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"After Rain" Again
P. K. Page and the Labour of Others

> I simply don't want to work for a living. I'd like to sit on a cushion and write a fine poem.
> —P. K. Page, qtd. in Sandra Djwa's *Journey with No Maps*

In 1971, A. J. M. Smith could begin an essay on P. K. Page's poetry by lamenting the lack of critical attention given to her work (17). Today, the situation is quite altered, and the critic who wishes to engage with Page's writing finds him or herself dealing with a highly mediated object; few Canadian writers (and even fewer poets) have received the kind of sustained, intense, and polyvalent study that Page has. In her introduction to a 2014 issue of *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* dedicated to Page's work, Emily Ballantyne acknowledges the somewhat crowded field of Page scholarship by noting that Page "is one of the most studied poets of her generation"; indeed, the volume she is introducing takes its place beside the "hundreds of scholarly essays, [and] several special issues and collections" already published (5).

No doubt there are multiple factors fuelling all this industry—including the fact that Page was a very fine poet whose compositions continue to reward careful attention. But we must also recognize that if Page has emerged in the last few decades as one of the most discussed and revered of Canada's modernist poets, it is partly because her work lends itself to what has been established as an essential paradigm in Canadian modernist criticism. I refer to the oft-repeated claim that an inclination towards subjective, personalist self-disclosure and prohibitions against the same emanating from the quadrants of international modernism (presided over by the likes of Eliot and Pound) produced a tension that is in some sense constitutive of the Canadian poetry of the 1940s and 1950s that we call modernist. A dominant narrative has consequently developed around Page's work that derives its explanatory power from this basic opposition: "Critical consensus

supports the identification of two opposing styles in Page's early work, contrasting the objective portrait poems with those relating to more personal themes" (Swann 181). In 1971, Smith had wondered whether "the effort to discriminate between the subjective and objective elements in her work . . . has been thought by the critics too unprofitable or found too fatiguing" (17). Ironically, it is precisely a perceived tension between subjective and objective "elements" in Page's work—whether read diachronically across her career or synchronically within specific works—that has proved infinitely "profitable" to Page's critics.[1] This view is now so established that it conditions nearly every reading of the poet's work regardless of the more local concerns and methodologies of particular critics—whether these are biographical (Djwa, Pollock, Sullivan), feminist (Killian, Rackham Hall, Swann), thematic (Jamieson), literary-historical (Essert, Hickman), ecocritical (Relke), or materialist (Irvine).

The *locus classicus* of this now institutionalized narrative of personalism and impersonalism in conflict is surely Brian Trehearne's long chapter on Page in *The Montreal Forties* (1999). Arguing that "a constitutive irony for most poets of the period lay between their innate and historical urges to self-affirmation and self-expression, and their stylistic compulsion to modernist self-erasure" (45), Trehearne depicts Page as a poet whose eventual transition "away from impersonal poetics" demanded first a complete poetic breakdown and a "prolonged period of silence" before she could reinvent herself as a more open, accommodating, and "sympath[etic]" poet (100). "[T]he Page who resurfaced in the mid-1960s," following a ten-year "silence" in which she turned to painting rather than poetry for expression, "was a stylistically different poet" (45), writes Trehearne, for whom the change indicates a dialectical resolution of the tensions that had previously defined her work. This story of crisis, breakdown, and eventual transformation furnishes for Page criticism an attractive resolutionary narrative of personal transformation and of obstacles overcome through struggle, the seeming credibility and coherence of which, in turn, validates the original terms of the inquiry—that is to say, modernism and its "constitutive ironies" and oppositions: objectivity vs. subjectivity, personalism vs. impersonalism, aesthetic distance vs. sympathy, and so on.

It's not a story I like very much. For one thing, it obscures contradictions both internal and external to Page's poetry that she could never have hoped to overcome, least of all in individualist terms; for another, it obscures *consistencies* that run throughout her work, across the impersonalist

and personalist divide that is meant to separate her early work from that following her middle silence. Finally, it validates a narrative of modernism that I take to be especially destructive to a fuller understanding of Page's poetic project and its politics—for which the question of style is somewhat (though not entirely) beside the point. In what follows, I attempt to tell a different story—a story about the relationship between poetry and labour—that should cast Page's work in a new light while simultaneously casting some doubt on the utility of literary modernism as an explanatory framework *tout court*.

The following analysis is deeply influenced by the political and aesthetic philosophy of Jacques Rancière. For Rancière any discussion about the meaning of particular art works or kinds of art works must begin by inquiring into the conditions that enable that work or those works to announce themselves to us *as art* in the first place. As he puts it in an interview with Gabriel Rockhill, "The visibility of a form of expression as an artistic form depends on a historically constituted regime of perception and intelligibility" (*Politics* 50). The world is full of objects and products, but only some of those appear to us as *artistic* objects and thereby invite the special kind of attention we reserve for them. Insofar as literary-critical practice is predicated on a sense of the art object's 'special' or 'exceptional' status among human productions, it relies on and manifests the complex network of ideas, customs, and feelings that produce art as a distinct category of experience and knowledge. Rancière's name for the currently dominant "regime" in accordance with which certain kinds of objects become visible and available to experience as art is the "aesthetic." He reads the aesthetic regime as a historically specific configuration of the sensible world, one that differs from previous modes by identifying art, not according to the properties of its objects or rules governing their production, but by virtue of its bearing witness to the existence of a separate "realm" of sensations and experiences that are to be enjoyed *in their difference* from the sensations and experiences of the workaday world. The aesthetic, in other words, delineates a heteronomous and supplementary world—a place of imagination, a "free" space—and, as such, divides up the social world in a particular way.

We tend to take an idea of the aesthetic for granted, but it is a historically determined concept. Unavailable to thought before the eighteenth century, the aesthetic presented itself and continues (under some duress) to present itself as a distinct "sensorium," an autonomous "region of being" (Rancière, *Politics* 27).[2] It can therefore be understood as another world within the

world, one which has the capacity to reveal that world in its difference to itself, hence the paradoxical politics of the aesthetic that simultaneously asserts its independence from the rules and hierarchies and norms of the common world while proposing somehow to affect or alter those structures from its position outside them. As Rancière puts it, the aesthetic is precisely that sensory experience that "holds the promise of both a new world of Art *and* a new life for individuals and the community" (*Dissensus* 115; emphasis mine). Every possible definition of the aesthetic—including even that anti-aesthetic which rejects the possibility of a distinct sensorium by declaring the end of all outsides (usually because global capitalism has colonized every sphere of human activity)—arises within the context of this originary paradox. What Rancière calls the aesthetic regime therefore simultaneously enfolds and cuts across more specific periodizations including Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism, which name the general patterns that negotiations of the aesthetic paradox have taken but do not constitute in themselves fundamental departures from the underlying logic of the regime itself.

To the extent that the preceding is true—and I see no reason why we shouldn't at least entertain the possibility that the notion of literary modernism "prevent[s] a clear understanding of the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience" (Rancière, *Politics* 26)—then we are invited to see how Page's literary crisis speaks within and to a particular regime of art, an aesthetic *ideology*, the logic of which precedes and exceeds both personal style and modernist critical tropes. At the same time, the aesthetic regime names a kind of experience (the feeling I am feeling when I am feeling "this is how art makes me feel") that can only take place in specific, local encounters with particular works. As Rancière puts it, "Art's difference only exists insofar as it is constructed case by case, step by step, in the singular strategies of artists" (*Dissensus* 179). What interests me here is how, exactly, Page conceives of the aesthetic experience and the "strategies" she adopts in order to realize or validate that experience in words.

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"After Rain," as Laura Killian wrote in 1996, is "a poem universally recognized by her critics as a pivotal Page poem" (97). As one of the last poems Page wrote before her publication hiatus, "After Rain" figures prominently in discussions of her work as the embodiment of the "crisis of subjectivity" (Irvine, "The Two Giovannis" 35) or "creative impasse"

(Rackham Hall 39 n10) that would eventually produce a radically different poet—one, the drift would have it, more worthy of our approbation. First published in *Poetry* in 1956, the poem is set in the garden of the Canadian embassy in Australia where Page, wife of the High Commissioner, lived between 1953 and 1956. After a night of rain, the embassy garden has been attacked by slugs and snails that have eaten up most of the plants. The poem has two human figures: Page, the poet, and Giovanni, the embassy's gardener. Page self-consciously, and the poem self-reflexively, stages a contrast between the poet's imaginative embroidery, which transforms the ruined garden into a *locus amoenus* of radiant beauty, and the gardener's deep sense of disappointment and dismay.

> The snails have made a garden of green lace:
> broderie anglaise from the cabbages,
> Chantilly from the choux-fleurs, tiny veils—
> I see already that I lift the blind
> upon a woman's wardrobe of the mind.

The poem continues:

> I suffer shame in all these images.
> The garden is primeval, Giovanni
> in soggy denim squelches by my hub
> over his ruin
> shakes a doleful head.
> But he so beautiful and diademmed,
> his long Italian hands so wrung with rain
> I find his ache exists beyond my rim
> and almost weep to see a broken man
> made subject to my whim. (*Cry Ararat!* 18)

Though ashamed of having transformed Giovanni's loss into her poetic gain, the speaker nevertheless remains unable to break from her aestheticizing gaze, such that the gardener's "ache," though acknowledged, remains "beyond [her] rim."

Critics have been especially interested in Page's use of the first person and her confession-like admonishment of the "female whimsy" that leads her to entertain the images that block sympathetic understanding.[3] Indeed, by juxtaposing the metaphorical wit of the first few stanzas (whose rhymes are strongly reminiscent of Marvell's "The Garden") with the "squelch[y]" reality of Giovanni's sorrowful pragmatism, "After Rain" acknowledges a conflict that had remained unresolved in the whole of her work up to and including itself. I agree with most critics that the poem speaks to a crisis, but I read

that crisis as arising from an attempt to render, as art and in art, activities and objects upon the very exclusion of which the aesthetic regime has historically depended: namely, non-creative labour and its material products.

On this count, the publication history of the poem is interesting. The version that appeared in *Poetry* in 1956 ends with an apostrophe to the garden's birds on Giovanni's behalf:

> O choir him birds, and let him come to rest
> within this beauty as one rests in love,
> till pears upon the bough
> encrusted with
> small snails as pale as pearls
> hang golden in
> a heart that knows tears are the half of love. (*Poetry* 101)

Here, the best the poet can do is invite Giovanni to see things her way and to transpose himself into her world, to join her "within this beauty." Page later restored a dropped final stanza (which was part of the original composition but which she was convinced to suppress for *Poetry* on the advice of her friend Floris McLaren who thought it too hokey[4]) for the poem's republication in *Cry Ararat!* (1967). In that version, the presumption of the (now) penultimate stanza is counterbalanced by an admission of her own shortcomings and a desire for change:

> And choir me too to keep my heart a size
> larger than seeing, unseduced by each
> bright glimpse of beauty striking like a bell,
> so that the whole may toll,
> its meaning shine
> clear of the myriad images that still—
> do what I will—encumber its pure line. (*Cry Ararat!* 19)

Dean Irvine argues that the repatriated final stanza constitutes an "attempt at a closing rapprochement between her poet-persona's impersonalist poetics and Giovanni's sentimentality, a "whole" in which she contemplates the integration of the sentimental and the aesthetic, the personal and the impersonal, in the image of her "heart a size / larger than seeing" ("Two Giovannis" 36-37). Likewise, Killian argues that "After Rain," by giving voice to "the poet's subjectivity," registers "a very serious critique of modernism's anti-sentimental and anti-subjective stance" (98) that constitutes a "primary step" towards "a new wholeness of vision" (100). More recently, Michele Rackham Hall has suggested that the poem stages a conflict between geometric modernism (which she aligns with "impersonality")

and "biomorphic modernism" (which she aligns with "personality" and subjectivism) and attempts to reconcile these "two modernist aesthetics" (37)—a reconciliation Rackham Hall argues Page eventually achieves in her poetry after a foray into visual art, where she could "grapple with the modernist dichotomy more directly" (37).

I choose these examples because they are cogently and convincingly argued, but also because they echo or anticipate Trehearne's authoritative reading of the poem's final stanza, which he likewise presents as an earnest, but consciously unsuccessful, attempt to unify contraries, the full significance of which, he argues, would only become clear after her "prolonged middle silence" (41) and her subsequent achievement of a more inclusive and "coherent" poetics of "whole[ness]" (77). Rather than read "After Rain" through a set of oppositions supplied by Modernist theory or Page's own personal testimony, however, I want to consider how the poem maps the terrain of poetry's place in the world. How does it attach its subjects and objects to concepts that, in the words of Rancière, "partition the sensible" (*Dissensus* 36) world and coordinate affect with understanding?

To begin answering this question, I would point out that Trehearne's reading basically neglects Giovanni's subordinate status (he is not quite Page's employee, as he works for the embassy, but she is the High Commissioner's wife and a figure of authority at the embassy, especially with respect to household management) and, more crucially, downplays the status of the garden's fruits and vegetables (pears, cabbages, cauliflowers) as *produce*, the objects of his labour. Trehearne moralizes Page's failure to fully sympathize with Giovanni by noting that the poem's oppositions "divide two people whose mutually disappointed labour in the garden might be uniting them" (44). But that's not right. The labour never was "mutual," nor is Page's speaker disappointed. *Giovanni* is disappointed because his labour has been undone and it will be up to him, not Page, to rectify the situation as best as possible. As the speaker herself makes clear, the wrecked garden is "*his* ruin" (18; emphasis mine). The speaker, though guiltily cognizant of Giovanni's pain, and wishing she might reconfigure her poetic perspective so as to better incorporate his experience, never does attempt to read the garden as the site of *labour*, mutual or otherwise.

Like most of Page's critics, Trehearne is no less preoccupied than Page herself with the work of the poet's imagination and therefore takes the aesthetic realm, that "sensible element torn from the sensible" (Rancière, *Dissensus* 173) as a given. But if we recognize the garden as a site of both this

poetic work *and* the gardener's more material labour, the lines of the conflict are redrawn: for at issue in the poem is not only, perhaps not even, whether a depersonalized poetics must necessarily eliminate the basis upon which to make sense of and render Giovanni's pain, but whether the plants and trees could ever be treated simultaneously as both objects of labour and as objects of poetry. Or, in what amounts to the same thing, the poem questions whether the poet and the labourer can ever occupy the same ground.[5]

To get at this question, we need to recognize in "After Rain," and in Page's work more generally, the workings of a cultural logic that enables the effects and affects through which art manifests itself as a recognizable domain of experience and meaning and which subtend a work's politics *prior* to any subsequent ideological expression on its part. The objects of art, notes Rancière, are defined by their belonging to a "specific sensory experience" (*Dissensus* 179). The essence of the aesthetic

> lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible. I call "distribution of the sensible" a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed. The partition of the sensible is the dividing-up of the world (*de monde*) and of people (*du monde*) . . . . A partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared common (*un commun partagé*) and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined in sensory experience. (*Dissensus* 36)

In speaking of a "partition" of "the sensible," then, Rancière refers simultaneously to a division of occupations within social life, an affixing of particular kinds of experiences to particular times and situations, and the process by which occupations, situations, and experiences are coordinated with organizing concepts that give them their "sense" in its dual aspect as a *felt* notion.

When we recognize that it is the implicit function of every work of art—to the extent its creator wants it to be apprehended *as such*—to validate itself *as art* by effecting a "partition of the sensible" whereby it establishes its proper domain and signals the appropriate "mode of perception" for its correct use and enjoyment, then we are in position to identify a more pressing tension at the heart of "After Rain." While Page was capable both before and after "After Rain" of writing what we might call subjective poetry, she was never capable, and perhaps never wished to be capable, of reconciling the world of labour with the world of art precisely because her aesthetic was constituted by way of its exclusion of and "difference" from labour and labourers. In other words, the boundary where labour and poetry meet but do not mix is precisely the "rim" that draws the charmed circle enclosing the aesthetic

experience and defining the realm of the poet. "After Rain" merely reaffirms the incommensurability of these two spheres of knowledge and experience; it is a meditation, admittedly a heartfelt and self-recriminating one, upon "art's difference." As such, it enforces the impossibility of mixture, overlap, or interpenetration of labour and art, the very hygiene upon which the aesthetic regime depends.

Page, we all know, was obsessively attached to an idea of the aesthetic understood as an autonomous world of total coherence and immanent meaning, a world she terms variously as "another realm," "another world," a "higher order," a "luminous circle" ("Traveller" 35-40), an "other world" (*Planet* 59), a "hidden room" (*Planet* 51), a "secret place" (*Planet* 51), "another space," (*Planet* 96), "another dimension" (*Planet* 100), a "never nether land," (*Planet* 161), a "higher realm," "another order" ("Writer's Life" 18, 22), a "dreaming world" ("Questions" 19). In "Dot," she calls upon the merest artistic gesture, a point on a page, to

> Hurry me to spaces where
> my Father's house has many dimensions.
> Tissue of tesseract.
> A sphered sphere. (*Evening* 90)

These examples are taken from Page's poems and interviews across a wide chronological range. Her delineation of the artistic experience as belonging to "another" territory, space, realm, or zone that transcends the ordinary world and its obligations and constraints is remarkably consistent. In her versified "Address at Simon Fraser" (1991), she locates this "sensorium" somewhere

> beyond materiality,
> beyond the buy-and-sell, beyond the want
> embedded in us . . . . (*Planet* 86)

Art matters, she insists, because to be granted access to this place "beyond" is to be made "whole again" (*Planet* 86). Thus, by asserting "wholeness" as the supreme value for Page's poetics, Trehearne and other critics merely redraw the uncrossable line between art and life, poetry and praxis, that Page's work had endeavoured to inscribe "case by case, step by step" throughout her long career. I do not wish to be misunderstood: I am not saying that "After Rain" attempts to invalidate Giovanni's experience. On the contrary, I am merely suggesting that the poem, being the kind of poem it is, jettisons that experience to the realm of what Peter Bürger calls "the praxis of life" (49), with which the poem's own work can never quite coincide. This is not a

question of "style," nor even a question of modernist form, but a question that concerns the very category of "art" as such.

Anticipating Rancière's correlation between the development of capitalism and the emergence of art as the object of an autonomous sensory experience under the "aesthetic regime," Bürger explains the aesthetic "realm" in terms of the division of labour which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century capitalism established as paradigmatic:

> If experience is defined as a bundle of perceptions and reflections that have been worked through, it becomes possible to characterize the effect of the crystallization of subsystems resulting from the progressing division of labor as a shrinking of experience. Such shrinkage does not mean that the subject who has now become specialist in a subsystem no longer perceives or reflects. In the sense proposed here, the concept means that "experiences" the specialist has in *his partial sphere* can no longer be translated back into the praxis of life. . . .The aesthetic experience as a specific experience . . . would in its pure form be the mode in which the shrinkage of experience as defined above expresses itself in the sphere of art. Differently formulated: aesthetic experience is the positive side of that process by which the social subsystem "art" defines itself as a distinct sphere. Its negative side is the artist's loss of any social function. (33; emphasis mine)

Here, we have a very useful framework for understanding the crisis in "After Rain" in historical terms: what the poem expresses is precisely the shrinkage and untranslatability of experience between "partial spheres" of specialization. It was the emergence of a new aesthetic logic in the eighteenth century, first described by the likes of Kant and Schiller, and later popularized by German, French, and English Romantic writers, that replaced an idea of the artist as maker with an idea of the artist as a kind of affective specialist—someone who could see and feel the world in an alternative way: hence the emergence of play, the imagination, freedom, disinterestedness, and purity in the dominant discourse surrounding artistic production and enjoyment. It was at this moment, a moment that coincided with the establishment of wage labour and the capitalist division of labour as the Western norm, that it became possible to speak of a "realm" of art. By becoming a "specialist," the artist (whether poet, painter, dramatist, or composer) gains access to this realm, but at the cost of forfeiting art's continuity with the common world.

Reframing the conversation around "After Rain" along these lines tends to confirm Wendy Roy's sense that the poem not only grapples with a limitation on the poet's capacity to actively sympathize with others but to deliberately "express socio-political concerns" (61). Even so, Bürger's argument that the

artist-cum-specialist "los[es] any social function" (33) needs to be qualified. While it may be true that the artist who functions in accordance with the logic dictated by the "aesthetic regime" withholds his experience from the "praxis of life"—or rather, posits the experience of art in terms of its non-identity with the time and space of ordinary living—it is also true that art's value has been seen to reside in that very condition of apartness. As Rancière explains, art "in its very isolation" may conceive of itself as "the guardian of the promise of emancipation" (140).

With respect to Page, who in a 1979 interview tells Jon Pearce that her art is "a memory of Eden, of heaven" (37), we need to recognize the utopian dimension of her practice. It would be along these lines that Northrop Frye, modern criticism's most articulate Romantic—and a powerful influence on both writers and critics in Canada—justified the political value of an otherwise disinterested art.[6] To that extent, Page's poetry manifests a "dissensual" element in the prevailing distribution of the sensible, a splitting off of the world against itself, the assertion of an irreconcilable duality where what Rancière calls the "order of the police" would proclaim only unity. To experience art as value, as Page reminded the graduates to whom her "Address at Simon Fraser" was directed, is to entertain the possibility of a different world, a genuinely real world because it can be experienced, whose logic is not determined by instrumentality and the pursuit of financial gain. Fundamentally free, this other world, by its very nature, embodies the object of an emancipatory desire.

But crucially, this unalienated space of revelation is not *entirely* free, insofar as it remains a contingent one: *internally* undivided, it nevertheless requires a fallen and compromised and unfree *external* world against which to define itself. For Page, this world is supplied, ideally and practically, by the realm of work and labour. (To the extent that the aesthetic can be imagined as a reaction-formation to hegemonic capitalism, this is not at all surprising.) Tainted by money, instrumentalist reason, materialism, social inequality, contractual obligation, self-interest, and, above all, *lack*, the world of work names the "sensorium" from which the aesthetic offers an escape. This assumption underlies Page's poems about female clerical labour written in the 1940s whose critique of the alienating effects of office work depends on a contrast between the freedom of the aesthetic and the constraints of the work day. Recalling Frye's view of the aesthetic as the "power of constructing possible models of human experience" via an imaginative transcendence of worldly necessity (*Educated* 5), Page recurrently depicts her workers as bereft of this faculty:

> some—if you speak to them of a different world,
> a future more like life—become sharp,
> give you their whittled face
> and turn away like offended starlings from a wind. ("Offices" 6)

Killian notes the dismissive treatment of workers in these poems and, sensing the connection between Giovanni and these earlier figures, wonders whether "After Rain" constitutes "an implicit acknowledgment of their failure, now an embarrassment?" (98).

Undoubtedly, Giovanni's presence is unsettling, and the poet's "shame" at her inability to see him as anything other than "beautiful and diademmed" (19) despite his pain is what prompts her double apostrophe to the birds that each may be "choired" into some other reality where they are less divided. The poet's shame here recalls the "guilt" expressed in another Page poem from the 1950s, "Photos of a Salt Mine," which appears to anticipate, in condensed form, the tensions of "After Rain."

> So all the photographs like children's wishes
> are filled with caves or winter,
> innocence
> has acted as a filter,
> selected only beauty from the mine.
> Except in the last picture,
> it is shot
> from an acute high angle. In a pit
> figures the size of pins are strangely lit
> and might be dancing but you know they're not.
> Like Dante's vision of the nether hell
> men struggle with the bright cold fires of salt,
> locked in the black inferno of the rock:
> the filter here, not innocence but guilt. (*Poems* 83)

We might think of the "filters" here, the filter of "innocence" and the filter of "guilt," as indices of aesthetical perception in which the same thing is made to mean differently by way of its translation into art. (Or, we could say, by way of its transposition from one sensorium into another.) As in "After Rain," the admission of guilt relates to the poet's ability to see beauty in what others actively engaged in the struggle to make a living experience as pain and brutality. Despite the poet's self-recriminations, though, both poems exploit the labour of others as part of their attempt to expose the logic of a liberating aesthetic. The inevitable result of this operation is that labour and its material relations must be figured as always and essentially alienated; labour is, for Page, art's absolute "Other," its "outside" that marks its limits and reveals its contours.

In one of the few recent essays on Page's work that does not reproduce the dominant logic of the criticism I describe above, Wanda Campbell discusses continuities between Page's poetics and those of nineteenth-century poet Isabella Valancy Crawford. Focusing primarily on their shared notion of a "hidden room" as locus of the (female) poet's imagination, Campbell stresses the contrast between this space and the demands of household labour. Quoting Crawford, she writes: "Juxtaposed with this private shrine where human need is brought to divine attention is the 'busy, busy cell / where I toil at the work I have to do.'" Page's own celebration of "the presence and power of the hidden room," Campbell argues, must likewise be seen in terms of its implicit and explicit opposition to "the work one [has] to do." This opposition between freedom and constraint, immanence and alienation, "play" and "work," informs and sustains all her poetry.

Whatever problems one might have with this schema, it only becomes a problem for Page when she attempts to write sympathetically about the labour of others, as she does in "After Rain," "Photos of a Salt Mine," and her dozen or so poems about office work. It poses a problem because in these poems Page runs up against the hygiene of her own aesthetic that precludes her (or her poem) from being in two places at once. Having been granted access to the aesthetic realm, Page (or her poem) must always look at the labourer from the other side of an invisible barrier, as it were. It is not quite a question of sympathy (for Page always feels sorry for the worker) but of the possibility of *cohabitation* with the worker, of sharing with him or her a common world. This prohibition has two main effects, one visible at the level of content, the other at the level of form. Thematically, worker and poet can never coincide, whatever the artist's political commitments. Page's poems thus verify what William Empson has argued is a "permanent truth about the aesthetic situation," namely that the "artist" can never "be at one with the worker" inasmuch as she is "never at one with any public" (14). While the restored final stanza of "After Rain" regrets this impasse on the part of the artist, the penultimate stanza more accurately expresses the general tendency in Page's poetry, which is to pity the worker who has been blocked from or denied access to the higher realm of art. If help exists for Giovanni in "After Rain," it is only to the extent that he can—through some leap of the imagination precipitated by the chirping birds—"come to rest" in this heterogeneous experience of "beauty" (19). In crossing over, in translating himself, however, he would cease to be a worker, and become an artist. There is in that word "rest," after all, more than a hint of a respite from

the *travails* of physical labour. Emancipatory change is imagined, but not within or as a consequence of "the praxis of life," only inside and because of a transcendent artistic experience.

True to the logic of aesthetic regime as described by Rancière, art here is not understood as a practice, as something one *does*, but as a way of seeing and being, an affective (corporeal, emotional, intellectual) *capacity to be elsewhere*. "Beyond materiality," art, for Page, is the experience, the perspective, the emplacement but *not* the production. "I'm never terribly interested in the thing when it's finished," she says in an interview with Lucy Bashford and Jay Ruzesky, "[t]he book is the by-product, the evidence of the fact that a lot of stuff went on" (114). Work, all about doing, is consequently denied its historicity as a realm of praxis or working through: it effects no translation. At the level of form and technique, then, poetic composition—the *doing* of writing—must likewise assert itself as non-work, erasing its possible commonalities with other kinds of labour. This is the second effect of art's "difference." In describing the differences between visual art (to which she turned after "After Rain") and poetic composition (to which she returned after a hiatus and maintained alongside a visual art practice), Page declares: "[I]n all essential particulars writing and painting are interchangeable" ("Traveller" 40); they are equally "roads" to the healing "silence" of "another world" (40), "some absolute elsewhere" (40). Thus, the material conditions of artistic production—the means—are downplayed in favour of the ends: that is to say, access to an alternative dimension of affect and understanding. The poem, as textual body or mechanical inscription, is dematerialized in a process of sublimation.

At this juncture, it may be worth pointing out that the avant-garde attack on the aesthetic regime invariably involved a foregrounding of the *medium* of expression. For socialist writers in particular, as Walter Benjamin's criticism repeatedly asserts, the need to revolutionize artistic means and techniques so as to "put an improved apparatus at their disposal" (233) was strongly felt. For a writer who had, at one time, imagined herself to be working towards socialist goals, the contradictions are readily apparent. There is indeed a crisis at the heart of "After Rain," but it is not a crisis of subjectivity: it is the strain of an entire artistic *institution* attempting to reach beyond its logical limit, rendered in personal terms. If this problem appears less acute following "After Rain," it is not because of an alteration in this concept, but simply because, barring a handful of exceptions, Page effectively ceased to write about her own relation to work and workers.[7]

To return to Killian's question as to whether "After Rain" signals a desire to redress the "failure" of her earlier work poetry, I would answer "yes, it does." But not by opening a way, at that time or after her poetic silence, to a rapprochement between art and labour or between the poet and the labourer. Not at all. "After Rain" recognizes a conflict between art and the "praxis of life," but it also accepts it as unresolvable within the logic of an aesthetic regime from which Page was not prepared to break. Far from anticipating an aesthetic departure, "After Rain" announces Page's retreat from art's open exposure to its destabilizing Other and a *fuller* commitment to an idea of artistic experience as occupying a space somewhere beside, above, beyond, behind—but never *in* or *with*—the ordinary world defined by labour and lack. As Laura Cameron argues in her article "P. K. Page's Poetic Silence," the poet who emerged after her poetic hiatus no longer struggled for control in her poems; indeed, she had acquired an "authority" over both her materials and her own sense of vocation by submitting to a "higher organizing principle" (50). *More* romantic, *more* transcendental, *more* mystical—more *purely* aesthetical—this ostensibly new poet had simply withdrawn from her art the disorderly elements that had confounded the poetic ideal that already underpinned both her own thought and dominant literary ideology of her time. She had tidied up her garden and could thus lay claim to the full power and security of the aesthetic regime and its prevailing "distribution of the sensible."

NOTES

1 Douglas Freake's argument that Page's work is structured by a tension between "Romantic" and "Modernist" tendencies such that the projection of a "lonely and lost self, seeking and occasionally finding at-one-ness with the world," is tempered by the Modernist's belief that "self-presentation and exploration" is "the major obstacle to the understanding of social reality" (96-97) represents the basic structure of most approaches to Page's poetry, notwithstanding a variation in terminologies.

2 The uniqueness of the aesthetic regime, argues Rancière, is that it redefined art, which previously had named a given body of practices among other material practices, into a mode of *being* belonging only to art. He writes: "I call this regime *aesthetic* because the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art. [. . .] In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power" (*Politics* 22-23).

3 The phrase is curious enough to elicit commentary in practically every treatment of the poem, but Relke (1994), Killian (1996), Trehearne (1999), Irvine (2004), Swann (2005),

and Rackham Hall (2014) all connect it to a tension between modernist objectivity and subjective self-disclosure.

4 For a fuller discussion of McLaren's influence on the ending of the poem see Irvine's "The Two Giovannis" (35-38).

5 I concede the point made by one of this essay's anonymous reviewers that Page, as ambassador's wife and household manager, is herself engaged in labour on behalf of the Canadian state—and unpaid labour at that. But it is precisely the complete absence of any reference in the poem, explicit or implicit, to this shared status with Giovanni that makes my point that the poem jettisons labour from the imaginative, aesthetic realm. Page registers some of these concerns in her Brazilian and Mexican journals, but there is no strong indication that she herself regarded these as *artistic* productions. To be sure, it is precisely the powerful logic of the aesthetic regime that arguments defending the artistic status of life writing must confront, and do.

6 This principle is so inherent in all of Frye's work it is almost difficult to come up with a definitive statement. But *The Educated Imagination* begins with Frye separating out the work of the imagination from other kinds of work and assigning to the imagination "the power of constructing possible models of human experience" (5). Thus, while non-artistic labour (everything from farming to science to journalism) deals with "reality," art discovers "the real realities" which "are bigger and more intense experiences than anything we can reach—except in our imagination, which is what we're reaching with" (40). The final goal of art, specifically literary art, for Frye, is political insofar as it models and works towards a final dissolution of the barrier between self and world, and between one self and another. It is fundamentally instructional: "Literature is a human apocalypse, man's revelation to man" (44). In this context, it is also worth noting that Frye praised Page's *The Metal and the Flower* (1954) for its aesthetic "pur[ity]" ("Letters" 132).

7 I thank the reviewers who drew my attention to Page's "Macumba: Brazil" and the later "Custodian." It is true that following "After Rain," Page occasionally wrote poems about work. But the minor presence of this theme—accounting for no more than a handful of works in more than five decades of writing—is in sharp contrast to the theme's dominance in her work preceding "After Rain." But even in these later work poems, the same antimonies that structure "After Rain" persist, though in a muted fashion. "Macumba: Brazil" itemizes the various activities undertaken by locals (some of whom, we presume, are working in the Ambassador's residence) as part of the rites of a pagan festival of the Macumba. The list begins with a series of domestic chores such as might be performed in a grand manor, but progressively names activities far less occupational: "they are dancing to the drums / they are bathed in the blood of the rooster" (*Essential* 40). The poem is driven by a tension between the speaker's point of view, which establishes as normative a difference in kind between bodily energy expended in work and bodily energy expended in the pursuit of spiritual excess, and the apparent unrecognizability of that difference for "them." At the same time, it is the very univocality of this "sensorium," this wholeness, that lends to their praxis something of a poetical quality. And so it may be "the[y]," and not she, who embody poetry while the poet herself, as Page suggested in a letter to Sigrid Renaux, "watched from the sidelines" (qtd. in Chávez 55). The poem remains suspended upon these two possible interpretations, but in either case throws up a barrier between poetry and labour that the poet cannot cross. In "Custodian" Page uses the language of a caretaker's labour to discuss her own ministrations to her aging body, which she "dust[s]," "wash[es]," "guard[s]," "rub[s]," and so on (*Essential* 25). I think the poem represents a

remarkable turn away from what Frank Davey saw in her earlier work as a "severe distrust of the physical universe," leading him to brand her an "anti-life" poet (232). It *is* interesting to see her write explicitly about her corporeal self via a vocabulary of work; but I would point out that the poem does not attempt to represent the work of *others*. Nor does the poem draw attention to its own material processes, the *work* of writing, in any direct way. Finally, I take the fourth stanza, which is placed centrally in the poem, as more crucial to its overall point than the janitor conceit: "It is but matter / and it matters not / one whit or tittle / if I wear it out."

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