37), Varley invested this Christ with divine and human attributes. *Liberation* (1936/37) can therefore be interpreted as a restoration of his faith and a “resurrection” of the broken body in *The Christ Tree*.

His later version, *Liberation* (1943), (Figure 12) was painted in Montreal where he was lonesome, again without hope for work and anxious to get away. It is through his correspondence with friends at that time that he discloses information that likely contributed to the creation of this work. He was pre-occupied with the events of the Second World War and its consequences, especially on England, his country of birth, to which he continued to feel closely bound. A commission to paint Canadian soldiers in Kingston for use in recruitment advertising by the government and his frequent stays

during that time at the home of Wing Commander C.J. Duncan, may have rekindled memories of his war experiences on the Front in France during the First World War. His correspondence with friends Len and Billie Pike during that time is riddled with dark foreboding and bitter and cynical allusions: “Don’t let the war news get topside and depress you for you’ve got worse to come before we are cleansed and that takes guts to live through it. It’s good to know we’ll see the beginning of a new world, much better than fighting to retain the old ways we’ll fight for the new.”³¹ Varley in this image may well have imagined himself as part of that new order.

Considered within the literature of christological representations mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Varley’s works do not correspond to Holsten’s interpretation of this conceit as self-aggrandization or being favoured by God as exemplified in Samuel Palmer’s *Portrait of the Artist as Christ* (ca. 1832). Neither do they relate to Horst Schwebel’s interpretation of James Ensor as the arrogant Christ mocking his audience in *The Entrance of Christ into Brussels* (1889), nor that of Marc Chagall’s suffering in the *Crucified Artist* (1940). One might include Varley’s *Liberation* (1943) within Irit Rogoff’s interpretation of the male artist as the role model of strength in the guise of Christ or soldier. The Second World War and its destruction was on Varley’s mind when he painted this canvas and his correspondence with friends alludes to the need for “the beginning of a new world”. His representation as an image of youth and strength in this canvas may have been Varley’s expression of a new beginning.

³¹ NGC, F.H. Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Len and Billie Pike, February, 1942.

Julia Louise Bernard's research of the Christ/artist imagery in late 19th century Europe suggests that the Christ/artist conception was constructed by artists as an ideological coping strategy in response to specific aspects of that historical period. In particular she attributes this concept to rapid cultural changes during political upheavals and economic crises. It is conceivable that Varley may have shared similar underlying concerns: Emotional reactions to economic hardship and political crisis, and uncertainty in his career as an artist. However, while most of the European artists in Bernard's research created their works as a recognizable reaction to these concerns, Varley's expressions suggest a more private response. For instance, *The Christ Tree* could be interpreted as an illustration of political criticism condemning the atrocities of the First World War. Yet Varley's sentiments expressed in his correspondence at that time referring to himself as a "pagan" not "a Christian" suggest a very private and personal confession. Being a small pencil and water color sketch emphasizes the impression that it may not have been intended for public viewing.

Liberation (1936/1937) can be included within Bernard's concept of a prophetic composition in that it depicts what could be interpreted as the "Resurrection of Christ", an intention that Varley had in mind when he painted this canvas. This work, even though it was a screen that concealed his personal emotions, was to be displayed to an audience which he intended to "purge of present death through lack of thinking", as he expressed to Mortimer B. Lamb in June of 1936.³² Similar to most of the works of his late 19th century

³² F.H. Varley to Mortimer B. Lamb, 5 June 1936, in Frederick H. Varley, ed. Peter Varley, p.68.

European predecessors, it was to convey an intention. Where it differs is that Varley has passed on to us the inspiration for this work: his personal experience while wandering in the mountains of Lynn Valley.

With Varley's *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1936/37) I want to support my suggestion of Albrecht Durer's (1471-1528) influence. I have chosen several of Durer's works in which similarities in their formal expression are clearly perceivable but which also reveal similarities in their motivating circumstances: Durer's *Head of Dead Christ* (1503) (British Museum, London) (Figure 13), *Head of Suffering Man* (1503) (British Museum, London) (Figure 14), *Nude Self-Portrait* (1503) (Staatliche Kunstsammlung, Weimar) (Figure 15), *Proportional Nude as Atelier Mannequin* (1526) (British Museum, London) (Figure 16) *Self-Portrait* (1500) (Alte Pinakotek, Munich) (Figure 17), and *Self-Portrait as the Man of Sorrows* (1522) (Bremen Kunsthalle) (Figure 18).

It would not be coincidence that Varley was familiar with the works of Durer. Varley's father was an accomplished draftsman who worked for a print and design firm, who in this trade, it must be assumed, was certainly familiar with Durer's works. As well, the St. George's Museum near Sheffield (Varley's place of birth) built by John Ruskin (1818-1900) in 1875 to house a large component of his art collection, included works by Durer.³³ The British Museum in London by the year 1904 had acquired a large collection of Durer's prints, engravings, drawings and manuscripts through generous foundation bequests. These bequests included Durer's *Proportional Nude as Atelier Mannequin*

³³ Maria Tippet, *Stormy Weather* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), pp.11-18.

(1526) (British Museum, London) (Figure 16), *Adam and Eve* (1504) (Pierport Morgan Library, New York) (Figure 19), *Apollo and Diana* (c. 1501-1504) (British Museum, London) (Figure 20), *Head of Dead Christ* (1503) (Figure 13) and *Head of Suffering Man* (1503) (Figure 14).³⁴ Varley had spent long periods of time in London between 1903 and 1905 and again before and after his assignment as a war artist in France between 1918-1919. By that time Durer's works were widely reproduced and easily available in books. While there is no direct reference to Durer in Varley's writings, there is sufficient evidence to assume Varley's exposure to Durer works.

If we place Varley's *Liberation* (1936/37) next to Durer's *Nude Self-Portrait* (1503) (Figure 15) similarities in the formal presentation are obvious in the figure emerging from behind a frame: the musculature of the upper bodies as well as the faces bear resemblance in their emphasis on eyes and brows and their formation of lips and bearded chins. Striking differences are in the expression of nudity and in the posture of the bodies. In Varley's work the body is straight and confident and the lower abdomen is partially draped while Durer portrays himself nude and as a twisted figure with drooping shoulders. In contrast to Durer's missing hands, Varley displays both hands, his right hand prominent and emphasized. In Varley's image the right foot with Christ's stigmata is stepping forward while the left is still beyond the threshold, giving this image a forward-moving thrust. In contrast, Durer's figure cut off below the knees, looks static, arrested within the frame.

³⁴ Giulia Bartrum, *Albrecht Durer and his Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

It is however in Durer's *Proportional Nude as Atelier Mannequin* (1526) (Figure 16), the pen and ink drawing that became Durer's model for several of his male figures, including that of Adam in *Adam and Eve* (1504) (Figure 19) and Apollo in *Apollo and Diana* (1501-1504) (Figure 20) where presentation and positioning of the body are almost identical with Varley's figure: the outstretched right hand, the positioning of legs and right foot. Durer folds the left arm behind the body, whereas Varley has covered it by the draped cloth with the left hand protruding with downward pointing index finger. The sinuous body of Varley's figure can be compared to a pen and brush drawing of a *Male Nude* that Durer drew in 1503 (Figure 21).

I am speculating that Varley quite intentionally transferred these formal attributes to his *Liberation* (1936/37). What may be coincidental is that some of the motivating circumstances that inspired Varley's *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1936/1937) are similar to those that may have had an influence on Durer's *Nude Self-Portrait* (1503).

Durer's diary reveals a vision:

The greatest miracle that I have seen in all my days, happened in the year 1503, when crosses fell on many people, especially on children more than on other people. Among them all I saw one in the shape, which I have drawn here below. It fell into the linen blouse of Eyrer's maid, who lived in the Pirckheimer's back-house. And she was so upset about it that she cried and wailed, for she thought she was going to die of it.³⁵

Panofsky explains this vision as the cause of a "harmless alga, palmella rodigiosa"³⁶

³⁵ Albrecht Durer. *Durer's Briefe, Tagebücher und Reime: nebst einem Anhang von Zuschriften an und für Durer* / übersetzt und mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen, Personenverzeichnis und einer Reisekarte (Wien: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1872), p. 135.

³⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Durer*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), p.90.

however, between 1503 and 1505 an outbreak of epidemic diseases which were grouped under “the plague” was ravaging Germany and many people were stricken, including Durer.³⁷

In his rendition of *Head of Suffering Man* (1503), we can perceive the fear revealed in his vision and the suffering that Durer was now experiencing, expressed in the bearded face presented in three quarter profile, distorted with half open mouth and pleading look in the right eye, closest to the spectator. This face represents the reality of this dreaded epidemic and Durer obviously meant us to concentrate on the face because all other features such as the man’s head of hair and neck are only roughly sketched.

Similarly, in *Head of Dead Christ* (1503), Durer seems to have transferred the suffering of man and perhaps his own suffering onto Christ’s face which is now presented full face turned towards the spectator. The death of Christ is contained within the face. Its most important distinction from the previous work is the addition of the crown of thorns placed on the bearded head which transforms the human face into the image of Christ. Wisps of long hair are hanging down on the left of this Christ image and the eyes are closed. The half open mouth displaying the upper front teeth, adds to the expression of pain and suffering of this distorted face.

An inscription by Durer at the bottom of this work to the right and left of his monogram reads (in translation) “I produced these two countenances when I was ill.”³⁸ I suspect that Durer’s own suffering is expressed in these two images. He has

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Giulia Bartrum, p.147.

further confirmed his presence by his autobiographical inscription which associates these two images with **his** illness, and by extension, with Durer himself. One can draw a comparison here with *The Christ Tree* where Varley associates himself with the image through his autobiographical writing. *The Christ Tree* relates to the suffering of man during the First World War but also to his own suffering: his loss of faith and his skepticism in his career as an artist which he emphasizes by the severed right arm and “painting hand”. The horror of death and destruction in this work is transferred unto the broken body of Christ which, I suspect, represents Varley himself. His spirit was broken and so was his belief in Christianity. As he expressed in his letter at this time: “I’m a pagan ...not a Christian.”³⁹

Durer’s presence as human being and his suffering are fully disclosed in his *Nude Self-Portrait*. One might see in this work “Durer’s Christ” in which Durer has merged Christ’s suffering as expressed on the face of the *Dead Christ* and his own suffering, this time emphasizing the effects that this suffering had on his body. Koerner would support such a reading. He sees the *Nude Self-Portrait* as possessing “a christomorphic dimension” based on the “crease or shadowing above the fold of Durer’s midriff”⁴⁰ which would allude to Christ’s side wound, fusing in this body human and divine attributes, similar to what Varley attempted in his christological images.

Durer’s pre-occupation with his illness at that time likely provoked him to gaze at

³⁹ NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 8 November, 1918.

⁴⁰ Joseph Leo Koerner, p.242.

himself in the mirror for this frank assessment of what the disease had done to his body, and as well, I am speculating, to him as an artist. Panofsky states that Durer did not do much painting between 1500 and 1505.⁴¹ This observation could explain the missing arms and hands in this self-portrait, an indication that Durer may have been lamenting his failing artistic ability due to illness. His nude body emerges in three quarter length behind a framed opening which occupies the whole canvas. The frame cuts both legs at the knees and obliterates both hands as well as his left arm, only displaying the upper right arm. His twisted posture with drooping shoulders and the hair contained within what looks like a hair net gives this figure a pathetic image. His face looks haggard with questioning eyes. The edges of his mouth seem to droop downward, accentuated by the traces of a beard which is closely cropped below the chin, similar to that in the *Dead Christ* image. This work is in sharp contrast to his earlier self-portraits in that he focuses attention to his body instead of his face, dress and accessories, as in *Self-Portrait* (1500) (Figure 17), which is fashioned and idealized and most likely constructed for a particular audience. It is in this self-portrait where Durer's creative hand is prominently displayed. Koerner acknowledges it as a sign "to celebrate the creative tool of his trade" and in Durer's guise as Christ, "links Durer's hand to the hand of God."⁴²

Durer seems to have compared his own suffering during his illness with the suffering of Christ. *The Dead Christ, Head of a Suffering Man*, and the *Nude Self-Portrait* can be related to the influence of a vision which was invested with fear

⁴¹ Erwin Panofsky, p.91.

⁴² Joseph Leo Koerner, p.151.

and the threat of a dreaded disease. In all three of these works Durer has expressed not only that fear but also its consequences of suffering, both in the image of Christ's face as well as in the human face of *The Head of the Suffering Man* and ultimately in his own body in *Nude Self Portrait*.

For Durer the fear and suffering displayed in *Dead Christ*, *Suffering Man*, and in his *Nude Self-Portrait* was to evolve as a major theme. Starting with his *Nude Self-Portrait*, his self-representation as Durer the person ceased, except for a small later sketch around 1510 in which he again portrays himself as the *Ill Durer*, (Figure 22), the right hand pointing to an encircled area on his left side. His persona from then on seems to become absorbed into that of the "man of sorrows" whom he personifies in his *Self-Portrait as Man of Sorrows* (1522) (Figure 18), and whom he appears to personalize and identify with through his repeated versions of the Passion. According to Kantor, "Christ and the Passion have become an occasion for Durer to incorporate himself in the image ..."⁴³ What Kantor fails to provide in his essay is the contemporary context, the European pre-occupation with the Reformation. Durer was a strong supporter of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and it would be inconceivable to think that his religious themes were not influenced by the instability of Christianity at that time. Evidence for this is an entry in his diary on May 17, 1521 during Luther's public hearings at Worms:

Oh Lord, who desirest before Thou comest in judgment that as Thy Son Jesus Christ had to die at the hands of the priests and rise from the dead and ascent to heaven even so should be made comfortable to him. Thy disciple Martin Luther, whose life the

⁴³ Jordan Kantor, p.24.

pope seeks with money treacherously against God, but whom
Thou will quicken.⁴⁴

Contrary to Durer, Varley's christological identifications did not become a pre-occupation. They were created in response to significant events. Varley's *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1943) derived from his experience with, and his concerns about the First and Second World War, and *Liberation* (1936-1937) evolved out of a profound revelation.

In conclusion, this chapter has traced Varley's religious contemplations. His autobiographical contributions may have consolidated, and added new evidence in the recognition of his christological identification in *The Christ Tree* and his two *Liberation* themes. Grandson, Christopher Varley suggests Varley's identification with the figure in *Liberation* (1936-1937) as an affinity with Christ who was ostracized and condemned for refusing to accept society's restriction⁴⁵ and Robert Stacey included this canvas in his exhibition catalogue of *Self-Portraits by Canadian Artists*.⁴⁶ *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1943) have not previously been recognized as self-portraits. Perhaps the description of Varley's revelation while on his morning walk in the mountains of Lynn Valley will prompt a re-examination of earlier suggested motivations for his self-representation.

⁴⁴ Ronald H. Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation* (Toronto: Saunders of Toronto, 1966), p.61.

⁴⁵ Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981), p. 130.

⁴⁶ Robert Stacey, *The Hand Holding the Brush: Self-Portraits by Canadian Artists* (London, Ontario: London Regional Art Gallery, 1983), p. 68.

In this chapter I have attempted to support my argument that Varley's *Liberation* (1936/37) and *The Christ Tree* are closely related and that Varley's Christ in this *Liberation* represents his re-affirmation of faith in Christianity and in his career as an artist. The Christ in *Liberation* (1936/37) can therefore be considered the Resurrection of his mutilated Christ in *The Christ Tree* which was Varley's expression of a loss of belief in Christ and doubt in his career as an artist, as well as a personal response to the atrocities he witnessed as a war artist during the First World War.

I have also demonstrated that Varley borrowed elements of style from Albrecht Durer in his representation of the Christ figure in *Liberation* 1936/37.

Durer's christological identification had its positive expression in his famous *Self-Portrait* (1500). However, his identification with Christ was to evolve into a pre-occupation in which Durer began to assume the role of the "man of sorrows" which he continued to express throughout his many versions of Christ's Passion. While Durer's vision of the "crosses falling from heaven" became an omen for a dreaded disease and was visually translated by him with expressions of pain and suffering in the images discussed, Varley's divine revelation, expressed in paint in *Liberation* (1936/37), was invested with faith and hope, inspired by the magic of Lynn Valley, British Columbia. His attachment to that landscape will be expanded on in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

VARLEY'S COMMUNION WITH THE LANDSCAPE

What philosophy I have of life comes directly from my life work & its laws have never failed when applying those laws to humanities. ... The NIGHT world is lost in darkness, no form exists. In brilliant SUN light, form is dissolved completely, but dawn creeps across the void and in the battling of forces of light and dark over an unknown world the magic of form is disrupted. The first rays from the burning sun catch the mountain peak - the shoulders of the slumbering earth tremble into being - the richly clothed mountain sides are illumined and reveal an ever changing splendour. Chasms - Gorges Ravines and Gullies - stark naked wounds in its side that time has made, are boldly drawn as deep dark lines losing themselves as they tumble into the yet sleeping valleys. Waterfalls leap into life draping themselves in the morning sun - rivers are born. The valleys are awakened and are full of song. To travel on the razor edge of the mountain peak and retain one's balance with all the many experiences of interchanging, interweaving patterns of dark and light, even when knowing they are transient, is quite a problem when applied to Life. Of course, we make a fool mess of it & fall many times. What of it! Up we try again and who can say how or where we fall? I only know that form alone is dead.- A mountain peak is just a mountain peak and we though born are literally dead unless we recognize and openly acknowledge the miracle of life itself. And that we have to do in our own individual way.¹

From this quotation there is no doubt that Varley's dialogue with nature was profound and that he contemplated its changing light and seasons, and referred to it as his own destiny and that of humanity. It is with this very personal and profound revelation that I want to look at *Mirror of Thought* (1937) (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria) (Figure 23). I will begin with its formal construction and then relate it to Varley's life experiences around the time he painted this canvas.

¹ AGO, Varley Archive, F.H. Varley to Ethel Varley, 24 November, 1950.

The motif of a figure in internal dialogue with nature is one of the key subjects in Robert Rosenblum's study of the northern romantic tradition² in which he locates Caspar David Friedrich's (1774-1840) *Monk by the Sea* (1809) (Nationalgalerie, Berlin) (Figure 24) as a fundamental influence. Friedrich searched to revitalize the experience of divinity in a secular world outside of the sacred confines of traditional Christian iconography. In several of Friedrich's landscape paintings the experience of the supernatural has been transposed from traditional religious imagery to nature. This is especially true of his numerous mountain vistas. In some of these landscapes a crucifix or cross is visible, as in *Morning in the Riesengebirge* (1810-1811) (Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlosser und Garten, Berlin) (Figure 25).

Several artists in the 20th century among them Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) and Edvard Munch drew upon, and perpetuated, aspects of this romantic belief by finding in the mysteries of landscape a surrogate for traditional religious art. For Hodler the mountain summits of the Swiss Alps and surrounding lakes assume a haunting, otherworldly character. In Van Gogh's art metaphors of divinity recur in images of the sun and the night sky filled with stars. Munch's images of landscapes and seascapes in the magic of sunlight and moonlight reflect the spiritual power of nature in his native Norway.³ For Varley it was the landscape of Lynn, British Columbia with its gorges, storms and majestic mountains that had a very profound influence.

²Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1975).

³Ibid., pp. 91-128.

When we, the spectator, look out from Varley's *Open Window* (1932) (Hart House, University of Toronto) (Figure 26) we are confronted by an obscure and undefined landscape shrouded in mist of intermingling colours of blue, green and grey. A mountain range at the horizon, its snowy peaks of shimmering white, separates this vast expanse from a sky that is dimly lit by either a rising or setting sun. The canvas is empty of any detail of nature apart from the mountain range and sky. Similar to Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, who has occasionally been identified as Friedrich himself,⁴ Varley contemplated this view with what appears to be an inaccessible mountain range looming in the distance.

In *Mirror of Thought* the view of that very same landscape is now presented to us from behind the closed window. It is brought closer and embedded with symbols that express life and mortality, not only in the realm of nature, but also in that of man.

This canvas was preceded by a study from c. 1934 (water color over graphite on wave paper, 19.1 x 22.5 cm., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa). Except for the face in the shaving mirror which resembles a caricature rather than a self-portrait, and the rim of hair, a cap or a crown covering the upper forehead, form and subject matter are the same as in the later oil painting. Both works could be interpreted as religious paintings because of the frequent introduction of the cross and the round mirror which resembles the circular medallions often found in processional crosses. However, the smoldering cigarette, the mirror, the changing seasons in nature, the wayfarer's cross and the automobile are all

⁴Helmut Borsch-Supan, "Caspar David Friedrich's Landscapes with Self-Portraits," Burlington Magazine 114 (1972): 622.

symbols which relate to transience and suggest that Varley may have been pre-occupied with instability and mortality.

Maria Tippet includes *Mirror of Thought* among Varley's "paintings from memory"⁵ painted after he had left Lynn Valley for Ottawa. In this painting Varley has closed the window from which he so often looked out on this loved landscape which he had roamed through to explore its wonders and which he had painted in all its seasons. This time he is not part of that landscape but rather he experiences it as a distant observer. He separates it into four very different moods by the vertical and horizontal window bars. Situating his head into the center would indicate that his memory was still entangled in that landscape even though physically he was far away.

Several scholars have associated this theme (the head separated from the body) with a "split between intellect and the senses, the mind and the body"⁶ which could be relevant for *Mirror of Thought* in the sense that physically Varley had already left Lynn Valley in early 1936, the landscape of this painting. Richard Brilliant has interpreted representations in the mirror as an indication of an artist's "alienation from himself" using as example Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in Convex Mirror* of 1524, to demonstrate that the artist allows us access only by "objectification". Following Brilliant's interpretation, the mirror image of Varley's face distances himself from his physical self, and the viewer is confronted with a mere reflection of the artist's face.⁷

⁵Maria Tippet, *Stormy Weather: F.H. Varley, A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), p.231.

⁶Barbara Rose, "Self-Portraiture: Theme with a Thousand Faces," *Art in America* 63 (January-February 1975): 71.

⁷Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 157-158.

Ann Davis includes this painting in her study of Canadian mystical painting as a work that was mystically rather than aesthetically realized, imagined more through contemplation rather than direct personal experience.⁸ Yet, when Varley painted *Mirror of Thought* he was suffering several personal hardships: he had received news that his canvas *Liberation* of 1936/1937 had been rejected by the Royal Academy in London (discussed in Chapter II). His marriage to Maud Pinder and as well, his relationship with Vera Weatherbie had ended. Maud Pinder, after receiving a small inheritance following her mother's death, had taken over the house in Lynn Valley which Varley could not sustain because of financial problems. Peter Varley recalled in a CBC interview with James Varley on May 19, 1970 that Varley's life at Lynn which had been his private universe, had fallen apart: "it was as if he was an outcast and he had been banished from this part of the world."⁹ His response to these hardships is reflected onto his *Mirror of Thoughts*, concealed in a symbolic language. Symbols of loss, abandonment, transience, and spirituality pervade this work. The landscape that he had so often portrayed and wandered through is now enclosed by a frame. Varley is separated and isolated from this landscape which, like his face in the mirror, is now only a mere reflection. Within the shaving mirror we detect his pre-occupation with the passing of time. The symbol of the mirror which in painting is considered the very implement that reflects the traces of transience, captures Varley's lined face with an expression of concern and disillusionment.

⁸Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting 1920-1940* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 22-3.

⁹Maria Tippett, pp. 222-23

His eyes reflect inwardness, looking out under heavy brows, vaguely acknowledging the spectator. The smoldering cigarette and the cross on the left side of Varley's head are both symbols of the brevity of life and mortality.

Pre-occupation with transience continues beyond the mirror: The cross formed by the bars of the window which cut the canvas into four different views of the Lynn Valley landscape, expose nature to different seasons and moods, alternating from light to dark. Significant is the human presence: the couple on the bridge and the car. What is immediately perceptible when looking at this painting are the much brighter colour shades in the two window panes to the right of the spectator in comparison to the dark, obscure and foreboding left. The lush green on the spectator's left in the lower pane moves up to a steep mountain ridge looming dark and obscure. Light piercing from behind this ridge illuminates the hills in the background. The upper right window pane in mixtures of green, blue, grey and brown takes us to a mountainous landscape. The mountain range is interrupted in the center by a valley with what looks like a lake in the foreground, surrounded by a rocky shore. Mist seems to be rising and surrounding the lower slope of the mountain range. Towards the left, close to the vertical window bar, a cluster of dead tree trunks rise up and reveal a cross. This cross, formed by nature, is placed right above the cross-shaped bar in Varley's shaving mirror. While these three panel views are uninhabited and concentrate on wild and uninhabited nature, the fourth panel on the lower right of the spectator connects us to the human element in the landscape. Here a couple stand on a bridge which connects the sandy road winding through the autumn landscape. Leading us into this part of the canvas is the front of a car and behind it what might be a

wayfarer's cross allowing the wanderer a pause for worship. Beyond its religious symbolism, and referring to Varley's feelings of loss and uncertainty at the time of this painting, this cross could be interpreted as a marker of direction to the road beyond the bridge which leads into the autumn colors of nature: various shades of greens, yellow, rust and beige flow into each other. Even the gray-green shade of the man-made object, the car, blend in with nature, giving this part of the canvas a calm and serene ambiance. What draws our attention and what is in sharp contrast to the subdued colors of the surrounding landscape, is the couple on the bridge: the male dressed in a dark suit, the female with black hair dressed in white. By putting emphasis on these two people, Varley implies their significance. He included this couple in several other works: *Weather, Lynn Valley* (1935-1936) (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria) (Figure 27) and *Night Ferry, Vancouver* (1937) (Private Collection) (Figure 28).

It is with the couple in opposing white and black that I will link *Mirror of Thought* and *Night Ferry, Vancouver* to Edvard Munch. I will take a closer look at the symbolic language in these works with the intention to reveal that not only did Munch and Varley share similar feelings and human experiences, they also used a similar language to express these emotions in paint. The works I have chosen for comparison will substantiate my argument.

Edvard Munch was considered the most innovative painter of Norway, and was the first Nordic visual artist to earn an international reputation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was an insightful portraitist and landscape painter and an explorer of human passions, including universal themes of love, death and spiritual longing. Scholars

from a variety of disciplines have explored the meaning of Munch's imagery, his sources of Symbolist art, and his legacy of German Expressionism in the context of developments in psychology literature, theatre, religion and philosophy. Munch had exhibited widely in Europe since 1889, especially in Scandinavia, Germany and in Paris.

Varley's correspondence does not reveal knowledge or interest in Edvard Munch and his works. However, it is likely that Varley heard about Munch's contributions to an exhibition of contemporary Scandinavian art in Buffalo, New York in 1913. This exhibition, believed to be the first American showing of his work, was sponsored by the American-Scandinavian Society of New York and included: *The Sick Child*, *Starry Night* and *In the Orchard (Adam and Eve under the Apple Tree)*.¹⁰ Lawren Harris and J.E.H. MacDonald with whom Varley was well acquainted at that time through their membership at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto, had attended it and were impressed. They came away from this exhibition feeling that in subject and treatment there were pronounced affinities with their own aspirations "not only in the general attitude of the Scandinavian artists, but also in the natural aspects of their countries".¹¹ Munch also lent eight prints to the Armory Show held in New York City in 1913 which received a great deal of publicity. His contribution included several versions of *Vampire* and *Moonlight*, *The Lonely Ones*, *Madonna*, and *Nude with Red Hair*.¹²

¹⁰Daniel Brunet, "Edvard Munch: A Biographical Chronology," in *Edvard Munch: Psyche, Symbol and Expression*, ed. Jeffrey Howe (Chestnut Hill: Charles S. and Isabella V. McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2001), p. 172.

¹¹Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Ottawa, 1995), p.48.

¹²Daniel Brunet, *ibid.*

A clue that reveals Varley's interest in Norway is disclosed in a letter to his sisters in early 1936. He tells of having crossed the ferry from Vancouver but because of a terrible hale, blown down trees and broken wires, no cars came out to Lynn. He had to walk about four miles to get home.

It was the most perfect night I have seen, with snow glistening on the peaks and in the valley. Rich colour in a windswept sky, and the power & wind booming through mountain passes, pulsing deeply on high & occasionally flurrying down & with unexpected violence bending & shaking the great trees on the highway. I opened a book I had with me 'Kristin Lavansdatter' and I found I could easily read the small print by the light of the night.¹³

Kristin Lavansdatter, a novel by Norwegian author Sigrid Undset (1882-1949) is a rather long and ambitious novel which paints a convincing and realistic picture of family life in fourteenth century Norway. From the above account it seems that he was reading this novel around the time he was working on *Mirror of Thought* and *Night Ferry, Vancouver*.

Munch's influence on Varley's work has been alluded to by Joyce Zemans. She refers to the tiny figures in Varley's *Weather - Lynn Valley* as "almost Munch-like".¹⁴ Nancy Tousley acknowledges the lack of exploration into Varley's symbolist and expressionist influences in her review of Varley's Centennial Exhibition held at the Edmonton Art Gallery in 1981¹⁵ and John Allison Forbes, referring to the same exhibition, raises similar concerns when he comments on the absence in the catalogue of information relating directly to Varley's art and its influences. He asks: "Did he know, for example

¹³NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to sisters Lil and Ethel, 9 February, 1936.

¹⁴Joyce Zemans, "An Appreciation," in *Frederick H. Varley*, ed. Peter Varley (Toronto: Kay Porter Books, 1983), p.67.

¹⁵Nancy Tousley, "A Centennial Exhibition," *Artmagazine*, 13 (February/March/April 1982): 14.

the works of Munch, or Bonnard?”¹⁶ It seems that his questions have remained unanswered.

Similar to Varley, Munch’s art forms a visual diary and commentary on his own life and beliefs, which is corroborated by Munch’s notes and written comments. Both grounded their art in their own lived experiences and their direct perception of nature, and both, in the works under discussion, expressed in art their private sorrows and struggles behind a screen of symbolism. As stated in my introduction, it is not my intention to analyze the works of art and their underlying causes. I will rely on the relevant literature, Varley’s correspondence and the comments of Edvard Munch, to support my comparison of the selected works. For my discussion of the theme of abandonment, transience, attachment and loss in Varley’s *Mirror of Thought*, I will refer to Munch’s *Night in Saint Cloud* (1890) (Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo) (Figure 29), *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* (1895) (Nasjonagalleriet, Oslo) (Figure 30), *Self-Portrait in the Glass Verandah II* (1940) (Munch Museet, Oslo) (Figure 32), *Melancholy* (1891) (Private Collection) (Figure 33) and several versions of *Starry Night* (Figures 36,37,38).

The window view in *Mirror of Thought* captures an important chapter in Varley’s autobiography which he has shrouded in symbolic language implying loss, abandonment and transience. Varley’s expression of these sentiments is well articulated by Edvard Munch when he writes: “A landscape will alter according to the mood of the person who sees it, and in order to represent that particular scene, the artist will produce a picture that

¹⁶John Allison Forbes, “Frederick Horsman Varley at Edmonton,” *RACAR*: 93.

expresses his own personal feelings. It is these feelings which are crucial: nature is merely the means of conveying them.”¹⁷

In *Night in Saint Cloud* Munch captures himself in a similar mood. We find him looking out of his window in Saint Cloud near Paris. We see his seated figure in shadow against the dim light coming from the window. The darkness of the room separates his figure from the light across the river Seine. The window frame casts the shadow of a cross onto the floor, reinforcing the pre-occupation with his own mortality, but also the grief for his father who had died recently. Like Varley in *Mirror of Thought*, Munch is isolated from the life beyond the closed window, shut out from the light and laughter across the river.

Munch had been awarded a scholarship to study at an art school in Paris, run by Leon Bonnat, a respected, strict and demanding academic. While at first he attended Bonnat's studio regularly, he soon isolated himself from his friends and colleagues and immersed himself in constant self-reflection. “Memories going back to his childhood appeared, and he tried to preserve and organize them in a series of literary notes that in some respects resemble a diary. Thoughts about death and the transitory nature of things dominate.”¹⁸ He writes about being abandoned by his friends since he cannot share in their laughter. His daily walks tire him and become shorter and he spends more time indoors, in front of the fireplace. “When I light the candle I suddenly see my huge

¹⁷Louise Lippincott, *Edvard Munch: Starry Night* (Malibu, California: The J.Paul Getty Museum, 1988), p.9.

¹⁸Ragna Stang, *Edvard Munch - The Man and His Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1977), p.70.

shadow across half the wall, clear up to the ceiling. And in a large wall over the fireplace I see myself - the face of my own ghost.”¹⁹

In Varley’s *Mirror of Thought*, there is a smoldering cigarette pressed between Varley’s lips. This was in twentieth century Europe associated with mortality and a broad spectrum of other meaning, including: working class status, deviance, moral slackness and creativity. In her discussion of Munch’s *Self Portrait with Cigarette* (Figure 30). Patricia Berman provides the historical and social context for this work.²⁰ When Munch painted this portrait, the addictive properties of tobacco and its effect on physical and mental health were known to him. In the context of Munch’s preoccupation with illness and death which, among other pre-occupations, transcend his art, the cigarette in this self-portrait may well symbolize transience. The dark and obscure background against which Munch posed himself and the searching expression in Munch’s eyes add further credence to this reading. At the time of this painting Munch was concerned with the “diseased state of society”, and the effects of city life on the general population including the “artistic bohemians.”²¹ He may also have reflected on the illness of tuberculosis which had claimed the life of his mother and a sister at age fifteen. Another tragedy was the death of his brother Andreas the same year that Munch painted this self-portrait. An earlier lithograph from 1908 *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* (Oslo Kommunes

¹⁹Trygve Nergaard, “Despair,” in *Edvard Munch: Symbols & Images*, ed. Arne Eggum (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1978), p. 116.

²⁰Patricia Berman, “Edvard Munch’s Self-Portrait with Cigarette: Smoking and the Bohemian Persona,” *The Art Bulletin* LXXV (December 1993): 637-646.

²¹Shelly Wood Cordulack, *Edvard Munch and the Physiology of Symbolism*. (Cranbury, N.J. and London: Associated University Press, 2002), pp.40-50.

Kunstsamlinger) (Figure 31) was meant to celebrate his “last cigarette before undergoing a strict regimen of abstinence to improve his health”.²²

For Varley the passing of time was of much concern in a personal and professional way. He had hoped that *Liberation 1936/1937* was going to bring him success and recognition abroad. He realized that there was little opportunity left to achieve these hopes. On April 29, 1937 he writes to Maud, “I don’t know what you think about it but I know that I am nearer 60 than 50 ... All those years & all I represent is about as much as a down and outer on a park bench.”²³ In *Mirror of Thought* a cross is revealed next to Varley’s face in the shaving mirror and in the cross-shaped window frame that supports the mirror. Beyond the window frame the changing seasons and the different moods of the landscape evoke feelings of uncertainty and mortality. These emotions are emphasized by the wayfarer’s cross and the natural cross formed by the cluster of dead trees in the upper window panel, close to the cross in the shaving mirror. The cross-shaped window bars and the autumn landscape in *Mirror of Thought* bear resemblance to the iconography in several of Munch’s self-portraits, painted four years before his death. In *Self-Portrait in the Glass Veranda II* (1940), Munch portrays himself as the “old man” who, at age seventy-seven, like the nature reflected behind him, has entered the “last season” of his life. His expression is uncertain and pessimistic. His eyes are hardly

²²Claude Cernuschi, “Sex and Psyche, Nature and Nurture, the Personal and the Political: Edvard Munch and German Expressionism,” in *Edvard Munch: Psyche, Symbol and Expression*, ed. Jeffrey Howe, p.149.

²³NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 29 April, 1937.

visible and his head is positioned against the wintry landscape and the window frame which forms a double cross to his left.

I now want to turn to the “Munch-like” figures in the right hand panel of *Mirror of Thought* and connect them to Munch’s *Melancholy* (Figure 33). Munch’s relationship with Milly Thaulow the wife of Munch’s cousin, naval captain Carl Thaulow, had recently ended and Munch in this painting centers his life around the site of this affair. Nergaard claims that Munch identified himself with the lonely figure on the beach²⁴ who dominates the right side of the canvas. His head supported by his right arm and hand, dressed in a black shirt, he looks melancholic and contemplative. He sits on a beach surrounded by rocks but he is not looking out. His gaze seems turned inward. On the horizon, a small boat blends into the yellow-mauve color of the water and sky. What the eye is drawn to is the small white figure of a woman on the pier who is accompanied by a man dressed in black. While the contemplative figure of the man seems isolated from the scene on the horizon, Munch has connected him with the couple through the black of his shirt and hair and the black undulating shoreline. A diary note by Munch around the time of this canvas reads:

“Down here by the beach, I feel that I find an image of myself - of life - of my life. The strange smell of seaweed and sea reminds me of her.... In the dark green water I see the color of her eyes. Way, way out there the soft line where air meets ocean - it is as incomprehensible as life - as incomprehensible as death, as eternal as longing.”²⁵

²⁴Trygve Nergaard, “Despair,” in *Edvard Munch: Symbols & Images*, p.131.

²⁵ Ibid.

In *Mirror of Thought*, the couple on the bridge, the woman also in white dress and the man in black is connected to Varley through the frame of the shaving mirror and the frame of the window. While physically separated, the contemplative expression in Varley's face projects the feeling of longing to partake in the life that goes on beyond the frames. In Varley's canvas it is the car, almost invisible because it blends with the colours of the landscape, that like Munch's boat, insinuates the departing of the couple. In 1942 Vera Weatherbie married Harold Mortimer Lamb.²⁶ Varley might have had similar thoughts to those that occurred to Munch when he painted *Melancholy*. "I know, I know they are going to the island over there ... it must be wonderful to love now."²⁷ Varley's grandson, Christopher tells us that "Varley gave this sentimental painting to Vera whom he deeply missed."²⁸

This couple, contrasted in their opposites of black and white, appear in several of Munch's works. In *The Lonely Ones* (1895) (Fram Trust) (Figure 34), they stand alone on a rocky shore overlooking the sea. In *Jealousy* (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsammlinger) (ca.1907) (Figure 35), they become part of a triangle. The face of the jealous man, the male figure in the foreground with green coloured face (perhaps an impersonation of Munch), is surrounded to his left by a young couple - the female rather suggestively posed while the male with head stooped, transmits a pensive attitude. Munch's remark which likely refers to this painting reads:

²⁶ Maria Tippet, p.247.

²⁷ Henri Dorra, "Munch, Gauguin and Norwegian Painters in Paris," *Gazette des Beaux Arts (France)* 88(November 1976): 176.

²⁸ Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*, p.136.

A mystical gaze, that of the jealous one. In these two piercing eyes are concentrated as many mirror images as in a crystal. There is something warning of hate and death. There is a warm glow that recalls love, an essence of her, something they all three have in common, a wisp of the woman they shared. The gaze is searching, filled with hate and filled with love.²⁹

Curiously, in *Mirror of Thought* Varley has also daubed his face with light green paint, a color which is reflected from the round mirror that frames his face.

In *Weather - Lynn Valley* (Figure 27) the couple in white and black appears on the very same bridge. Varley brings them back once more in *Night Ferry, Vancouver* (Figure 28) which he completed the same year as *Mirror of Thought*. Varley layered this painting with shades of green, mauve and blue, at times in heavy and swirling brush strokes, which move across the water and are reflected in the sky above. The work reflects a mysterious night atmosphere: the skyline on the horizon, the moon above, and the back portion of a ferry with three people on its deck. According to grandson Christopher, “Varley returned to Ottawa, where in ‘108 hours of enthusiasm’ he painted *Night Ferry, Vancouver*”.³⁰ Again, as in *Mirror of Thought*, the canvas is separated into four parts by the ferry mast and its supporting ropes. The ferry has left Vancouver, shown in the distance under a moonlit sky. The mast cuts across the deck and the waves of the ferry, reaching out as far as the shore, giving the impression that Varley is linking the ferry to the shore left behind. Closest to the lower edge of the painting where the mast cuts across the ferry’s deck, the couple standing close to the railing on the right is separated from the lonely figure of a

²⁹Reinhold Heller, *Munch - His Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.144.

³⁰Christopher Varley, p.134.

man who is looking back to the shore where the journey began, his back turned to the spectator and a life ring attached to the side of the railing. Varley has given emphasis to this lonely man by silhouetting his figure onto the yellow/orange color of the ferry's back railing. Attention is also drawn to the couple by the reflection of light cast in front of them. The woman stands out in her dress of pink and turquoise. The waters seem more turbulent on the side occupied by the lonely man, to the spectator's left. In a note to son John, Varley writes:

I am getting away more and more from the fact. It is good to paint impressions long after the impression has been received. My Vancouver which is a background of *Night Ferry* is a New York with a cut out moon in the sky & the flurry of water behind the boat are like peacock feathers. A couple of lovers on the lower deck are influenced by the crazy moon & give me pale rose and dusky gold while a stocky figure with sprawled out legs stolidly stands with his back to the spectator & you have to guess what he thinks.³¹

He writes to Maud telling her that this painting had made an impression on someone at the National Gallery and that he had it shipped down to the Toronto Gallery "but as they don't like it enough to buy, so what now little man? I don't know."³² This note confirms that Varley saw himself as the 'little man' on his journey East and once again, as in *Mirror of Thought*, he is the observer of the scene. The fragmented canvas echoes what appear to be fragments of memories of experiences lived rather than the geographical reality of what the spectator assumes from the title of this work.

³¹Ibid., pp. 134&136.

³²NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Maud Pinder, 29 April, 1937.

Similarities to *Night Ferry, Vancouver* can be detected in Munch's several versions of *Starry Night*. Not only are there similarities in the formal elements but also in the subject matter. In these different versions of *Starry Night* we see in the foreground two sides of a verandah which jut out into a snowy night landscape. The colors of gray and shades of blue, radiate an unsettling atmosphere of a cold and lonely winter night. On the horizon a strip of yellow light suggest the skyline of a city. What in Varley's *Night Ferry, Vancouver* is the back of the ferry deck, in *Starry Night* the two sides of the verandah staircase form the enclosing space in the foreground of the canvas. Here, instead of Varley's ferry mast, a group of trees to the left of the center of the canvas connect the viewer to the lights of habitation and to the starry sky above. Between the two sides of the railing of the staircase to the verandah, human presence is suggested by shadows. In a charcoal drawing dated 1916-1923, three shadows appear (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger) (Figure 36). In an oil on canvas work of 1922-1924 (Munch Museet, Oslo) (Figure 37), two shadows are cast against the snowy background, the silhouette of a man's head cast against the spectator's right side of the railing. Similar to Varley, the man on the deck of the ferry observing the lovers, the silhouette of this figure suggests that he is also aware of the couple whose shadow is cast on the snow at the bottom of the verandah steps. In a slightly larger version of the above, painted in the same year (Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Oslo) (Figure 38), the shadow of only one figure is visible on the snowy background, presumably that of the artist standing in front of his illuminated

house. "He is now totally alone...."³³

Varley reveals to us the very same predicament in what seems to be his last painting of Lynn Valley, *Moonlight after Rain* (1947) (Art Gallery of Ontario) (Figure 39) where the "little man" seen in *Night Ferry, Vancouver* appears again. With his back turned to the spectator, he crosses the bridge alone, submerged in a mysterious and dreary looking landscape in shades of blue, gray, brown and green, flanked by trees on both sides of the canvas. The road leading across the bridge now seems to be encircling an island of shrubs and trees. We do not see where the path leads to. Our view is obstructed by the island in the center of the canvas. The mountains in shades of blue and green are hazily looming on the horizon where the sky seems to be clearing. Like Friedrich in *Monk by the Sea*, it seems that Varley has projected himself as the "little man" to explore his relationship to the great 'Unknown', trying to recognize and acknowledge the "miracle of life". In an undated letter to his sister Ethel at the end of 1955 Varley states: "My life has taught me that I have nothing to say about 'what will be'... As long as I make contact with a great Unknown and recognize the privilege of living in a glorious world, it would be impertinence to say 'I will do this or that'."³⁴

In conclusion, I began and ended this chapter with works in which Varley exposes his contemplative and spiritual communion with nature, the "magic" that Varley refers to in the opening statement of this chapter. In *Mirror of Thought* and *Night Ferry*,

³³Louise Lippincott, *Edvard Munch: Starry Night*, p.91.

³⁴NGC, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Ethel Varley, undated (probably end of 1955).

Vancouver this “magic” is disrupted and reveals what Varley might consider the “travel on the razor edge of the mountain peak.”³⁵ These paintings refer to several of the “dark and light patterns” in Varley’s life which seem to have been similar to emotions and responses experienced by Edvard Munch, judging by the resemblance in expression in the works selected for this discussion.

Both Munch and Varley considered their works of art as “autobiography”. Munch disclosed to a relative that: “My pictures are my diaries.”³⁶ For Varley his paintings were his “conversations.”³⁷ As visitors to exhibitions of the works discussed, we have communicated with them and come away with our own interpretations of the artist’s intention. By providing a context for these works with autobiographical contributions by Varley and Munch, I hope to have provided a different perspective and a better understanding of the intentions of their authors³⁸ and, in particular Varley’s motivation in *Mirror of Thought*.

In *Mirror of Thought* Varley exposed the universe that held for him a special magic and he allowed us to share several of his personal experiences within that landscape. Above all, he revealed that the mountain peaks and valleys of Lynn were not only form but were indeed filled with the “miracle of life”. Not only did he communicate the mysterious seasonal changes in the landscape, he included himself within that cyclical pattern, thereby implying that life and death dominate both man and nature.

³⁵AGO, Varley Papers, F.H. Varley to Ethel Varley, 24 November, 1950.

³⁶Ragna Stang, *Edvard Munch: The Man and his Art*, p.11.

³⁷AGO, Varley Archive, F.H. Varley note to Ethel Varley, undated.

³⁸Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.121.

CONCLUSION

“An artist paints to find himself.”¹

The objective of this thesis was to follow Varley’s search to find himself by considering his self-portraits within the context of his autobiographical writings in order to gain a better understanding of the feelings and emotions he instilled during these encounters with himself. Within Varley’s rich and varied repertory of art works, his self-representations are exceptions. However, they stand out for several reasons: First, they fluctuate from the traditional notion of physiognomic resemblance to innovative ways of representation and absence of physical resemblance. Second, they occur as markers around three themes that were of major significance to Varley: his war experience, his religious/spiritual beliefs, and his communion with nature. Third, they were confrontations at times when Varley was troubled and insecure in contrast to many artists who painted themselves at prime times in their careers.

Philippe Lejeune’s guidelines in his *Autobiographical Pact* were particularly helpful in considering several of these portraits not identified as self-portraits by their label and not previously recognized as such. *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1936/1937) reveal that it was primarily in these works where Varley was able to conceal from the spectator his personal pre-occupations, as discussed in Chapter II. Varley was aware of signifying status and power as he so well demonstrated in his portrait of Lieutenant McKean and *Liberation* (1936/1937). The portrait of Lieutenant McKean is an example

¹NGC, Varley Archive, F.H. Varley to Eric Brown, 30 August, 1937.

of the official portrait that aims at justifying and embodying status. It was to serve as an example of bravery and honor for the Canadian military. *Liberation* (1936/1937) on the surface, signifies the power of Christ which Varley intended in order to convince the spectators of the idea of everlasting life. Varley's self-portraits however are very much reflections of the private self in contemplation. They are personal confrontations without the recognizable signs of his profession, and, on three occasions, are concealed behind the shell of the image of Christ, as discussed in Chapter II.

The influence of Augustus John was recognizable in Varley's portrait of *Canadian Soldier* (1942). In Chapter II and Chapter III the influence of several other artists became particularly revealing. In Chapter II it was not only the similarity in the formal presentation but also the communication of feeling and intention which led to my drawing a comparison between Varley's and several of Albrecht Durer's works. Durer's association during his illness with *Head of Dead Christ* (1503), led me to suspect that Varley, faced with his loss of faith and spirit because of the horrors witnessed on the battlefield, identified himself with the mutilated body of Christ in *The Christ Tree*. I assume that in *Liberation* (1936/1937) Varley resurrected these doubts. *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1936/1937) can therefore be considered in a similar way to how Durer resolved his suffering through the Passions which culminate in the Resurrection. The close resemblance of the head and facial features in the Christ in both, *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1936/37), prompted further support of this reading. These two images can

be considered within Brilliant's concept of artists' self-portraits in which a personal inquiry after the self culminates in the attempt to realize that self in some outwardly expressive image, not previously known.² Also in Van Alphen's interpretation of new concepts of representation and subjectivity whereby mimetic referentiality has been challenged, *The Christ Tree* (1918), *Liberation* (1936/37) and *Liberation* (1943) can be accepted as self-portraits.

While Christopher Varley has acknowledged Varley's identification with the Christ figure in *Liberation* (1936/1937), no such association has been ascribed to *The Christ Tree* and *Liberation* (1943). Christopher Varley attributes his interpretation of *Liberation* (1936/1937) to the artist's sense of social alienation and spirituality.

He identified himself with Christ, that great teacher and visionary who was ostracized and condemned for refusing to live within society's restrictions. He empathized with Christ's pain, sorrow, and eventual victory over death.³

This interpretation does not respond to F.H. Varley's experience which inspired this canvas. The knowledge of his revelation while walking in the mountains of Lynn Valley, as disclosed in Chapter II, may inspire a revision of Christopher Varley's reading.

In Chapter III the influence of Edvard Munch could be recognized in similarities of representation, content, and communication of emotion. While several observers have alluded to this influence, it had not inspired further exploration. My approach in looking at Varley's self-portraits has reached beyond the personal reflection in the mirror and has

²Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 169.

³Christopher Varley, *F. H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*, p.130.

linked him to some of his contemporaries and to portraitists that preceded him who demonstrated similarities, not only in formal representation, but also in expression of mood and state of mind. Brilliant notes that the self-portrait may be directed to only a few, perhaps only to the artist in order to protect his privacy.⁴ This may have been Varley's intention, however, supported by his autobiographical writings, we can recognize not only how Varley appeared to himself but also how he felt about himself when he painted his self-portraits. Lejeune remarked that when the artist, brush in hand, reconstructs himself, fills in the gaps, surrounds himself, restores himself and puts himself back "in shape" there always remains "that spark of surprise."⁵ There is always an element that escapes. As such I hope that my reading of these portraits will inspire further inquiries into Varley's self-portraits.

⁴Richard Brilliant, p. 164.

⁵Philippe Lejeune, p. 114.

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Figure 1. Frederick H. Varley. *Self-Portrait*, 1919, oil on canvas, 61.0 x 58.8 cm., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

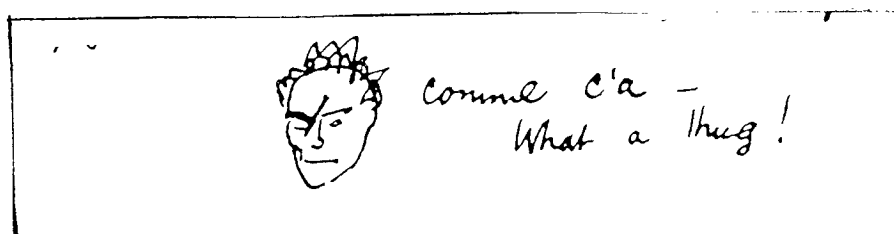


Figure 2. Frederick H. Varley. *Comme C'a - What a Thug!*. 1942, ink sketch 2.2 x 1.5 cm., Varley Archive, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Figure 3. Frederick H. Varley. *Self-Portrait, Days of 1943*, oil on canvas, on masonite, 49.5 x 40.7 cm., Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto.



Figure 4. Frederick H. Varley. *Lieutenant G.B. McKean, V.C.*, 1918, oil on canvas, 102.0 x 76.0 cm., Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.



Figure 5. Frederick H. Varley. *Canadian Soldier*, 1942. oil on canvas. 101.5 x 81.3 cm., Art Collection Society of Kingston.



Figure 6. Augustus John. *Canadian Soldier (I)*, 1917, oil on canvas, 32 x 24 inches. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Figure 7. Augustus John. *Portrait of T.E. Lawrence as Aircraftsman Shaw*, 1935, oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

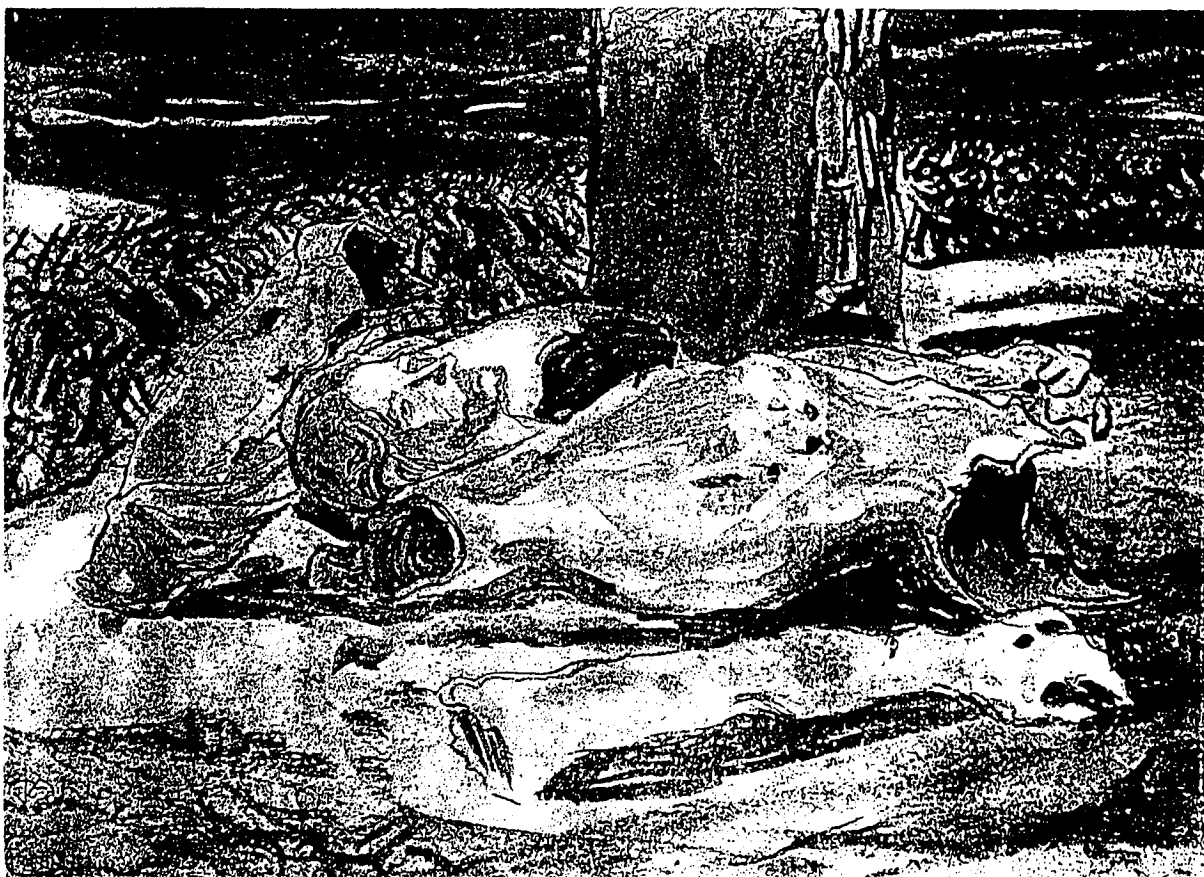


Figure 8. Frederick H. Varley. *The Christ Tree*, 1918, pencil and watercolour on paper, 17.6 x 25.3 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Figure 9. Frederick H. Varley. *Endpaper* for Wilson MacDonald's book *The Miracle Songs of Jesus*, 1921, lithograph, white on blue background, 8 x 10 inches.



Figure 10. Frederick H. Varley. *The Nativity*, 1923, Pendentive painting, approx. 15 x 10 feet, Saint Anne's Church, Toronto.



Figure 11. Frederick H. Varley, *Liberation* 1936-37, oil on canvas, 213.7 x 134.3 cm., Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Figure 12. Frederick H. Varley, *Liberation*, 1943, oil on canvas, 71.0 x 61.5 cm., Private collection.



Figure 13. Albrecht Durer. *Head of Dead Christ*, 1503, charcoal on paper, 31.0 x 22.1 cm., British Museum, London.



Figure 14. Albrecht Dürer. *Head of Suffering Man*, 1503, charcoal on paper, 31.0 x 22.1 cm., British Museum, London.



Figure 15. Albrecht Durer. *Nude Self-Portrait*, c. 1503, pen and brush, heightened with white on green grounded paper, 29.2 x 15.4 cm., Staatliche Kunstsammlung, Weimar.



Figure 16. Albrecht Durer. *Proportional Nude as Atelier Mannequin*, 1526, black pen and ink with yellow wash on background, 45.0 x 24.8 cm., British Museum, London.

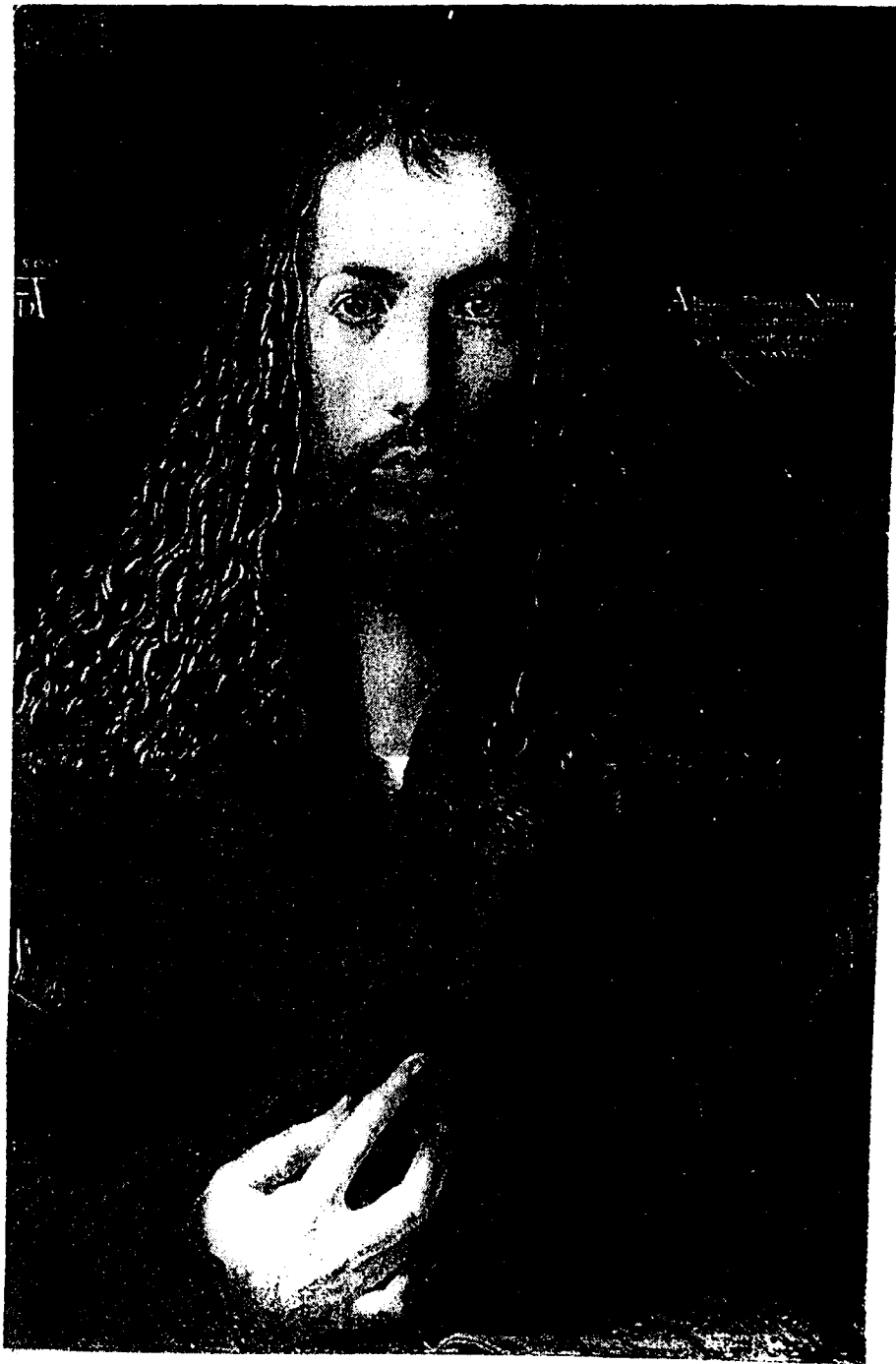


Figure 17. Albrecht Dürer. *Self Portrait*, 1500, oil on wood, 67.0 x 49.0 cm., Alte Pinakotek, Munich.



Figure 18. Albrecht Dürer. *Self-Portrait as Man of Sorrows*, 1522, metal point on green prepared paper, 40.8 x 29.0 cm., Kunsthalle Bremen.

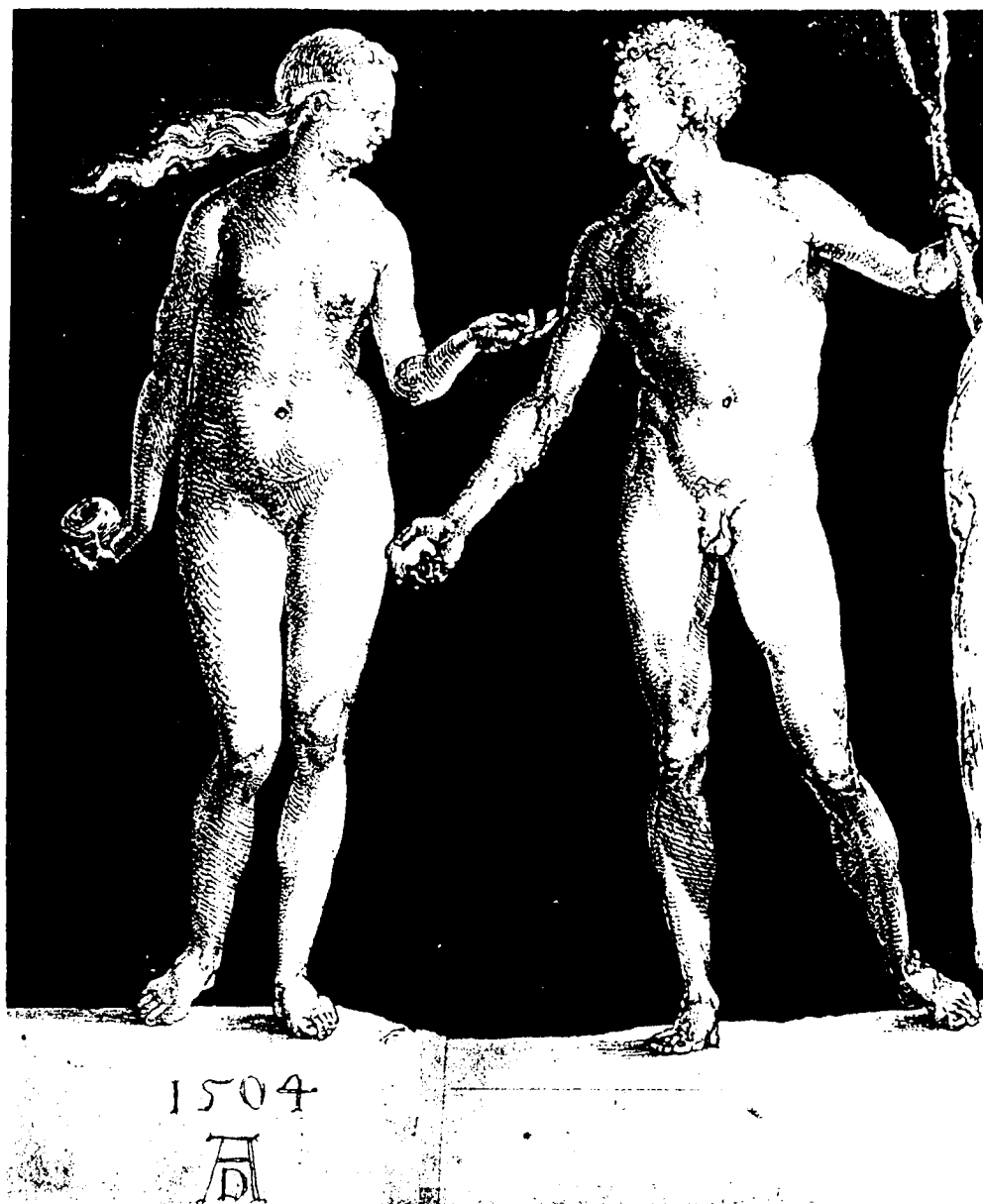


Figure 19. Albrecht Dürer. *Adam and Eve*, 1504, pen and ink with brown wash, 24.2 x 20.1 cm., Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

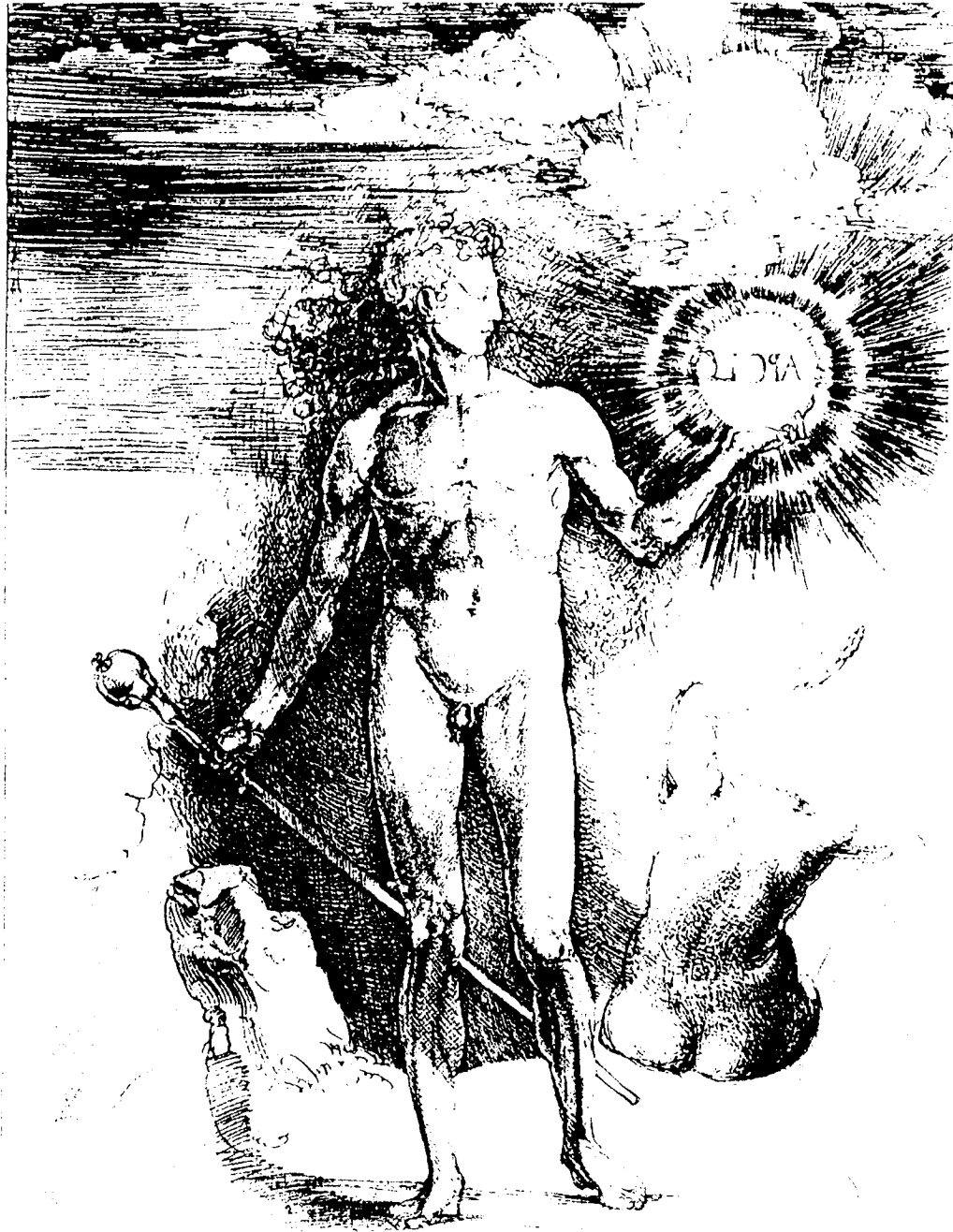


Figure 20. Albrecht Dürer. *Apollo and Diana*, ca. 1501–1502, pen and brown ink, 28.5 x 20.2 cm., British Museum, London.

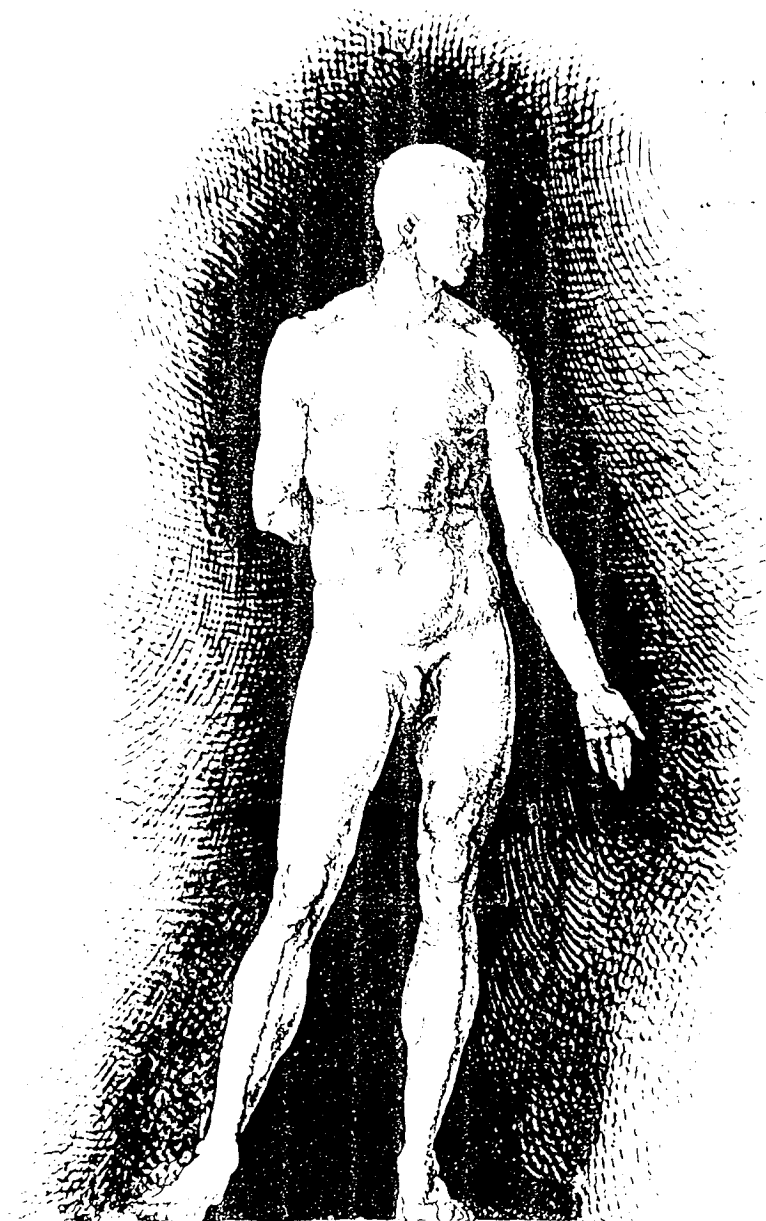


Figure 21. Albrecht Dürer. *Male Nude*, 1513, pen and brush in brown and green with touches of pink, 27.5 x 20 cm., Sachsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden.



Figure 22. Albrecht Durer. *Ill Durer*, ca. 1510, pen and ink with watercolour, 13.2 x 11.5 cm. Kusthalle, Bremen.

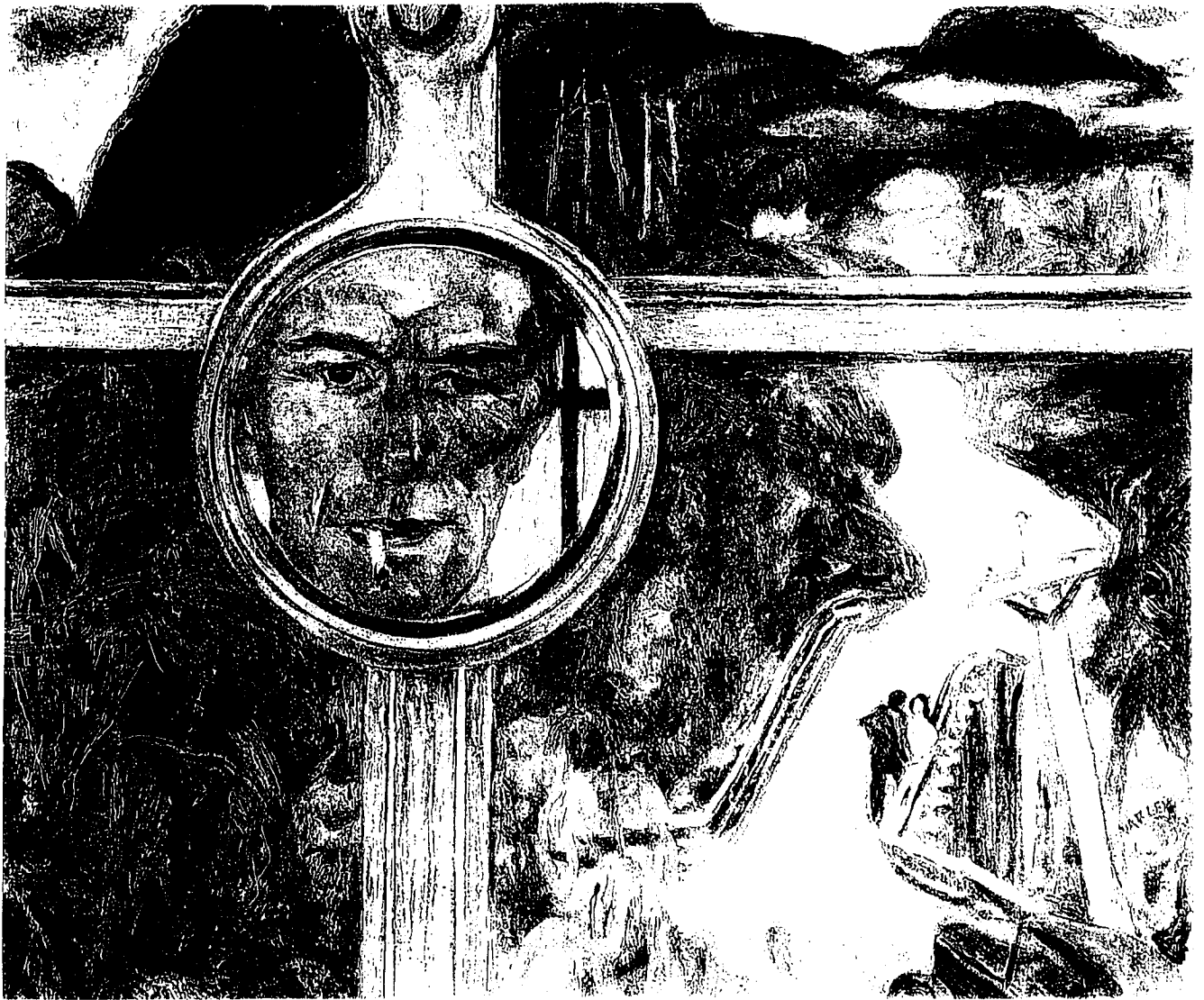


Figure 23. Frederick H. Varley. *Mirror of Thought*, 1937, oil on canvas, 50.7 x 60.9 cm., Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.



Figure 24. Caspar David Friedrich. *The Monk by the Sea*, 1808-1810, oil on canvas. 110 x 171.5 cm., Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



Figure 25. Caspar David Friedrich. *Morning in the Riesengebirge*, 1810-1811, oil on canvas, 108 x 170 cm., Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin.

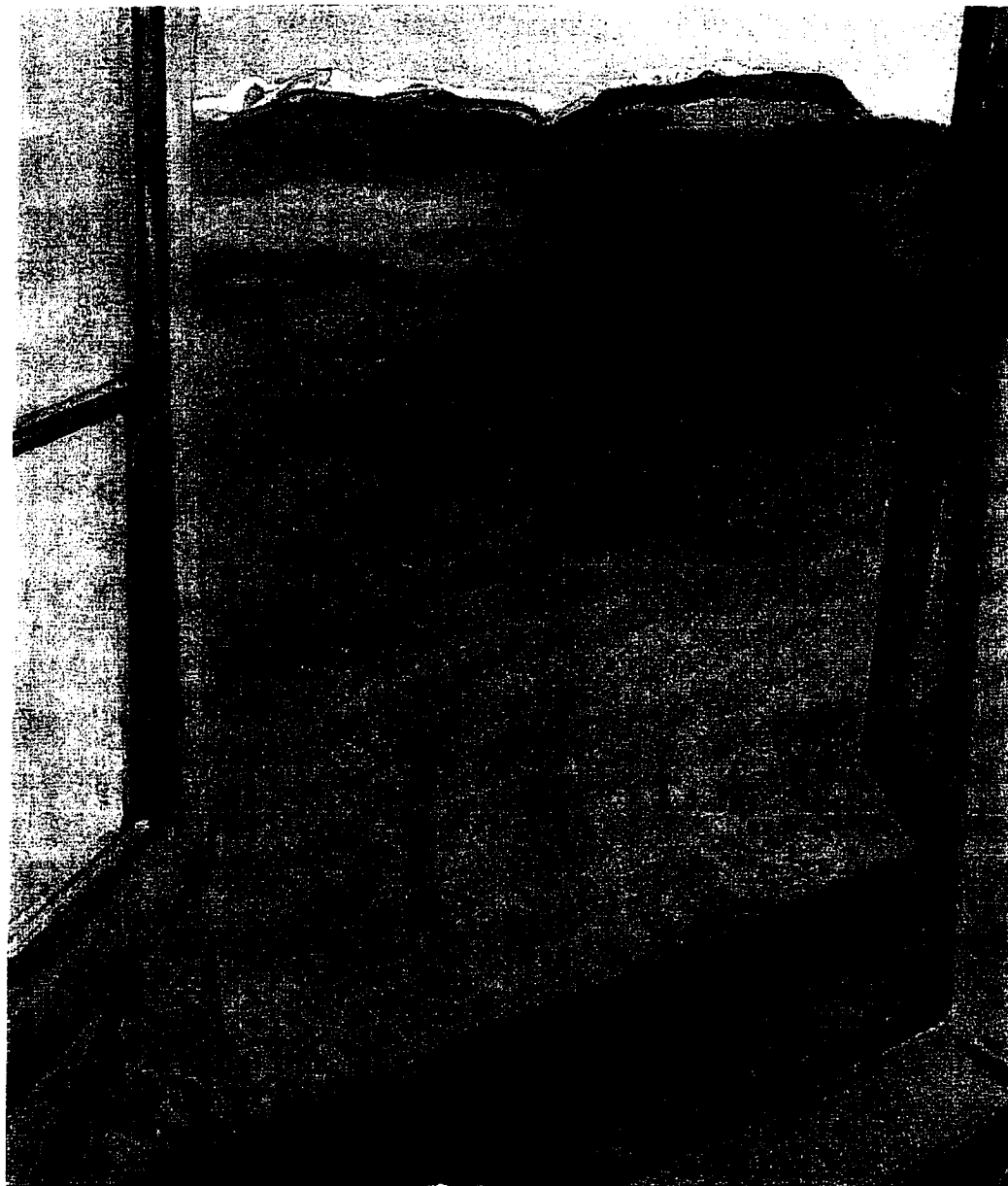


Figure 26. Frederick H. Varley. *The Open Window*, c, 1933, oil on canvas, 102.9 x 87.0 cm., Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto.



Figure 27. Frederick H. Varley. *Weather, Lynn Valley*, 1935-36, oil on panel, 30.5 x 38.1 cm. Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

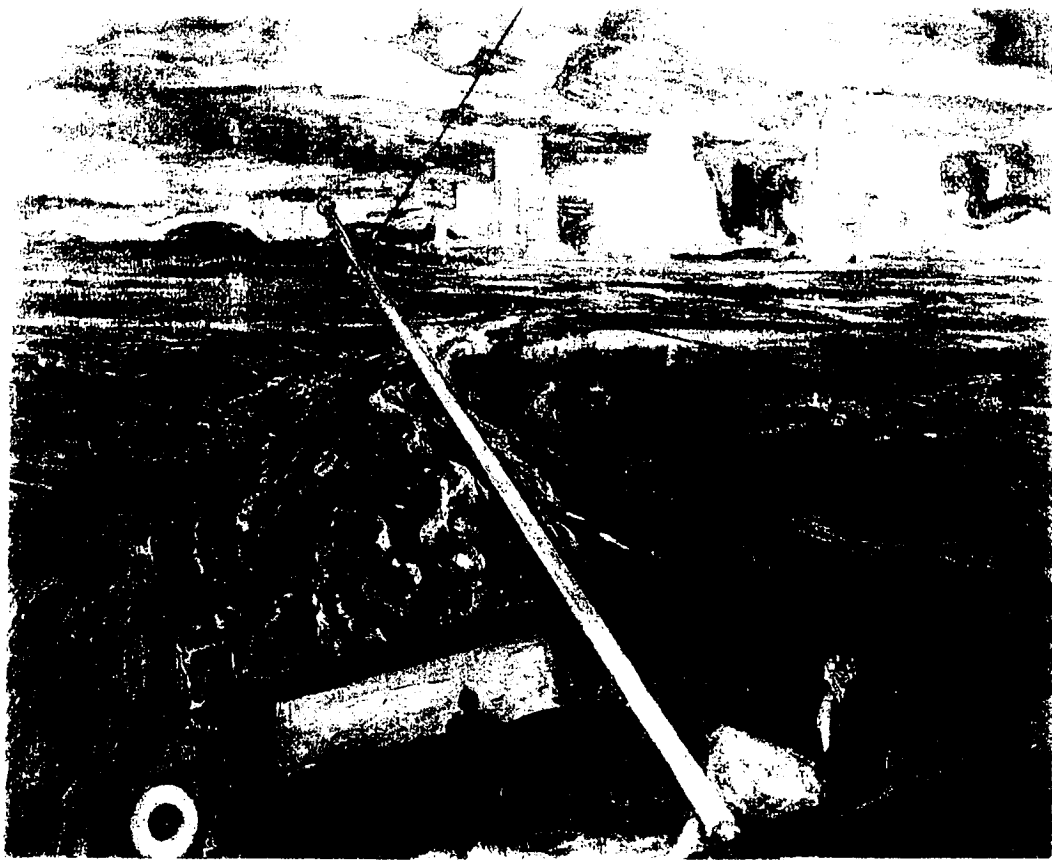


Figure 28. Frederick H. Varley. *Night Ferry, Vancouver*, 1937, oil on canvas. 82.3 x 102.2 cm. Private Collection.

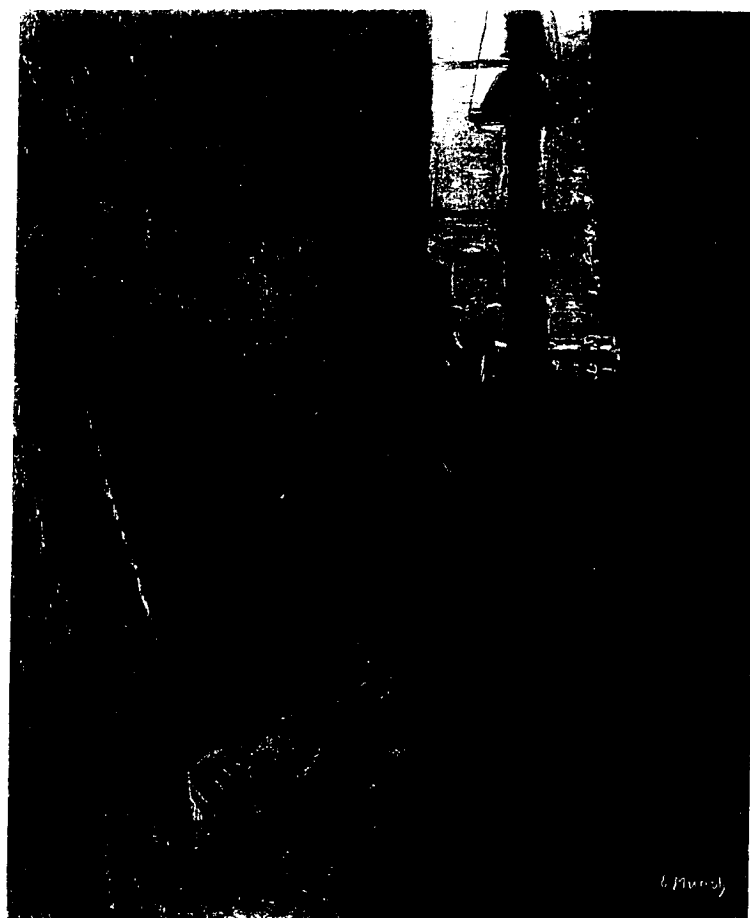


Figure 29. Edvard Munch. *Night in Saint Cloud*. 1890. oil on canvas. 64.5 x 54 cm., Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo.



Figure 30. Edvard Munch. *Self-Portrait with Cigarette*, 1885, oil on canvas, 110.5 x 85.5 cm. Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo.



Figure 31. Edvard Munch, *Self-Portrait with Cigarette*, 1908, lithograph, 56 x 45.5 cm., Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger.



Figure 32. Edvard Munch. *Self-Portrait in the Glass Verandah II*, 1940, oil, black crayon, and spray technique on board, 18 x 21 7/8 inches. Munch Museet, Oslo.



Figure 33. Edvard Munch, *Melancholy*, 1891, oil on canvas, 72 x 98 cm., Private Collection.

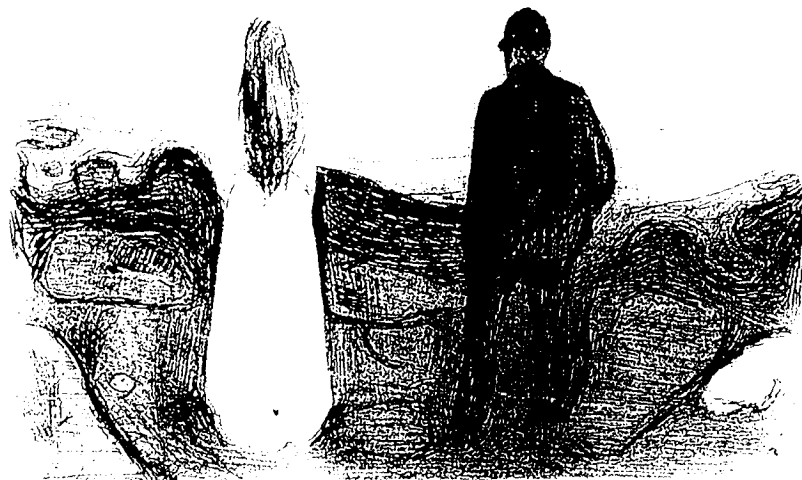


Figure 34. Edvard Munch. *The Lonely Ones*, 1895, drypoint, 15.5 x 21.3 cm., Fram Trust.

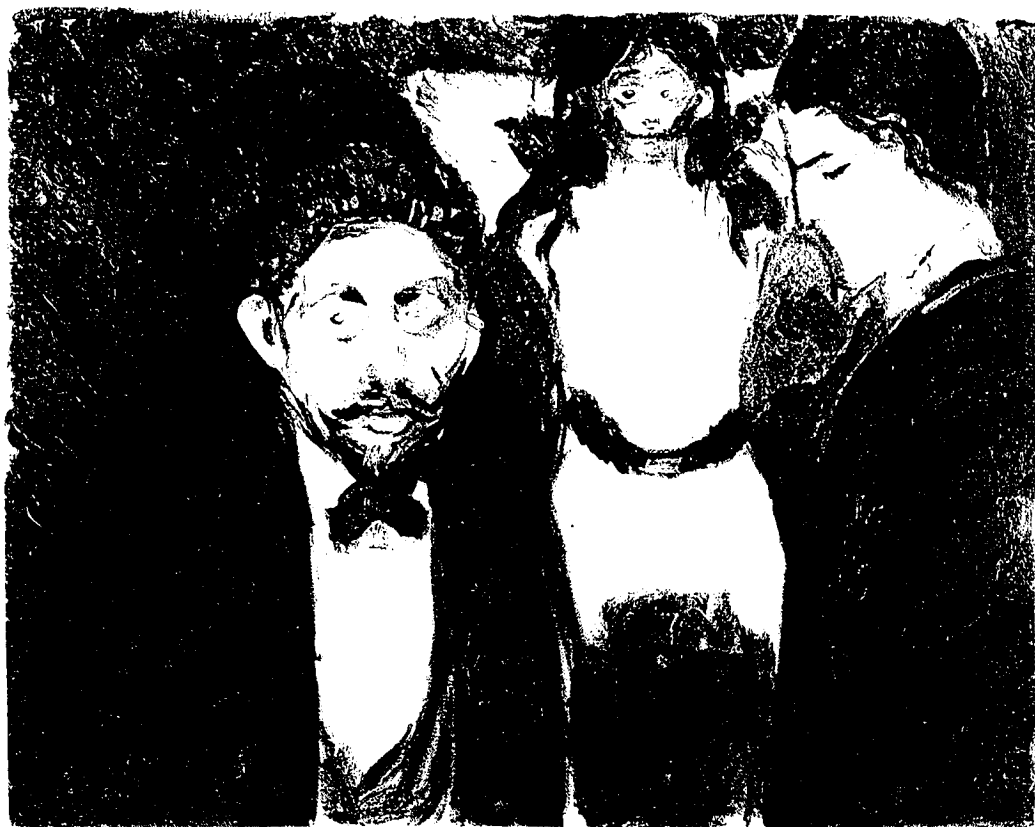


Figure 35. Edvard Munch. *Jealousy*, c. 1909, oil on canvas, 75 x 97.5 cm., Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger.



Figure 36. Edvard Munch. *Starry Night*, 1916-1923, charcoal on paper, 70 x 62.5 cm., Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger.

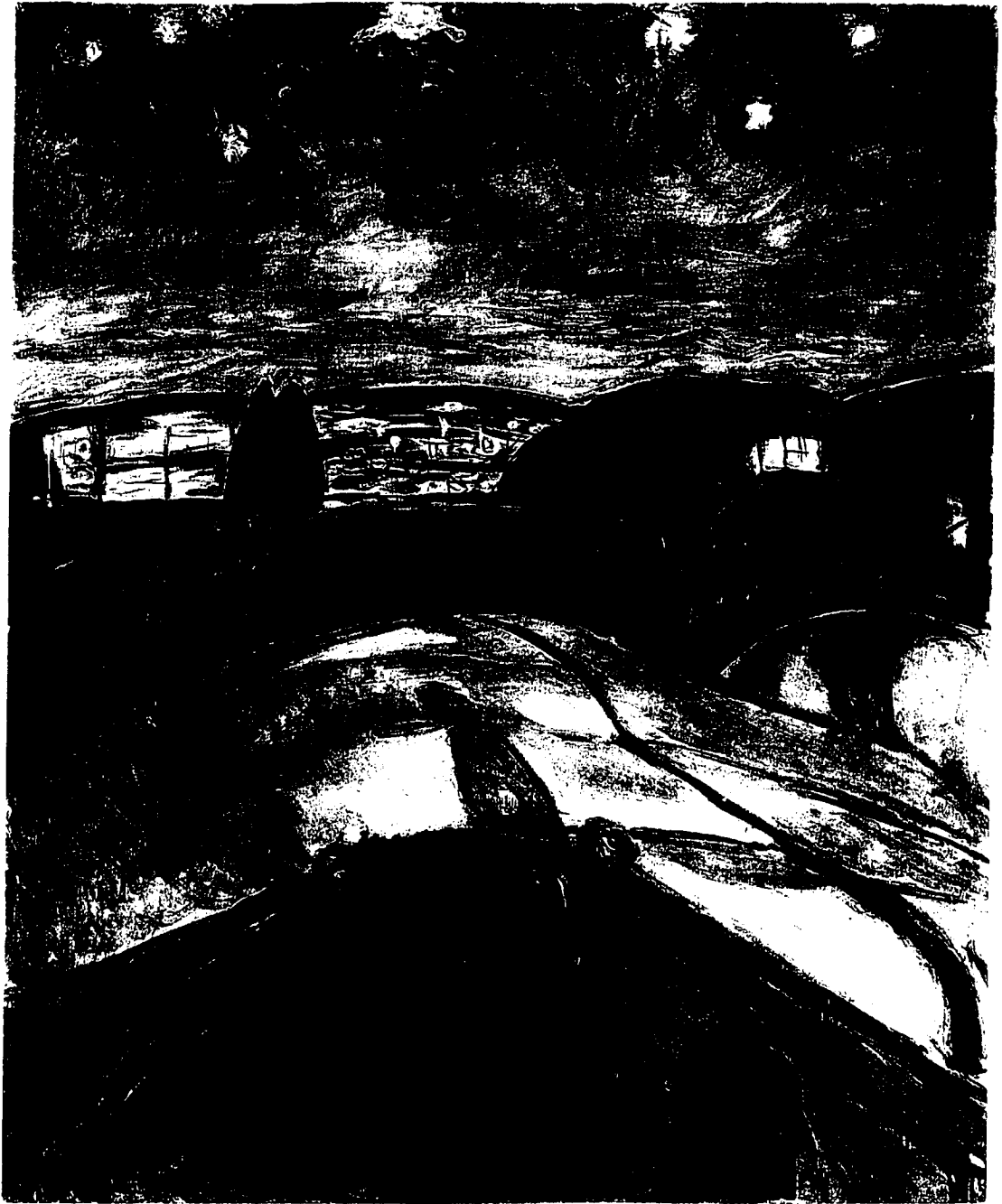


Figure 37. Edvard Munch. *Starry Night*, 1922-1924, oil on canvas. 47 ½ x 39 3/8 inches, Munch-Museet, Oslo.



Figure 38. Edvard Munch. *Starry Night*, 1923-1924, oil on canvas, 121 x 100 cm.. Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger.



Figure 39. Frederick H. Varley. *Moonlight after Rain*, 1947, oil on canvas, 61.2 x 71.1 cm., Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.