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Poetry and the Modern Woman

P. K. Page and the Gender of Impersonality

The female is a chaos,
the male
is a fixed point of stupidity. . . .

You, my dear correspondent,
are a stabilized female,
I am a male who has attained the chaotic fluidities. . . .

LETTER FROM EZRA POUND TO MARIANNE MOORE

Why insist upon reading P. K. Page "as a woman"? Doesn't this come dangerously close to concurring with critics who more or less dismiss or downplay her poetic achievements with a well-placed and seemingly innocuous "feminine" or some related adjective (e.g. "sentimental"[1])? At the very least, will I not be forced to make ahistorical, essentialist claims, which are problematic at best, untenable at worst? If, in the face of these admittedly thorny questions, I persist in the enterprise, it is precisely because the problems which arise when I engage certain feminist critical practices are telling; they are also fruitful, if paradoxical, inroads into the poetry itself. Not only do the dilemmas and difficulties with which I wrestle when I read Page 'as a woman' point to some of the dilemmas and difficulties of being both a woman and a modernist poet, they also generate a serious and useful critique of the limitations of a 'traditional' feminist critical practice, as well as those of an 'impersonal' modernist aesthetic. Questions about the historical relationship between modernism and gender, and finally between modernism and feminism, can then be used to illuminate one another, as well as create a lexis with which to speak of and make inquiries into Page's particular modernist aesthetic.

One of the most indicting feminist studies to date documenting the

undeniable misogynist undercurrent running through much modernist rhetoric is Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the 20th Century.* The first volume in this series, *The War of the Words* (1988), devotes the greater part of its 300-odd pages to the gathering of tangible evidence of this structural misogyny: from the declarations and manifestoes which denigrated 'feminine' and 'feminized' language/writing/culture and called for a new, hardened, vital, virile language and poetics, to the offhand yet dutifully recorded patronizing statements made by high-profile proponents of modernism. Itself militaristic in tone, *No Man's Land* casts the modernist movement (if not all of literature) as a battle of the sexes:

> Indeed, both the shape of literary history and the nature of the language out of which that history is constituted became crucial combat zones, since both the man's case and the woman's cause had to be based not only on redefinitions of female and male nature but also on revisions of the aesthetic assumptions and linguistic presumptions of patriarchal culture (121).

Though such a style can be off-putting at times, the evidence wielded here is substantial and concrete, effectively pointing to the political stakes behind modernism's metaphorical use of gender difference.

Still, one risks reductionism to declare that modernism is at base little more than "the reaction-formation of intensified misogyny with which male writers greeted the entrance of women into the literary marketplace" (233). To do so certainly works to obscure other issues at stake. The fact that Joyce said of Eliot's *The Waste Land* that it "ended the idea of poetry for *ladies*"—and not *women*—suggests the class issue at the heart of modernism as well. Certainly the modernist movement claimed to represent a revolt not only against the 'feminized' domestic culture of the Victorian age, but also against the 'bourgeois realism' of the nineteenth-century novel. Suzanne Clark, however, in *Sentimental Modernism*, reminds us that even *this* is a highly nuanced, gendered distinction, all the more sinister for its subtlety and 'naturalizing' impulse:

> The sentimental as a form, a set of tropes, and a rhetorical stance is profoundly intertwined with the historical conflicts of middle-class culture. . . . Women, of course, have had a privileged (or fatal) relationship with the sentimental. From the point of view of literary modernism, sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised. The gendered character of this condemnation seemed natural: Women writers were entangled in sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature. . . . (2).

Here Clark's analysis proves useful in bringing the issue of modernist misogyny back to a *textual* level, a battle of rhetoric and form, and something which critics like Gilbert and Gubar tend to ignore in their enthusiasm for reconstructing social contexts like the literary marketplace.

Other feminist critics, however, have more recently come to see the formal innovations of modernism, with its challenge to novelistic realism, as empowering for women writers. Its insistence on calling into question seemingly self-evident concepts such as personal identities is particularly apt to undermine heretofore 'natural givens' such as gender identities, revealing them to be mere linguistic configurations. Modernism, therefore, held out to women the possibility of effecting a revolution from within the language itself (Moi 11), of undermining the very structure of western patriarchal tradition by exposing the duplicitous nature of discourse—an assertion which leads Toril Moi to conclude that Virginia Woolf prefigured deconstruction. Indeed, Clark herself concedes that the "revolution of the word would challenge standard conventions of language, including the way gendering appears to be natural rather than an effect of discursive practices," but maintains that the "bad news for women" (the "unwarranting" of sentimental discourse) remains "intimately bound up with the good news" (6). Even so, we do well to remember that an ideology which defined woman as the angelic guardian of sentimental and domestic culture most often translated in practical terms into imprisonment within the domestic realm. The issue of women's suffrage and the first feminist movement had already made many intellectual women painfully aware of this chasm between laudatory rhetoric and hard reality at the time in which modernism as a literary movement began to emerge. It is more than reasonable to imagine that modernism must have seemed to many such women a potentially liberating force and means of subverting the patriarchal Victorian order which defined and confined them. Gilbert and Gubar's mammoth work is weakest where it attempts to deal with women writers who openly embraced modernist principles. Having worked from the implicit assumption that the modernist aesthetic is necessarily antithetical to feminism and to women in general, they go to great lengths to reclaim for a feminist vision of language and fiction several women writers closely associated with the modernist movement—Virginia Woolf, H.D., Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes—without ever addressing the apparent conflict which this would seem to set up. In fact, it can be difficult to distinguish between

the kind of language experiments which are praised in H.D. because they can "'hatch' multiple meanings" (247) and those in the 'Penelope' chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses,* which are disparaged as "artless jingles" (232); as feminist and Joyce critic Bonnie Kime Scott is quick to point out: "They [Gilbert and Gubar] are not prepared to see Joyce's puns and word images . . . in the same joyous spirit" (108). This potential contradiction is partially reflective of a realist bias in the practice of Gilbert and Gubar's variety of feminism, one of its limitations which the poetry of P. K. Page will force us to re-examine.[2]

The liberating promise of modernism would also help to explain why so many women writers did, in fact, leap onto the modernist bandwagon, particularly women whose personal lifestyles were considered deviant by rigid, heterosexual, Victorian gender norms. Indeed, rather than discouraging 'women scribbling,' as we might expect, given much of the negatively gendered language of modernism's political and literary stances, the period saw women authors, as well as critics and publishers, flourish.[3] This would suggest that these women saw as in their interest the overturning of the Victorian cult of domesticity and 'sentimental' novelistic tradition. This is not to suggest that embracing a modernist aesthetic was unproblematic for women writing at the time—or after. Often it entailed a symbolic murder of the Victorian mother within, a repudiation of one's literary ancestresses: witness Woolf's "angel in the house." For Clark, this is the double bind of modernism: "not only the unwarranting of feminine authority but a rupture of conventional womanhood that promises freedom" (8).

In several ways this double bind of modernism for women writers (as well as this realist / anti-realist split in feminist criticism of modernist texts) can be shown to originate in the very underpinnings of the modernist vision, at least as it has been institutionalized: that is, what Suzanne Clark has identified as modernism's radical shift of the masculine, "naturalized critical gaze" (7) from woman as sexual object of desire (romantic, sentimental and Victorian plots) to eroticized textual object. The result, as Clark notes, is the conceptual 'splitting' of woman "into the sexualized textual body and the conventional feminine lady, into a revolutionary and erotic object and a derided maternal or hysterical subject" (9). In other words, modernism's rejection of the sentimental and romantic conventions entailed shifting the primal scene of 'boy meets girl' to 'pen meets paper.' In this way modernism can be said to have invented an *écriture féminine:* a metaphoricized, textualized, feminine body symbolizing the "otherness as

style" of the modernist text, of which Joyce's Molly Bloom has become the privileged emblem.[4] From the more recent, anti-realist, constructivist or 'French' feminist standpoint, this 'othered' text constitutes a disruptive feminine poetics which dismantles phallogocentric discourse from within; representatives of the older, realist, essentialist or 'Anglo' school of feminism (Clark, for example) would want to claim, however, that the new textual 'primal scene' retains all of its erotic impact, and the pen its phallic and author-itative overtones.

Yet in spite of this double bind—the demand to repudiate a 'feminine' or feminized tradition and the opportunity to participate in the reforging of tradition itself—at the time in which she was writing, P. K. Page could have laid claim to a women's modernist tradition, in which her literary mothers and sisters would be Woolf, H.D., Amy Lowell, Mina Loy, Marianne Moore and certainly Dorothy Livesay. If she did feel herself to be working within just such a tradition, however, she failed to acknowledge it openly. This points to a most uncomfortable problem within more traditional feminist literary scholarship, an enterprise which has tended to posit a mother/daughter paradigm of nurturing influence in antithesis to Bloom's father/son model of the anxiety of influence.[5] It is a model based on a female poetic tradition of thinking back through one's literary ancestresses, claiming and celebrating the familial ties and finding inspiration and authority therein (think of Adrienne Rich on Emily Dickinson). Even the woman poet who repudiates the tradition and becomes the rebellious, modernist daughter will often begin by going through the process of "looking back," and in so doing self-consciously define herself against and yet within the tradition of "women poets" (for example, Amy Lowell's "The Sisters," in which she finally pities Emily Dickinson and ridicules "Mrs. Browning," embracing only Sappho as a literary matriarch worthy of her attention). The woman poet, then, who neither acknowledges nor openly rebels against a "female poetic tradition" poses a distinct dilemma for the feminist critic.

Similarly, much of feminist criticism has placed enormous emphasis on women's writing as a record of women's personal experience. If, however, one is dealing with a female poet such as P. K. Page, who systematically warns against the "tyranny of subjectivity" and the "tyranny of the Eye/[I]" (and presuming one remains committed to such a critical perspective), the

dilemma is exacerbated indeed. Fortunately (for this feminist critic), in the fifties she 'slips' up, and a highly problematic and feminine 'I' slips in, giving us something of a foothold (even as *she* 'slips') and rescuing her from the fate of a poet like Marianne Moore,[6] whose unwavering commitment to Eliot's principle of impersonality in art has served practically to exclude her from feminist revisionary canons and criticism, which have often dismissed her by characterizing her poems as "concentration upon technical brilliance coupled with a marked exclusion of feminine experience from art" (Juhasz 35-6).[7]

I include the quotation about Moore because I feel that it serves as an apt description of Page's earliest work, where "exclusion of feminine experience" translates from (Anglo) fem-crit jargon to mean the almost total absence of the *direct* expression of a gendered poetic subject-self, usually in the form of the lyrical first person pronoun. One of the earliest (1942) and most successful poems, "The Stenographers," will serve as an example, but it should be noted that almost any poem of this period, with one or two crucial, self-reflexive exceptions upon which I will later focus, would do. It is ostensibly a poem inspired by Socialist sympathies, to which at least the subject matter of the poem—the exploitation of office workers—testifies. The formal aspects of the poem itself, however, its progression by the proliferation or accumulation of images on the page, its impersonal, objective stance, its aestheticized object, do much to undercut the human(ist) element.[8] The human, and more specifically, *female* suffering at the center of the poem, and the empathy which it does or should generate, seem strikingly at odds with the reader's detached admiration of the virtuoso performance of the poet's pen. Though the speaking voice does, indeed, lay claim to a single "I" in the final stanza, it is clearly not the "I" of personal experience, but rather the representative of the impersonal, observing and distancing eye which has scanned and recorded the lives and dreams of the women up to this point in the poem: "In their eyes I have seen/the pin men of madness in marathon trim/race round the track of the stadium pupil" (23). There is nothing within the poem which hints that Page herself suffered through the experience she is documenting, though of course she did. This is not to suggest that we ought to be hunting for autobiography in poetry; it is, however, to suggest that the careful excision of the poet's subjective voice seems to render the task of generating empathy a paradoxical, if not impossible, one. The irony of the choice of distance in this particular poem—the impersonal poetic treatment of impersonal labour practice—is deepened by the fact

that Page is here addressing what could be considered a women's issue (low-wage, feminized service jobs) in a seemingly neutered voice.

This reading of "The Stenographers" is tinged with a certain propensity in traditional feminism to 'hunt for the woman' in any woman-authored poem. As we have seen, another kind of feminism, one influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and French poststructuralism, takes issue with this realist-feminist preoccupation with a personal and gendered signature, which we have already acknowledged to be problematic for the exclusionary practices to which it appears to lead. Interestingly, the constructivist feminist critique of traditional or essentialist feminism is bound up with the rhetoric of modernism itself, and goes something like this: the theoretical assumption that a text should reflect a writer's personal experience (in this case, that of being a woman) is based on the naïve and empiricist assumptions that 'female experience' or a 'female self' is somehow immediately apprehensible, and that language is a readily available, transparent medium with which to convey it. Toril Moi, in good modernist form, concludes that it is "a position which favors 'bourgeois realism'" (4).

As an alternative model, Alice Jardine has developed the notion of the *gynema*, which is not a writing *subject* but a reading *effect*, a woman-in-effect, out of which comes her theory of *gynesis*[9] in a specifically modernist context: "the putting into discourse of 'Woman' as that process intrinsic to the condition of modernity"(27); as in the notion of *écriture féminine*, the 'feminine' here serves as the quintessential metaphor for the 'otherness' of the modernist text. Christine van Boheemen (1987) argues forcefully in a similar vein, though she, unlike Jardine, casts the phenomenon in a sinister light:

> If Western literature has traditionally seen the feminine as emblematic of nature and biological origin, Modern thought from Joyce to Derrida rests upon a double dispossession or repression of "femininity" and the appropriation of otherness as style. (8)

While many feminist critics (and Jardine is certainly among them) have come to see this "process" of "the putting into discourse of 'Woman'" as the ultimate valorization of the feminine, others warn that it is dangerous territory: the flesh-and-blood woman writer appears to be threatened with invisibility once again, for these critics concede that even a male author may write a woman-in-effect into his text (witness the quintessential example, James Joyce). And just how desirable, or how politically useful, such a

'valorization of the feminine' is remains questionable. As van Boheemen (1987) concludes:

> It does not and cannot say anything about woman as nonsymbolic, historical being. She is disembodied, etherealized as text. Modernity, moreover, reduces the complexity of woman's being in the world as both *anthropos* (human being) and *gyne* (sexual creature) to a merely sexually determined identity (199).

This deliberate 'othering' of the modernist text through the metaphor of the feminine is closely related to what Clark is about when she speaks of the unacknowledged sentimentality of modernism itself, which merely displaces the gaze of desire from woman to text—the shift which effectively split the female "into a revolutionary and erotic object and a derided maternal or hysterical subject" (9). I here want to ask, as does van Boheemen in her introduction (1987), if "the idea of woman's otherness [has] become the emblem of Modernity," what are the implications for women writing and speaking in the Modern age (2-3)? More precisely, what might have been the implications for modernist poet P. K. Page?

If I have elaborated at length upon Jardine's theory of *gynesis*, it is because I find it a temporarily useful tool with which to pry open the mechanics of Page's poetic vision, even as I maintain some reservations about how valuable or valorizing a tool it is. It enables me to identify what I am tempted to call a "reading effect," which I see as a central paradox in the poems: on the one hand, while Page is forever warning the reader about the danger of the subjective I/eye, particularly in the poet (in which we recognize Eliot's doctrine of the impersonality of art), and while we might assume that 'extracted' I/eye to be gendered feminine in the case of the poet, I feel that *she* characterizes it as masculine: it is the eye that would fix, the (phallic) camera that would kill, the gaze that would harden; on the other hand, the poetic and impersonal objective eye (from which the 'I' of personal experience has been carefully excised) is characterized by a feminine fluidity,[10] by its receptivity to an unending flux of images which merely flow through it, like light through glass, air or water, and by its association with flowers and gardens. This metaphoric, feminine fluidity is what I will tentatively call a textual "woman-in-effect," according to Jardine's understanding. Whether this is finally Page's sublimated femininity or merely part and parcel of her adopted modernist aesthetic falls beyond the scope of this paper. My argument will rest on the fact that she finally does

not, or cannot, sustain this divorce of a poetic vision coded feminine and a gendered self—that is, the splitting of the female subject implicit in the modernist aesthetic.

Though I am more or less allowing the anatomical metaphors of modernist discourse—hardness and fluidity—to suggest the epithets 'masculine' and 'feminine,' there are occasions, though rare, when Page more directly associates the fluidity of poetic vision with the female. "Vegetable Island" is the most explicit of these occasions, in which men would contain and control the growth of flowers ("are they too lush and lovely lovely are they / a little out of hand?") while "women wander unafraid as if / they made the petals" (48-9). Similarly, "The Flower and the Rock" attributes a self-transcending sympathy to the woman in the poem, again associated with flora ("She felt the flower of his pain beneath her hand / which cupped for it and was soft and yearned as if / all her blood had withdrawn to the stamping wrist"), while "he" does not feel beyond his own "solid rock of pain" (53). More often, however, at least in the early poetry, the ideal fluidity of Page's vision is disembodied, becomes a mere 'textual effect,' a transcendent and impersonal consciousness awash in imagery. Or it is located in the child's imagination, as yet untainted by adulthood and sexual maturity.[11] It is in this sense that the textual 'woman-in-effect' of the poem need not be gender-specific with respect to its personae; "Only Child" quite clearly places the fluid consciousness of the poetic imagination in the eye of the little boy, while it is his mother's words which make the birds into statues, *her* imperative which causes *his* eyeballs to harden—the beginning of his initiation into unseeing adulthood.[12]

There are, however, stages and states of consciousness and even places which come close to approximating, or which are conducive to, Page's poetic vision: the childhood imagination, lush gardens, and dreams, all of which are characterized by the flux or fluidity of images which I have characterized as 'feminine.' But there are telling, self-reflexive moments (by this I mean dealing with the poetic process itself) when the vision itself becomes sinister and threatening, when gardens become maddening labyrinths, when dreams become nightmares, when self-effacement before the poetic image teeters on the brink of self-annihilation. A brief series of comparisons will serve to sketch the contours of the rim of the chasm where the poet does her balancing act. Page begins "Traveler, Conjuror, Journeyman" with a description of her poetic vision:

> The idea diminishes to a dimensionless point in my absolute centre. If I can hold it steady long enough, the feeling which is associated with that point grows and fills a larger area as perfume permeates a room. It is from here that I write—held within that luminous circle, that locus which is at the same time a focusing glass, the surface of a drum. (208)

A remarkably similar image of this ideal of poetic vision appears, though significantly distorted, in "If It Were You" (1946):

> . . . madness would rush at you from the shrubbery
> or the great sun, stampeding through the sky
> would stop and drop—
> a football in your hands
> and shrink as you watched it
> to a small dark dot
> forever escaping focus . . .
>
> Might you not, if it were you,
> bewildered, broken,
> slash your own wrists, commit
> an untidy murder in the leafy lane . . .
>
> might you not
> grow phobias about calendars and clocks,
> stare at your face in the mirror, not knowing it
> and feel an identity with idiots and dogs
> as all the exquisite unborns of your dreams
> deserted you to snigger behind their hands? (39-40)

Though the poet carefully avoids taking up a subject pronoun to represent the speaking consciousness, it nevertheless remains present throughout the poem (though used only once) in a less obtrusive object pronoun: "If it were you, say, you . . . not *me* this time" (38) (italics mine). Next to "Traveler, Conjuror, Journeyman," *this* particular garden seems to emblematize poetic vision run amuck; diminishment to a "dimensionless point" has become a maddening, shrinking sun which forever *escapes* focus. What otherwise might have become what she refers to as "dream-poems" (Pearce, 34-5), images 'given' in a dream, remain "exquisite unborns" which abandon the poet, leaving the "person you call 'I'" without any sense of a coherent self, indistinguishable from "idiots and dogs." Ideal poetic transcendence of ego boundaries spills over into a maddening loss of personal identity.

Even the favorable dream-state hovers about the terrifying possibility of transforming itself into nightmare. A juxtaposition of the two poems "Sleeper" (1947) and "Nightmare" (1952) (as, indeed, they are arranged in

the volume *The Glass Air*) measures the tenuousness of the boundary that would separate dream from nightmare. In the earlier poem, the unconsciousness of sleep is associated with being overcome by water, which is a positively charged association for the reader of Page's poetry:

> The gentle dreamer drowns without a sound . . .
> Complete in sleep, discards his arms and legs
> with only whimpers;
> from his flesh retreats
> like water through a mesh, leaving it beached
> alone upon a bed.
>
> And takes the whole night in his lungs and head.
> A hydrocephalic idiot, quick at sums
> wandering strangely lost and loose among
> symbols as blunted and as bright as flowers. (45)

If dream-drowning is a means of escaping the "flesh which blocks the imagination" ("After Reading *Albino Pheasants*," 106), a privileged passage to a mystic state in which vision is uncluttered by the present, the mundane, the egotistical, it already contains the seeds of destruction.

"Nightmare" is the underside of "Sleeper," charting the same region of the unconscious dream-state, this time personified as a kind of succubus, "this too-dark creature," which lurks in the poet's bed. The ironic twist, of course, is that the poet is of the same sex (one wonders what this implies about a woman poet's relationship to the muse, and is this, in fact, her muse gone mad?), so that instead of a scene of poetic seduction we have one of birth, in which the "yelping young" of the demon-muse feed—in almost cannibalistic fashion—at the poet's breasts. The passive receptivity of the muse poet becomes her graphic undoing, twisted and stretched "tight and thin" as she is "at the dark bitter wish/of this night-walking/anxious alchemist." The protean demon-muse, however, will also shape-shift into seductive, ego-gratifying poses, which might allow the poet to believe that she is in control: "Sometimes she smiles at me/as if I were/her own face/smiling in a mirror." The final, terrifying stanzas return to the cannibal motif, that ultimate, demonized image of total identification; the suggestion is that the demon-muse and the poet are perhaps so intimately bound up with one another that they may, in fact, be on either side of a mirror:

> Yet should I sleep forever
> she would eat

my beating heart
as if it were a plum

did she not know
with terrible wisdom
by doing so
she would devour her own. (47)

This poem stands out as strikingly different from those which precede it in significant ways. First, there is the sustained presence of a speaking subject; secondly, this is a voice which is no longer an impersonal, recording vehicle, but rather one which is intensely implicated in the images with which it presents the reader; lastly, and most tellingly, this poem comes very close to acknowledging a deep split in a feminine consciousness, and to recognizing this as somehow fundamentally self-destructive.

For its ambivalent treatment of both a speaking poetic consciousness and a troublesome and clearly feminine alter-ego, "Nightmare" in several ways anticipates "After Rain" (1956), a poem universally recognized by her critics as a pivotal Page poem. Here, for the first time and in sharp contrast to all that has come before, Page openly claims her poetic vision as *belonging* to a gendered self; not as some ethereal, mystical, feminine flux of images, but concretely: it is "a woman's wardrobe of the mind/Such female whimsy. . . ." Though this reclamation of a feminine identity is disturbingly self-deprecatory, it also appears as a necessary first step in a move toward a new wholeness. The poem moves from its habitual impulse of image-making ("garden abstracted, geometry awash") to a recognition of the depersonalizing effects of such an impersonal aesthetic:

I suffer shame in all these images.
The garden is primeval, Giovanni
in soggy denim squelches by my hub
over his ruin, . . .
I find his ache exists beyond my rim
and almost weep to see a broken man
made subject to my whim.

"[S]ubject to her whim" recalls Page's characterization of her poetic vision as "female whimsy" at the beginning of the poem: Giovanni the man is both subject *of* and *to* her poem. As such, he can only exist within the poem as aestheticized object ("so beautiful and diademmed"); the genuine pain and disappointment of the human *subject* lies "beyond [the] rim" of the poet's

vision. One is reminded of the stenographers, typists, and salt mine workers of her early socialist poems; is this an implicit acknowledgment of their failure, now an embarrassment? It is noteworthy that such a recognition is accompanied by, indeed, is only possible because accompanied by, the poet's embracing of her own subjectivity.

(Re)introducing the poet's subjectivity, however, is not the only modernist taboo which Page flouts in this poem; she also dares to speak of "a heart that knows tears are a part of love." If she was not already another sentimental female poet,[13] she undeniably earns herself the stigma here; in this sense, "After Rain" represents quite a risk. Here is where I part ways with Rosemary Sullivan, whose 1978 "Heart a Size Larger than Seeing" focuses primarily on this poem. Sullivan identifies the self-reflexive moments of the poem as pointing to the tension between self-effacement before the image and self-annihilation, something like what I have been trying to do with the earlier poems. Her portrait of the poet is disturbingly passive, painting her awash in images merely "given" her, a reading which Page endorses by claiming to be a muse poet. This, too, is where I am a resistant reader of Page's own reading, and would suggest, rather, that she was certainly aware that by the fact of her gender alone she risked the most damaging of assessments by her modernist brethren: being labeled a *sentimental poetess.* This implies that her early, highly formalized, self-contained, crystalline, imagistic poems were the result, not of the gift of the muse, but of carefully honed and applied formalist techniques—certainly suited to her talent as a poet, but perhaps also partially out of an awareness of the risk which her gender already constituted in terms of her critical reception. In my reading, then, Page is taking, and taking responsibility for, a great risk in these lines: they are nothing less than a very serious critique of modernism's anti-sentimental and anti-subjective stance.

Yet another poem written in the same period, "Arras" (1954), testifies to this new direction in Page's poetry, a direction which promises to be a significant departure from the formalist impersonality of her poems of the 1940s. Indeed, the poem's opening line invites us to "Consider a new habit—classical." Yet the following stanza will witness the "insinuation" of that least 'classical' of beasts, the excessively voluptuous peacock, whose "screaming" and gaudy "jewels and silk" embarrass the poet in her 'classical' intent, so that she does not claim her creation: "Through whose eye . . . ?" she asks, feigning ignorance. The denial of her participation in the creation of the striking image sparks

something of an identity crisis: "Who am I/or who am I become that walking here/I am observer, other, Gemini . . . ?" This doubling and division of the self is reminiscent of the 'split' in the poet's consciousness which surfaced in the earlier poem "Nightmare." Is it, in fact, the 'classical' impulse behind her formalist poetry which is at the root of the poet's alienation from herself?

Pleading powerlessness ("I ask, what did they deal me in this pack?"), she hesitates before the entrance to the two-dimensional world of the poet: "My fingers slipping on a monarch's face/twitch and grow slack." The two dimensions of the arras and the cards, like those of the blank page, are a formidable challenge to the poetic imagination: "The tines of a fork pushed vertically through the paper appear as four thin silver ellipses"; how to suggest "their unity, even . . . the entire fork—large, glimmering, extraordinary", or "catch some overtone which will convey that great resonant silver object"? ("Traveler, Conjuror, Journeyman" 184). Finding neither hand nor heart to shore her up against the unrelenting demands of poetry ("Is it I who am forgotten, dismembered, escaped, deaf, uncollected?" [183]), the poet considers all-out flight as a possible solution. But the poet's dilemma is an inescapable one: should the once spinning world of the imagination grind to a halt, the "stillness" proves as unrelenting, even damning.

In the midst of the stillness, graphically isolated in the blank space between two stanzas on the page, a confession: "It was my eye." Only by claiming the extravagant and "voluptuous" image as her own will the poem move forward again. And it does so in strikingly erotic imagery:

> Voluptuous it came.
> Its head the ferrule and its lovely tail
> folded so sweetly; it was strangely slim
> to fit the retina. And then it shook[.]

Though much more oblique an admission than that of "After Rain," the poet's eye is clearly figured as feminine: its adequate image is that of female genitalia receptive to the phallic peacock of her creation.[14] This sexual metaphor for poetic vision in Page marks a significant shift in the nature of that very vision: no longer figured as drowning, but as orgasm; not a splitting of selves, but unification of once separate beings. For the poet to announce flatly, "It was *my eye*," is to collapse deliberately the distinction she was so anxious to make in her earlier work between the tyrannous subjective eye and objective poetic vision; indeed, she is moving toward marriage, reunion, restoration and re-vision.

Like "After Rain," "Arras" seems to be striving for a new wholeness of vision; and again, the dramatic entrance into the poem of the poet's subjective, female self seems to be a primary step in this endeavour. These two poems mark, however, not the dawning of a new era of poetry for Page, but rather the beginning of a ten-year silence, about which she remains disturbingly silent. If we read them in retrospect, we find alongside the promise of a new vision (a "heart a size/larger than seeing") a foreboding sense of helplessness, a groping for a restored wholeness without the certainty of where to turn next, in both her appeal to external forces in the concluding stanza of "After Rain" (that the birds "choir") and in the startlingly prosaic query of "Arras": "Does no one care?" She gives a clue to the ensuing silence, perhaps, when she speaks of her sojourns in Brazil and Mexico, the time period which perhaps tellingly corresponds to her poetic silence:

> My first foreign language—to live in, that is—and the personality changes that accompany it. One is a toy at first, a doll. Then a child. Gradually, as vocabulary increases, an adult again. But a different adult. Who am I, then, that language can so change me? What is personality, identity? And the deeper change, the profounder understanding—partial, at least—of what man is, devoid of words. Where could wordlessness lead? Shocks, insights, astounding and sudden walls ("Questions and Images" 187).

If, as she intimates, she has discovered a profound and inextricable link between the self and the language with which one constructs the world, the implications for her earlier notion that the subjective I/eye is to be, and can in fact be, overcome, are devastating. And indeed, we have already seen her moving toward a recognition of this sort.

Once again speaking of the time-frame which corresponds to her period of 'silence'—at least in terms of poetic production—Page wrote in 1969:

> I began to suspect, in what would once have been near-heresy, that drawing and writing were not only ends in themselves, as I had previously thought, but possibly the means to an end which I could barely imagine—a method, perhaps, of tracing the 'small design'. And the very emergence of these ideas began to clear a way, remove the furniture and provide a new space ("Questions and Images" 190).

This suggests that her 'silence' was not an unproductive one, in spite of the absence of publication. In this "new space" cleared away, Page's poetry of the late 1960s confidently picks up the more tentative thread woven throughout "After Rain" and "Arras." This later poetry strives after a wholeness of vision which now readily embraces the sensual (as in "Cry Ararat,"

1967) rather than seeking to move beyond it or somehow eradicate it as tyrannical, and most notably by a dramatization of the interaction of a poetic self—unabashedly gendered female—with the images of her creation: not self-effacement before the verbal image, but a negotiation of the self and its boundaries in the creation of image. This process is eroticized in "Another Space" (1969) in a way which recalls the imagery of "Arras."

In yet another dream-poem, the poet here finds herself being 'reeled in' by a dancing circle of figures on the beach. Significantly, the volition of the poet is in play: she is "willingly pulled by their rotation." As she approaches, the figures are more clearly distinguishable as figures in "'a Chagall'—/each fiddling on an instrument." The feathered bows of the fiddles then transform into arrows, one of which is shot by the 'headman',

> to strike the absolute centre of my skull
> *my* absolute center somehow
> with such skill
> such staggering lightness
> that the blow is love.

Constance Rooke points out that the bow transformed into arrow at the center of this poem (and the center of the poet's skull) is related to the aboriginal bone of "Arras" transformed into phallic peacock (143). Both images make use of the sexual in order to translate the necessary loss of self in the act of creation, without the terrifying overtones which have elsewhere accompanied the poet's depiction of this necessary loss. The result is no longer the radical split or dissolution of the self, but rather a healing dissolution of barriers dividing selves:

> And something in me melts.
> It is as if a glass partition melts—
> or something I had always thought was glass—
> some pane that halved my heart
> is proved, in its melting, ice.

In a single movement, the terrifying stillness of "Arras" is dispelled, and the prayed-for new vision of "After Rain" is realized:

> And to-fro all the atoms pass in bright osmosis
> hitherto
> in stasis locked
> where now a new
> direction opens like an eye.

I suggest that Page is finally enabled to attain the glimpsed-at wholeness of "After Rain" and "Arras" only by subscribing to a "near-heresy" in modernist terms: "that drawing and writing [are] not only ends in themselves . . . but possibly the means to an end. . . ." Abandoning the formalist doctrine of "art for art's sake"—to which the notion of impersonality is wed—allows Page to use poetry itself as a means of revisioning and actively constructing a healed and whole poetic self—more explicitly, the poetic self of a *woman*, a concept which modernism had split open and apart, alienating herself from herself. Page's poetic vision is, in turn, transformed, no longer exacting the execration of the 'subjective eye,' but rather, "requir[ing] the focus of the total I" ("Cry Ararat!").

NOTES

1 Such as A. J. M. Smith in "The Poetry of P. K. Page" (22).

2 Gilbert and Gubar are here representative of a certain realist current in feminist criticism, often referred to as Anglo-American feminism (although the tag has little to do with national boundaries anymore). From this perspective, the opacity, difficulty, or simply the rejection of a realist treatment of human (female) experience could become grounds for suspicion, and the term "impersonal" itself a scathing critique. The most cited example of feminist critical ambivalence toward "female" modernism is Elaine Showalter's characterization of Virginia Woolf's "androgynous aestheticism" as "impersonal and defensive," "a strategic retreat, and not a victory; a denial of feeling, and not a mastery of it. . . . a response to the dilemma of a woman writer embarrassed and alarmed by feelings too hot to handle without risking real rejection. . . ." (26, 28); to which we might add the indicting generalization of a critic such as Suzanne Juhaz, who reads Marianne Moore as "representative of women who are poets in the first half of the century," and her poetry as a "concentration upon technical brilliance coupled with a marked exclusion of feminine experience from art" (35-6).

3 Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* is one of the best and most comprehensive histories of women in the modernist movement. See also Mary Loeffelholz's *Experimental Lives: Women and Literature, 1900-1945*.

4 See Christine van Boheemen, "'The Language of Flow': Joyce's Dispossession of the Feminine in *Ulysses*," in *Joyce, Modernity, and its Mediation*, ed. Christine van Boheemen (Amsterdam, 1989); Derek Attridge, "Molly's Flow: The Writing of 'Penelope' and the Question of Women's Language," *Modern Fiction Studies* 39 (1989): 543-65; Jeri Johnson, "'Beyond the Veil': *Ulysses*, Feminism, and the Figure of Woman," in *Joyce, Modernity, and its Mediation*, ed. Christine van Boheemen (Amsterdam, 1989); Suzette A. Henke, *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire* (London, 1990); Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, ed. Sneja Gunew (London, 1991) 224-30; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York, 1984).

5 For a theoretical elaboration of this model, see Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in*

the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.

6 About whom Eliot once said: "Miss Moore's poetry is as 'feminine' as Christina Rossetti's, one never forgets that it is written by a woman; but with both one never thinks of this particularity as anything but a positive virtue" (149). Such a left-handed compliment is a measure of how very thin was the ice upon which these women had to tread.

7 This is one of the more 'objective' dismissals. She is often quite openly castigated for "wanting to be one of the boys," or labeled "Eliot's hyacinth girl," because "both sexually and aesthetically Moore could be counted on to observe a ladylike decorum" (Erkkila, 102). And indeed, the male critics seemed to appreciate this quality in her.

8 For these observations on "The Stenographers," I cite Professor Brian Trehearne, whose seminar discussions and conversation—in particular, the suggestion that an aesthetic of impersonality posed a special problem for Page—were the inspiration and occasion for this paper.

9 As opposed to Elaine Showalter's *gynocriticism*, her coinage for distinguishing between *feminist critique*, reading 'as a woman', i. e., deploying a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (usually reserved for men's texts), and reading the woman writer 'as a woman.'

10 Page has spoken of the 'gifts' of her muse as being "just like water rushing" (Pearce, 34).

11 See "Only Child," "Little Girls," "Boy with a Sea Dream," "Blowing Boy," "Young Girls," "Morning, Noon and Night," and "Images of Angels."

12 At this point, turning briefly to Page's 1944 novella "The Sun and the Moon" proves an informative and useful digression. The heroine, Kristin, has an empathic gift which allows her to enter into an ecstatic identification with, and feel herself continuous with, things like rocks and trees. When she meets and falls in love with Carl, an artist, sun to her moon, she discovers that her love for Carl saps his identity and talent. The night before their wedding, she decides to release him, and uses her empathic gift to annihilate her own identity and transform herself into a tree. The implications of this highly *sentimental* story, as well as Page's own reticence about publishing it, are helpful things to bring to an examination of her poetry. That Kristin's gift of empathy with objects is an analog to Page's own poetic vision seems apparent (indeed, Constance Rooke does not hesitate to take this "as *evidence* of the author's own empathic knowledge" [114] [italics mine]), that this gift is both necessary to experience an authentic 'reality' fully and also threatening to personal identity seems obvious; and that this ecstatic and annihilating gift for empathy is located in a feminine consciousness seems significant, together with the fact that the story was published under a pseudonym: a constructed and alternative identity clearly meant to keep the story and its possible implications out of the poetry.

13 Desmond Pacey, in 1954, characterized Page's poetry as "a sensitive woman's response to the world of war, want, and fascism," and noted that circa 1945 "Miss Page" had seemed likely to earn herself the distinction of "leading poetess of Canada" (Dudek, 167).

14 Rooke elaborates on the sexual imagery of this stanza, which she takes to signify the equation of "vision and love", "so that the peacock (gloriously male) enters both arras and woman through the poet's eye" ("Approaching P. K. Page's 'Arras'" 141).

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