

“Now That I Am Dead” P.K. Page and the Self-Elegy¹

Over the years, P.K. Page’s poetry has reflected the varied experiences of her life. Not surprisingly, since entering old age, she has written an increasing number of poems in which she anticipates death and looks back over her long and distinguished career. By her own admission, there is “a lot about death” in her 1981 collection *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* (Page, “Conversation” 75). Published in the year Page turned sixty-five, the collection contains elegies for friends, family, and fellow writers, as well as poems in which she meditates on her own mortality. This elegiac strain continues in *Hologram* (1994), a collection of *glosas* each incorporating the work of a different poet. To Page it seems appropriate that “towards the end of [her] life” she should use the *glosa* form as a way of looking back and “paying homage to those poets whose work [she] fell in love with in [her] formative years” (*Hologram* 9-10). *The Hidden Room*, a two-volume edition of Page’s collected poems, appeared in 1997. Collected Poems may be viewed as “the modern equivalent of the epic,” the form which traditionally closes the poet’s career (Lipking 70). Page, of course, is still writing, but *The Hidden Room* is suggestively divided into sections whose titles mark the stages of a poet’s inner life, from “To Begin Before I Was Born” to “Now That I Am Dead.” This format characterises the collection as a comprehensive review of a lifetime of writing, ending with a look toward death and beyond.

Self-elegies are individual poems in which Page anticipates her own death, and this imaginative exercise may or may not be accompanied by a celebration of her life’s accomplishment. The term “self-elegy” has been applied by Jahan Ramazani to designate “the genre of the self-standing

meditation on the author's mortality" (*Poetry of Mourning* 120).² The term is, he suggests, to some extent redundant, since "all elegists, like Milton, Gray, and Shelley 'turn' to lament their own destined urns" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 136). The self-elegy derives in part from the reflexive quality that is built into the psychological underpinnings of elegy in the form of the potentially self-destructive melancholic desire on the part of the mourner for identification with the dead (Freud 246). In addition to its affinity with the elegy proper, the self-elegy also draws upon the medieval religious tradition of the *ars moriendi* and its later literary manifestations such as Thomas Nashe's refrain "I am sick, I must die" ("A Litany in Time of Plague" 1592).³ The self-elegiac tradition includes the self-epitaphic poems of Raleigh, Swift, and Coleridge. Keats, Dickinson, and Christina Rossetti, imagining their own deaths, bequeath the self-elegy to the twentieth century where it thrives in the hands of Yeats and Stevens, and is carried on by Auden, Plath, Larkin, and many others.⁴ The flourishing of the self-elegy throughout this century has been attributed partly to the decline of traditional mourning rituals in the face of "technologies of war, medicine, and information which increasingly dehumanize death" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 136). In a contemporary North American society in which poets are economically marginalized, the elderly are hidden away in old-age homes, and death is regarded as something of a taboo subject, the self-elegy presents an opportunity to invest one's death with a sense of occasion, and to assess the achievement of a life.

Chief among self-elegiac conventions is the attempt to defeat death by rehearsing it (Ramazani, *Yeats* 167). The self-elegist may imagine his own death in ways that allow him to demonstrate his ascendancy over it and master his fears, but he must also come to terms with death's ultimate authority. This ambivalence produces a vacillation between authorial confidence and questioning that is characteristic of the form, as the self-elegist simultaneously confronts and represses the terror, isolation, and finality of death (Ramazani, *Yeats* 151-52). This paper will examine P.K. Page's unique handling of the form as she extends the tradition of the contemporary self-elegy. She is well aware that in trying to imagine and describe the otherness of death, she can only fall back on familiar narratives. Her self-elegies reproduce the kinds of consoling stories that we tell ourselves and each other in order to render death less frightening, but she also exposes the inadequacy of such stories by acknowledging the fears that they are designed to suppress. Page conveys this ambivalence through a graceful blend of whimsy and gravity. She often cultivates an appearance of acceptance in her

poetic confrontations with death, but my readings will emphasize the undercurrents of resistance that stir beneath this placid surface.

Moving on to poems in which Page's anticipation of death is accompanied by a review of her past work, I will explore the extent to which she views her art as a consolation in the face of old age, and a potential antidote to death. Page does not seek immortality by looking to her poems as unchanging artifacts, so much as seek self-renewal through revising her poetic vision. This type of self-elegy focuses on the successive stages of a writer's career. By imagining an act of identification between the self and the work, the poet presents her career as a process of continual self-improvement, "an evolution that defends the poet against merely withering into old age" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 137). In order to demonstrate Page's approach to this type of self-elegy, I will focus on an especially crucial period of transition in Page's career. Several critics have examined a palpable change that occurred in Page's aesthetic during the mid-1950s.⁵ At this time, she turned away from the kind of social protest poetry with which she began her career, in order to explore more introspective themes. This change of emphasis was accompanied by the introduction of a new subjectivity into her work, in place of the modernist aesthetic of impersonality to which she had previously adhered. I am less concerned with the ways in which Page accomplishes this transition than with the ways in which she represents it as self-elegiac. Several poems written during this period, while they are not ostensibly about death, depict this remaking of the poetic vision as a remaking of the self. The new and improved vision emerges from the death of the old and is substituted for the poet's mortal body. This pattern of self-renewal has been recognized and interpreted in terms of Page's interest in the Sufi notion of life as a series of ascending stages, a "movement to a golden world and beyond" (Page, "Biographical Interview" 35).⁶ By considering Page as a self-elegist, I aim to extend this approach to Page's work, and reveal the literary traditions that inform her representations of her poetic development.

Page explains her deepening preoccupation with the subject of death by commenting that "as one gets closer to death it is less inimical" (Page, "Conversation" 75). The conflict implicit in the apparent serenity of this statement (death is still inimical; it is just less so than before) is characteristic of many of Page's self-elegies. Faced with death, she often appears to advocate an attitude of calm optimism that she ultimately

exposes as either unattainable or too easy, somehow incomplete. She considers the various fictions through which we try to imagine a death that is acceptable, or at least less inimical, to us; she seeks refuge in them herself, but not without reminding us of all that they fail to encompass.

In "Voyager," she takes the memory of her father's death as an opportunity to rehearse her own:

At the age at which he died and within
days of that date
I lie outstretched
the robins listening on the grass (*The Hidden Room* 1: 183)⁷

Assuming the posture of a corpse, suggesting decomposition with the image of the robins listening for the worms that move beneath the grass, she seems willing to surrender herself to death's finality. The setting is a pleasant, if mildly surreal, garden with a "cerise rhododendron levitating" in the distance, and Page acts out a death as comfortable and unceremonious as a nap on a summer afternoon. At the same time, however, she resists the idea by locating herself in the present tense: her father has "died" and her own life may be "half over—*spent*," but she is still alive and firmly in control of her apparent surrender. The rest of the poem describes a recurring dream in which the dead father returns to his family as if from "some long intergalactic voyage," counteracting Page's initial acceptance of death and its consequences. Indeed, it becomes clear that her opening rehearsal of death is partly an attempt to connect with her father in order to alleviate some unresolved conflict between them,⁸ and that her pose of apparent compliance is not as comfortable as it at first appears.

Similarly, in "Phone Call From Mexico" Page imagines a comforting, appealing version of death which she is ultimately reluctant to condone. She struggles to persuade a dying friend to abandon her "impotent blind rage" and submit peacefully, to "lay [her] head down gently like a quarrelsome tired child" (*HR* 1: 175). It is an image that would replace the terrifying isolation of death with a vision of maternal comfort and convert a sordid end into a new beginning, but Page cannot find a way to communicate this consoling message. She is prevented by the cold impersonality of the telephone and by the stubborn "railing and roiling" of the dying woman's anger, but also by her own sense that the message is inadequate. At the end of the poem she is in tears herself, knowing that however we might try to welcome death as a release from illness and old age, life, its pleasures and possessions, are never easy to relinquish.

This reluctance to subscribe to consoling versions of death and relinquish the life of the body even as it tiresomely ages is the subject of “Custodian,” and here Page looks directly toward her own death. She represents the maintenance of her aging body as an endless round of menial chores:

I watch it.
Lock and stock.
No joke.
It is my job.

I dust, I wash, I guard
this fading fibre;
polish even.
Spit.

And rub I it
and shine
and wear it to the bone.
Lay bare its nub. (*HR* 1: 177)

In the midst of this flurry of activity, she pauses to remind herself that the body, its desires and the world that it inhabits, ought not to claim so much of her energy:

It is but matter
and it matters not
one whit or tittle
if I wear it out.

This stanza suggests that the division between “I” and “it” sustained throughout the poem may signify nothing less than faith in the doctrine of the soul’s immortality. The consoling power of this notion, however, is trivialized by the diction (“whit,” “tittle”), and the wordplay on matter/matters seems too glib a way to dispose of such a weighty issue. Sounding too much like a piece of conventional wisdom to be reassuring, this view of death does not distract Page for long from corporeal matters:

Yet mend I it and darn
and patch
and pat it even
like a dog

She is well aware, however, that this preoccupation has its limits. She spits on “this fading fibre” to polish it, but spitting can also express contempt. This one word, isolated at the end of the second stanza, thus expresses both excessive attachment to the body and excessive disdain for it. While Page

finds neither of these extremes acceptable, she moves back and forth between them in order to demonstrate the difficulty of giving the pleasures of this life their proper due, yet finding some way to accept their loss and face death gracefully. In “Phone Call From Mexico” she is moved to tears by the pain and helplessness of “all those . . . who age ungainly”; in “Custodian” she tries to come to terms with these feelings by regarding with self-deprecating humour her own struggle against age and death. The poem depicts her attempt to defeat her dread of death by domesticating it: the process of aging is made to seem as if it is no more threatening than a manageable series of household tasks, and the proliferation of active verbs (“dust,” “wash,” “polish,” “mend,” “darn” and so on) creates an illusion of her authority over her body’s decline.⁹ This authority is subtly undercut, however, by the housewifely pose that she adopts, alluding perhaps to the particular pressure our society places on women to look young: behind her illusion of agency, she labours at maintaining her looks in obedience to societal expectations. In the end, all this drudgery is of little use: Page moves from polishing and shining to mending, darning, and patching, suggesting that the material she works with is getting progressively shabbier; indeed, it is her effort that “wear[s] it to the bone,” hastening the decline that she intends to forestall. The short, spare lines and self-consciously curt diction (“No joke. / It is my job.”) create an impression of seriousness and self-importance that heightens the absurdity of what the last stanza reveals as wasted effort. The body in which so much has been invested will become

that which the Auctioneer
when I am gone,
for nearly nought
will knock down
from his block.

In this imagined confrontation with death, it is not clear whether Page has made her peace with the idea or avoided it altogether. The phrase “when I am gone” could imply a renewed faith in the idea that the “I” of the poem will continue to exist after the disposal of “it,” the body, accorded some respect as a former dwelling place of consciousness. On the other hand, the phrase has a euphemistic ring about it, and it allows Page to exit inconspicuously without actually having to confront this Auctioneer, or suffer the brutality of the final two lines. Thus while she seems initially willing to confront death with lighthearted confidence, at the last minute she retreats from it as something too dreadful to imagine.

In “The End,” Page again anticipates death, and carries on from where “Custodian” leaves off, beginning with the moment of death and imagining its aftermath. Into this unknown territory she brings her familiar concern for the stories we tell ourselves in order to make death appear less frightening, and to imagine it as something we might be able to welcome. Her intense desire to enter into the spirit of such consoling narratives leads her to an affirmation of confidence and optimism at the approach of death. To the careful reader, however, Page reveals her awareness that what she proclaims herself ready to accept is not death, but rather a vision of death that she has constructed in order to suppress what she most fears. “The End” is a *glosa* which incorporates four lines by Mark Strand. Strand’s lines focus on the difficulty of imagining one’s own death (“No man knows what he shall sing at the end”) and of finding an appropriate metaphor to describe “what it will seem like” (*HR* 2: 215). Page responds by considering various accounts from people who might be expected to know what it is like, those who have come close enough to death to sense what lies on the other side of this “high wall”:

Some who have scaled it say they were stricken blind
yet lacked a blind man’s skills—white cane, dark glasses.
One girl I know clambered up and gazing over
saw the familiar universe reversed
as in a looking glass.

While these people claim to speak from experience, their authority is qualified by Page’s use of partitive articles (“some,” “one”) which emphasize the dissimilar details of each account.

Seeking reassurance, she relates her own story of a dream-like encounter with a kind of revenant “composed of light.” His invitation to her to touch him (“flesh, blood, hair”) seems to cast her as a skeptical Thomas to his Christ, but it is he who has been converted, confirming her speculation that “it was not *not* everlasting there / as once he had assumed.” Despite his refusal to be more specific, his visit inspires in Page a fairly detailed vision of a death from which “there was nothing to fear”:

For he belongs to the sea—we all do. We are part of its swell.
And only the shoreline grounds us. Yet we stand
hands tied, deluded, seemingly earthbound
imagining we belong to the land

which is only a way-station, after all.
We are the sea’s, and as such we are at its beck.
We are the water within the wave and the wave’s form.

There is a deliberate confidence here that almost obscures the discrepancies between these resounding statements and the numinous encounter which inspires them. In contrast to the diverse accounts preceding it, this vision of death as a return to an originary ocean stresses homogeneity, implying that we will all experience death in the same way. This insistence on community and shared experience contradicts the message brought by the ghostly visitor: "It's personal. When your turn comes you'll know." His emphasis on solitude and individuality is opposed by Page's repetition of the word "we," which appears six times in the last stanza and reverberates alliteratively in words like "water" and "wave." While the visit seems meant to be reassuring, it is for Page "the purest heartbreak" and in the message of the solitariness of dying, she sees a terrifying isolation, the fear of which she tries urgently to suppress. While the *glosa* form counteracts isolation by creating a dialogue between two poets, in this case, the lines from Strand's poem deployed at the end of each of Page's stanzas continually bring her back to our aloneness and uncertainty before death.

The ecstatic vision of the final stanza is related with all the persuasive rhetoric of a personal creed, tempting us to forget that in a poem structured as a series of stories about death and its aftermath, this vision is simply one more story, no more authoritative than any of the others, and perhaps less so, since it is the only one not explicitly based on personal experience. The title of the poem is itself a euphemism that allows us to talk about death without having to mention the word. Moreover, the title elides the idea of death with "The End" of a book or a story, making it seem a little less final. From the title of the poem to the final vision, Page stresses that in her attempt to look directly into an afterlife she can do nothing but fall back on familiar stories, some of which echo beyond the perimeter of the poem. Shelley, for example, imagines death as a voyage toward a rejoining of origins, as does Wallace Stevens,¹⁰ but the imagery of Page's final stanza also bears a significant resemblance to some of her own earlier poems. Her vision of death as a transition from an earthbound state to a long-forgotten aqueous one completes her portrayal of adolescence as a far more difficult and awkward move from water to land in poems like "Young Girls" (1946), "Blowing Boy" (1946), and "Boy with Sea Dream" (1954). Thus, at a moment when she appears to be proclaiming her acceptance of death most resoundingly, she is actually integrating death into the patterns of her own writing, making it seem less frightening by presenting it as a figurative event rather than a literal one.¹¹

In “The End,” Page thus imagines an anticipation of death that is accompanied by a retrospective glance at the beginnings of her long career. The poem is a fitting *envoi* to *Hologram*, a collection in which “one feels Page coursing back through a lifetime, summing it all up” through a series of “conversations with the loved dead,” the poets whom she has admired from her youth and whose work has influenced her own (Sullivan, “Hologram” 124-26). The Janus-like stance that Page assumes in *Hologram*—one face turned toward old age and death, the other looking back over a lifetime of writing and reading—has surfaced in her work before. Take, for example, the opening of “The First Part” from *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies*:

Great desire to write it all.
Is it age, death’s heavy breath
making absolute autobiography
urgent?

Who would think that this old hive
housed such honey?
Could one guess
blue and gold of a macaw
blue and gold of sky and sun
could set up such melodic din
beat so musical a drum?

Distilled from all this living,
all this gold. (*HR* 1: 216)

In these lines, Page substitutes her vibrant, harmonious verse for her aging body. She envisions a miraculous doubling of her self, whereby she is the “old hive” and also of a piece with the images of dazzling beauty for which she is responsible. Her writing is portrayed as an alchemical process which transforms raw experience into gold that is suggestive of perfection, and, perhaps, immortality. While Page here acknowledges that it is her advancing age which makes this brief summary of her past work especially pressing, considerations of mortality and writing have long been intertwined in Page’s poems and are not simply a preoccupation of old age. Throughout her career, particularly at moments of transition from one style of writing to another, she has regarded her poetry as a potential source of personal renewal.

Douglas Freake has argued that an abiding fascination with multiple aspects of the self is one of the central preoccupations of Page’s poetry, and we have seen how this discontinuity between selves is crucial to her struggle

to come to terms with death: in “Voyager” she identifies herself with the deceased father whom she mourns; in “Custodian” she speaks of her own body as an entity separate from herself. In “The First Part,” she imagines an escape from aging and death by identifying herself with a seemingly incorruptible art. While one might question this notion of a poem as a passport to personal immortality (and Page is not always so confident about this herself), poetry still affords the possibility of renewal, since it can be refurbished while the aging poet cannot. By imagining an identification between the self and the work, a poet can create the illusion that the self, like the work, can be “shaped, manipulated, improved” and so seem to evade the relentless decline toward death (Ramazani, *Yeats* 139). Page’s customary practice of reselecting and rearranging previously published poems is evidence that she sees her work as “material for an ongoing reshaping of the self” (Freake 99), but this is only one aspect of a specifically self-elegiac exploration of poetry as a defence against death.

The scheme of self-doubling that Page employs in a poem like “Custodian” in order to gain a position of mastery over her aging body can also be used to demonstrate mastery over her body of work. That is, the self-elegiac relation between different aspects of the self is reconfigured as the relation between the poet and her work, and between present and past styles of writing. This self-reflexive concern with marking the stages of a poetic career is embedded within the elegy proper, as elegists traditionally exploit the occasion of another’s death in order to celebrate their own literary comings-of-age. It is this careerist subtext that leads Celeste Schenck to define the elegy as “any lyric meditation proceeding from the thought of death that signals the readiness of the initiate for transcendence to new poetic modes, the ‘fresh woods and pastures new’ of Milton’s *Lycidas*” (15). Other forms that include this division of the poet’s work into categories of “then” and “now” include the palinode, in which the author renounces a former style or subject matter, and the traditional invocation which “distances the present enterprise from the previous discourses of the poet” (Ramazani, *Yeats* 140).¹² This “topos of authorial self-surpassal” characterises those self-elegies or “poems of transition” in which the poet adopts a new voice by trying to “author the death of . . . previous selves” (Ramazani, *Yeats* 140).

The contest between two distinct kinds of writing is the subject of “Elegy,” first published in 1952, which can be read as a troubled record of Page’s struggle to renounce a former style and proclaim a revised poetic voice. The poem is ostensibly a lament voiced by a chorus of mourners:

This spring is all small horses and stars
but you have closed your pores to its bombardment,
shut yourself up with the night that flowed into you like ink.

When that black haemorrhage began
your doors opened as if to sunlight
and the darkness roared in like a tidal bore.
Now your least thought is the poor type on cheap newsprint . . .

First we mourned you as if dead
and covered you with flowers
but when the blackness trickled on our hands
we stepped out of your deadly nightshade. (*HR* 1: 62)

From the references to ink, type, and newsprint, we may infer that the person to whom this lament is addressed is a writer, and one who seems caught between two different sources of inspiration. The “poor type on cheap newsprint” suggests a journalistic type of writing that seems narrow and mundane, at least in comparison with the “small horses and stars.” While the writer in the poem does not seem to consider these latter things fit subjects for poetry, the implication is that to do so would be a better use of her talent. “Elegy” does not mourn an actual death so much as a lost communion with nature. The writer in Page’s poem who once “walked giddy with gold” echoes the “dizzy raptures” that Wordsworth felt as a child and longs to recapture in adulthood (“Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” 85). Having lost this kind of child-like response to the natural world, Page’s writer is mired in an adolescent state. The image of the overwhelming ocean of ink brings to mind the “amphibious” adolescents of “Young Girls,” who are “perilously afloat” and “always drowning” (*HR* 2: 12). For the writer in the poem, one way out of this dilemma would be to attain a more mature style by recapturing something of this lost childhood sensibility, but this does not happen. Page has said that this poem is about “the subject’s incapacity to get past a certain point in her own personality” (Page, “Conversation” 76). In “Elegy,” she imagines a self-elegiac process of transition gone horribly wrong in which the attempted shift from one voice to another takes on a surreal, almost nightmarish quality. An attempt to move beyond this adolescent self by banishing it to the grave includes a grisly death scene (“you dribble black when you speak”), and the attempted burial produces the fear of contamination from a “dead” self that refuses to die. No transition can be accomplished, and the poem ends with images of desolation and loss, a “green tree” shrivelling into a lump of coal, the small horses refusing to “accept sugar / lightly with feathered lips from such pied palms.”

The vocation of writing invites comparison between the subject of "Elegy" and Page herself. In addition to its portrayal of a state of arrested adolescence, I suggest that the poem has a specific autobiographical significance, and may be read as an allegory of the early years of Page's career, when she was living in Montreal and involved with the left-wing literary magazine *Preview*. The image of poor type on cheap newsprint effectively conjures up the *Preview* environment, the apartment in which the magazine was mimeographed on foolscap and stapled together by the poets themselves (Precosky 76), while the images of ink-stained hands possibly refer to the practical side of publishing and the editorial duties that Page shared with her colleagues. It was during this period that Page began to explore the themes and techniques that would long be associated with her poetic reputation. Poems like "The Stenographers," "Shipbuilding Office," and "Typists" expose the alienation and joylessness of modern urban life, evoking the drab despair of the boarding-house, and the tedium of an office routine that turns workers into mechanical extensions of their typewriters. Such themes reflect the *Preview* group's socialist commitment, while in terms of technique, these poems fulfil the group's desire to foster a literature of protest that fused "the lyric and didactic elements in modern verse" (Precosky 76). This technique, however, provokes criticism of these poems, and raises questions concerning the compatibility of style and subject. In "The Stenographers," for example, the sheer proliferation of images, combined with a rigorous striving after objectivity, tends to obscure the human sadness and suffering of which the poem treats (Sullivan, "Size" 35-36, Killian 91-93). While I hesitate to describe the meticulously crafted poems of this period as adolescent, Killian has suggested that they may well have become a source of embarrassment to Page (98). Speaking for herself, Page says nothing to contradict this assumption, calling herself "too politically unsophisticated . . . to write good political poetry" (Wachtel 49). Page has never repudiated her socialism, and the more recent poems "Address at Simon Fraser" and "Planet Earth" deal with environmental issues and signal something of a return to the intention if not the technique of the social protest poetry with which she began her career (Messenger 200). In the early 1950s, however, Page needed to modify her treatment of overt social themes in order to realize her full potential as a "poet of the imagination . . . [whose] poetry has more to do with folklore, myth, and archetype than with objective time, history, and social fact (Sullivan, "Size" 35). In its dream-like portrayal of a writer whose talent mysteriously sickens when she

excludes these elements from her work, “Elegy” demonstrates Page’s own awareness of the need for a change of approach.

“Elegy” envisions the kind of transition that is achieved in “After Rain” (1956), “universally recognized by her critics as a pivotal Page poem” (Killian 97). In it, a woman stands aloof watching a gardener pace dejectedly through a sodden, snail-infested garden. Opening herself to the natural beauty of the scene, she luxuriates in a series of abstract and brilliant images: “garden abstracted, geometry awash— / an unknown theorem argued in green ink, / dropped in the bath” (*HR* 2: 109). She subsequently reproaches herself with the knowledge that her playful and exquisite vision of the garden fails to include the sorrow and pain that the gardener finds there: “I suffer shame in all these images . . . I find his ache exists beyond my rim” (110). Page’s exposure of these images as “exclusive” and “self-involved” (Sullivan, “Size” 34) can be interpreted as a retraction, or at least a criticism, of her earlier work, those poems whose elaborate images tend to obscure the humanity of the office workers and urban misfits who populate them. Page ends “After Rain” by resolving not to let “myriad images” distract her from empathy:

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. . . .

She is determined not to let her extraordinary talent for image-making overwhelm her sensitivity to human suffering. The image of the heart that surrounds and envelops the poetic vision represents the attainment of a new wholeness that is sought but pessimistically dismissed in “Elegy” with the oddly jaded lines, “we have seen our whole hearts / and known them black-edged as mourning envelopes” (*HR* 1: 62). In “After Rain,” the “heart that knows [that] tears are a part of love” indicates a poetic voice that is not afraid of emotion. The poem shows Page’s new willingness to break with a modernist credo of impersonal objectivity. Killian argues that the admission of subjectivity—a clearly feminine subjectivity—into “After Rain” in the form of “female whimsy” (*HR* 2: 109) represents a significant departure from Page’s earlier work. This transition could not take place until Page “openly claim[ed] her poetic vision as *belonging* to a gendered self” (Killian 97). This would explain why the transition imagined in “Elegy” is so vexed. It is only thanks to Page’s comment about the poem (quoted above) that we know that its subject is female; within the poem itself there is nothing that

clearly indicates the gender of either the subject or the speaker. It is the poem's silence on this matter, its own suppression of a subjective and gendered speaking consciousness, that shows "Elegy" to be implicated in the aesthetic it seeks to reject, and explains why its attempt at achieving a new vision is unsuccessful.¹³

In my reading of "After Rain," I am less concerned with how Page achieves this new vision than with the way in which she represents the transition self-elegiacally. Having ventured into the garden herself, Page transforms the dilapidation she finds there into a radical image of rebirth:

the clothes-reel gauche
as the rangy skeleton of some
gaunt delicate spidery mute

is pitched as if listening;
while hung from one thin rib
a silver web—
its infant, skeletal, diminutive,
now sagged with sequins, pulled ellipsoid,
glistening. (*HR* 2: 109)

A skeleton that carries a child, and the skeletal infant itself are images converting death into birth, ending into beginning. Page represents the attainment of a new poetic voice through the death of an old one (the "mute" skeletal remains) in an attempt to assert her authority not simply over the development of her career but over death itself. The poem ends, however, on a slightly ambiguous note that conveys some doubt as to whether this new voice can be sustained. Page admits that she may yet be seduced by "each bright glimpse of beauty" and "do what [she] will," allowing the details to distract her from "the whole." This rueful confession that the transition to a new voice may not be complete translates in self-elegiac terms to the knowledge that any attempt at self-renewal through the figurative conversion of endings into beginnings will have limited success. Having created the illusion that she has triumphed over death by reinventing herself, she must finally submit to death's inevitability.

This pattern of triumph and submission is more thoroughly explored in "Arras" (1954), one of Page's finest and most discussed poems. "Arras" opens with a description of an imagined tapestry depicting a stylized garden. A process of self-revision is signalled by self-doubling, as "the poet seems to enter [the] garden scene . . . while, at the same time, she remains an observer outside of it" (*Orange* 252-53):

Consider a new habit—classical,
and trees espaliered on the wall like candelabra.
How still upon that lawn our sandalled feet.

But a peacock rattling its rattan tail and screaming
has found a point of entry. Through whose eye
did it insinuate in furred disguise
to shake its jewels and silk upon that grass?
 . . . Who am I
or who am I become that walking here
I am observer, other, Gemini. . . (HR 1: 46)

This twinning suggests an artist's sense of identification with her work; she is separate from it, but somehow part of it as well. Within the world of the arras, a contrast is immediately established between the "voluptuous" and decidedly un-classical peacock and the formal serenity of the classical design that is disrupted by this noisy intruder. The arras represents Page's poetic vision, and its contrasting elements suggest two different phases of that vision, two different styles of writing. The exact nature of Page's stance toward the arras, and toward its sandalled figures in particular, has for some time been a source of interpretive controversy, but critics such as Relke and Killian seem to agree that the figures are in some way representative of Page's concerns about her previous work. Relke calls the figures "elitist . . . all perfection, all blank reflection, all unseeing eyes" (28). They warn against "a formal realm of classical simplicity," a poetic vision which excludes a "multiplicity of human emotions": desire, passion, pain, empathy (28). The trees on the arras that resemble candelabra remind me of "Portrait of Marina" (1951) in which a girl's headache is represented as "a kind of candelabra—delicate— / where all her tears were perilously hung" (HR 1: 73). This echo of such an outrageously artificial image denoting pain and unhappiness connects the formalism of the arras to the problems associated with Page's earlier art. The remote, regal beauty of the arras figures indicates the stature of Page's accomplishment, but the "'classical' impulse" that produces them also suggests the limitations of that earlier, formalist poetry (Killian 99).

Indeed, as the poem progresses, something about the world of the arras makes Page increasingly uncomfortable. She tries to distance herself from it, to deny her complicity with it in a series of evasive questions: "Through whose eye . . .?"; "who am I become . . .?"; "what did they deal me in this pack?" This unease eventually produces a state of paralysis:

No one is moving now, the stillness is
infinite. If I should make a break . . .

take to my springy heels . . . ? But nothing moves.
 The spinning world is stuck upon its poles,
 the stillness points a bone at me. I fear
 the future on this arras.

“Arras” has reached an impasse that recalls the poet’s inability in “Elegy” to “get past a certain point” (Page, “Conversation” 76). It is only with Page’s confession (“It was my eye”), her willingness to claim the disruptive peacock as her own creation, that the poem can resume its progress (Killian 99):

*Voluptuous it came.
 Its head the ferrule and its lovely tail
 folded so sweetly; it was strangely slim
 to fit the retina. (46)*

Several critics (Paul, Rooke, Killian) have noted that the poet’s eye/I is clearly gendered feminine, receptive to the peacock as the “phallus of love” (Rooke 141). Page’s acknowledgement of the peacock marks the “dramatic entrance into the poem of the poet’s subjective, female self” and is an important step in the journey toward the “new wholeness of vision” that is celebrated in “After Rain” (Killian 100). “Arras” thus dramatizes the emergence of a new poetic vision that supersedes an old one; or, more accurately, since the figures and the peacock are part of the same tapestry, the poem shows the expansion of that previous vision to include new elements. Since the poem makes explicit the poet’s sense of identification with her work, this attainment of new vision can be seen also as an improvement of the self which counteracts the decline into death. There is something death-like about the inert, silent, staring figures, and the poet at times reacts to the arras (and to the playing cards that are equally flat and impersonal) as to a mirror of her own mortality: “the stillness points a bone at me”; “my fingers slipping on a monarch’s face twitch and go slack.” By considering her mortality in relation to a visual artifact, Page continues a tradition of ekphrastic self-elegy that finds its fullest expression in the Romantic period and is adapted and extended in the work of twentieth-century poets (Ramazani, *Yeats* 152-53).¹⁴ The “classical” habit and “sandalled feet” of the arras figures, along with their stillness, bring to mind the figures on Keats’s Grecian urn who will remain unchanged long after the poet and his entire generation have gone. The solemn, sandalled figures and jewelled bird of “Arras” may also seem to evoke the sages of “Sailing to Byzantium.” Page’s realization, however, that “[n]o one joins those figures on the arras” (46) indicates that even if the arras did represent an “artifice of eternity” (Yeats 218), she

cannot expect to be gathered into it. In contrast to the adamantine brilliance of the mosaic that offers Yeats a refuge from decay and death, the arras is fabric that can fade and fray with time. It is a *memento mori*, an image of limitation rather than transcendence.

In some of her Brazilian poems, Page's use of ekphrasis conveys the limitations of language; that is, she "write[s] 'visual art'" in an attempt to "articulate a 'foreign' perception . . . which [cannot] be copied into words" (Messenger 192). In "Arras," however, this practice is reversed as Page emphasizes the limitations of the visual artifact in order to celebrate the figurative power of her language. She projects her mortality onto the two-dimensional, silent arras figures, which are surpassed by the "rattling," "screaming," sensuous peacock; their message of death is defeated, and Page celebrates the triumph of a new poetic vision over the stasis and silence which threatened it earlier in the poem.¹⁵ This kind of "substitution of figurative life for the marks of death is, as always in elegy, only partial" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 157). The ending of "Arras" is hauntingly ambiguous and questions the durability of Page's celebrated new vision. The orgasmic union of the peacock and the poet's eye is followed by the plaintive whimper, "Does no one care?" The final lines see the poet waiting for "another bird" to reveal itself, but this promise of regeneration is chastened by the persistence of the staring figures who remain as remote as ever, "motionless, / folding slow eyes on nothing." Rooke interprets the figures as representative of "the glory (the perfection of human life) that is sought by the poet throughout her work" (136); at the end, however, they also seem to be emblems of the unrelenting demands of that work. In retrospect, they are troubling harbingers of Page's ten-year period of poetic silence ended by the appearance of *Cry Ararat!* in 1966. The final stanza also reveals the limits of Page's figurative defeat of death. Her longing for human contact ("I dreamed the bite of fingers in my flesh") expresses the self-elegist's worry that her search for continued life through a "defensive attachment to [her] own language" has consigned her to a kind of living death, sealed off from life's immediacy (Ramazani, *Yeats* 188).

W.H. Auden has said that all writing is an attempt at immortality. "The writer is like a schoolboy who carves his initials on a desk; he wishes to live for ever" (Auden 16-17). Page dedicates *The Hidden Room* "To All My Family and Beyond," indicating her own desire to speak to future generations through her work. In the eponymous poem that introduces the collection, however, she worries about how that work will be received:

*I am showing it to you
 fearful you may not
 guess its importance
 that you will see only
 a lumber room
 a child's bolt-hole
 Will not know it as prism
 a magic square
 the number nine (HR 1: 11)*

The author who desires immortality cannot control the reception of her work; there is no way to ensure that, after her death, it will be interpreted correctly, or that it will be read and remembered at all. While Page has her doubts about a kind of immortality that amounts to “preservation in a literary pickle jar” (Ramazani, *Mourning* 15), she suggests that there is another kind that is more accessible and productive. One of the *glosas* in *Hologram* incorporates and develops the lines from Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” that indicate the only kind of immortality that is available to the poet: “He became his admirers” (*HR* 2: 199). Implicit in the *glosa* form itself is the message that however he may try to envision “monuments of unaging intellect” (Yeats 217) or otherwise seek in his own poetry a refuge from death, his best opportunity for continued life is in the work of other poets. It is an immortality that Page has already attained. Hers is still a living voice, and other poets have begun to incorporate her poems into *glosas* of their own.¹⁶ Through her example, the lines of conversation are kept open, between the past and present, and beyond.

NOTES

I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for its support of this research.

- 1 The quotation used in the title of this paper is the title of the final section of *The Hidden Room* vol. 2.
- 2 In his use of the term “self-elegy,” Ramazani draws upon Helen Vendler’s examination of the “posthumous voice” of Wallace Stevens’s late poems (32-35) and also upon Harold Bloom’s discussion of the “hieratic poems” or “pre-elegies” in which Romantic poets anticipate their own deaths (90). For Ramazani’s detailed readings of Yeats’s self-elegies see *Yeats* 134-99. *Poetry of Mourning* contains readings of self-elegies by Stevens, Auden, and Plath.
- 3 For an account of the relationship between English Renaissance poetry and medieval religious formulas for meditating on one’s own death, see Stein 67-118.
- 4 For a more detailed genealogy of the self-elegy, see Ramazani, *Yeats* 136.
- 5 For wide-ranging discussions of the change in Page’s aesthetic that occurred during this period, see Sullivan (“Size”), Relke, and Killian.

- 6 Sandra Djwa hints at a self-elegiac interpretation of Page's autobiographical companion poems "Cullen" and "Cullen Revisited" by suggesting that the latter poem presents the shift from "socialistic journey to spiritual journey" as "a conflagration of the previous self" (Page, "Biographical Interview" 35).
- 7 In quotations of Page's poetry, all page numbers refer to *The Hidden Room*, henceforth abbreviated to *HR*.
- 8 In conversation with Djwa, Page alludes to this unresolved conflict, saying that her failure to be reconciled with her father has caused her to dream about him since his death. See Page, "Biographical Interview" 35-6.
- 9 In his reading of Yeats's "The Tower," Ramazani lists the series of active verbs through which the poet seeks to "reverse his passive relation to death" (Yeats 170).
- 10 Ramazani's reading of Stevens's "Prologues to What Is Possible" emphasizes its allusions to the ending of Shelley's *Adonais*. See *Mourning* 119-20.
- 11 Ramazani identifies a similar strategy in Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion." See *Yeats* 192-3.
- 12 Virgil, in the alternate beginning to the *Aeneid*, Spenser, in the invocation to *The Faerie Queene*, and Milton, in the invocation to *Paradise Regained*, all take care to distinguish between these works and the poets' earlier productions. For discussions of the invocation as a recapitulation of the stages of the poet's career, see Lipking 69 and Ramazani, *Yeats* 140.
- 13 A look at the intersection of gender and genre in "Elegy" sheds more light on the beginnings of Page's break with modernist values. Killian argues that this break is achieved in "After Rain," a poem which constituted a serious risk to Page's reputation as a modernist poet, because lines like "tears are a part of love" could have led critics to categorize and dismiss her as a "sentimental poetess" (98). "Elegy" is an important precursor to "After Rain" in this respect because of its generic associations. In a modernist critical climate, female poets who wrote elegies risked being labelled as "nightingales," and for this reason, major modernist women poets such as Gertrude Stein, H.D., and Marianne Moore tended to avoid the form (Ramazani, *Mourning* 21). While Page's choice of the elegy is thus a deliberate flouting of modernist taboo, her suppression of feminine subjectivity throughout the poem indicates a residual wariness of the modernist association of the form with sentimentality.
- 14 Ramazani argues that ekphrasis has always been linked to the idea of death, as some of the earliest examples of the form were tomb inscriptions. For a brief summary of the relationship between ekphrasis and the poet's mortality, and a discussion of Yeats' ekphrastic self-elegies, see *Yeats* 152-61. As a poem that describes an imagined work of art, "Arras" is an example of what John Hollander has called "notional ekphrasis" (209). Messenger finds the term useful in her approach to some of Page's Brazilian poems. See Messenger 193.
- 15 I am influenced in this reading of "Arras" by Ramazani's reading of Yeats' "Lapis Lazuli." See *Yeats* 156-57.
- 16 John Barton, Elizabeth Brewster, and Sandy Shreve have all written *glosas* based on Page's poems. They appear in *The Malahat Review* 117 (1996): 62-67.

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