

# A SIZE LARGER THAN SEEING

## *The Poetry of P. K. Page\**

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A POET'S IDENTITY MAY BE FOUND in the habits of feeling and insight that are particularly, almost obsessively, her own and which distinguish her poetry from that of other writers. Occasionally an individual poem can be found which defines a poet's sensibility. The poem "After Rain" provides such a focus in P. K. Page's poetry. With a remarkable acuity, she explores the dimensions of her own poetic temperament, exposing both the strengths and the potential vulnerability of her art. Like so many of Page's poems, "After Rain" describes a simple domestic occurrence (in this case a woman and a gardener examining a garden) pushed to a level of hallucinatory intensity where insight becomes possible. Here, the poet describes her mind as a woman's wardrobe of female whimsy and there follows a brilliant complex of images, propelled by fantastic associative leaps:

I none too sober slipping in the mud  
where rigged with guys of rain  
the clothes-reel gauche  
as the rangey 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.<sup>1</sup>

Page is a kind of conjuror playing her own private linguistic game and she could seemingly go on indefinitely manipulating images with this dexterity. Rarely

\* In view of recent publications, *Canadian Literature* wishes to state that this article was accepted in March 1976.

has one so complete a sense of a poet luxuriating in language. Yet the whole momentum of the poem is reversed with the remarkable line: "I suffer shame in all these images." This line, with its powerful anguish, is the pivot of Page's poetics, for here she articulates one of the deepest impulses of her work. She has such a remarkable verbal gift that the image-making process can become almost too seductive. In her hands, images are self-generating, and multiply and reproduce in a kind of literary osmosis. Thus one has the sense in her early poetry of images taking over and sidetracking the poem into perspectives that the theme does not suggest. "After Rain" is an extraordinary poem in that Page senses not only the technical, but also the theoretical implications of her susceptibility to image.

Perhaps this can be clarified through an exploration of Page's attitude toward metaphor. She recognizes metaphor as the poet's most perfect instrument. She writes in an essay on A. M. Klein that metaphor is a way of seeing; it "'gives two for one' — gives two *in* one. Two or more separate ideas, objects, images, fuse. In so doing generate energy. Illuminate."<sup>2</sup> Yet there is a danger in this for the kind of poet Page is, and she herself seems to intuit it: the danger that the energy generated can be illusory. The condition where metaphor can be made to reverberate indefinitely, where everything can be seen in terms of everything else, can lead language away from insight and make it an autonomous game, an evasion of clarity. The emphasis must be on *meaning*.

Page is an almost entirely visual poet. Her imagistic dexterity is based on a sensibility that is sensual and, in fact, her sensitivity to physical image is so extreme that it is as if the sensory perceptors had been stripped bare. In moments of fantasy, word free-fall, nature and its particulars appear in her poetry as generative, life-energizing, and there is a peculiar empathic intensity in her response to it. There is a negative counterpart to such moments, however, in poems of vertigo which describe the visual world as aggressively assaulting the perceiver; poems like "Vegetable Island," where the individual is invaded and infected by the sensual world, "has no strength to meet a tree / debauched with blossoms" and must seek to erase "the touch and scent of flowers."

In 1945 P. K. Page published her first and only novel, *The Sun and the Moon*, under the pseudonym Judith Cape.<sup>3</sup> In a curious way it encapsulates these two alternative responses to the natural world. Its heroine, born during a lunar eclipse, has a devastating capacity for empathic response to nature. In seemingly neurotic states, she is able to identify so completely with nature that she becomes inanimate rock, or tree. Throughout the book, there is a curious sense of reciprocity, of fluid interchange between the human and the natural. The heroine's empathic gift permits her to perceive the static reality of inanimate things; chameleon-like, she can know "the still sweet ecstasy of a change in kind." The author is ambiguous in her attitude toward her heroine; on the one hand, her protean gift of self-effacement gives her access to ecstatic moments of identification with nature. There are con-

vincing passages where the metamorphosis is outward — the heroine becomes a rock, a chair, a tree, experiencing these forms of existence in moments of identity. But there is an alternative rhythm where the self is invaded, and becomes the receptacle of external objects. In fact the heroine becomes succubus; not only her identity, but also the identity of the other is destroyed by her chameleon presence. To my mind comes the analogue of Keats' "Camelion Poet": "When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated."<sup>4</sup> To control this invasion an extraordinary exertion of will is necessary. For the poet, this means a control through technique, verbal dexterity. But P. K. Page's greatest dilemma is to ensure that this control is not sterile, that language is explored as experience, not evasion.

This, then, is the concern of the persona in "After Rain." With a baroque extravagance, the poet's mind builds from the visual assault of nature an exotic web of fragmentary images. They seem to metamorphose spontaneously and any attempt to hold the poet to an emotional or visual consistency is futile. Yet the incompleteness of the poet's private image world is focused suddenly by the presence of the other, the gardener. The poet is trapped by her remarkable responsiveness to nature. Images of rim and hub define the private space which circumscribes her, making her fantasy exclusive, self-involved. The poet asks to break from self-involvement to another kind of seeing, and this appeal is at the centre of Page's work:

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

Here is the paradox: a sensibility so richly susceptible to sensual detail, to "each bright glimpse of beauty," that even the sense of self, of separateness from the physical world, seems threatened. To the poet this means an almost unlimited store of image and metaphor, but without a controlling principle. Page recognizes the dilemma at the core of her imagistic suggestibility and she would be "unsexed" by the myriad images which seem to assault the eye in "After Rain." She has sensed the need to convert image into symbol, that painful ritual which the poet must impose on himself. She must seek a poetic order or rationale for the myriad details. The whole she seeks is another order of perception altogether, "larger than seeing." The *eye* becomes the most potent image in her work. It is through the visionary eye of the imagination that the marvelous involution takes

place: from the multiplicity of sensual detail to the controlling principle of symbol: "The eye altering, alters all."

P. K. PAGE SEEMS TO HAVE INTUITED HER SUBJECT from the beginning, but it has taken her time to bring her full capacities to bear on it. It is fascinating to read through her entire work, watching as she ferrets out the metaphoric world that corresponded to the needs of her sensibility. She is an intuitive poet, one of the empathizers, and reading her *Poems Selected and New* the image comes to mind of the exotic "animal" entitled "And You, What do you Seek?" which illustrates the cover of her 1967 *Cry Ararat!*<sup>5</sup> It is a perfect image for the poet: ornate and beautiful. Its thin sensory projectile extended, the animal seems propelled by a blind empathic energy that depends upon another order of intuitive vision in its infinitely patient probing.

Page has published four volumes of poetry — a total of 114 poems, not including poems published in magazines and never collected. *Poems Selected and New* is her definitive volume to date. It is not, however, ordered chronologically, and to have a sense of her development one must revert to earlier books. She began her poetic career with a reputation as a poet of social commitment and is probably still best known for the poems of the 1940's written while she was a member of the Montreal *Preview* group of poets. This is unfortunate because her "socialist" poems are, to my mind, her least successful. In fact few subjects could have done more to distract Page from her finest gifts. Like Wallace Stevens, she is almost entirely a poet of the imagination; her poetry has more to do with folklore, myth, and archetype than with objective time, history, and social fact. A fear of egocentricity may have led her to seek the supposed objectivity of the socialist theme, but it was a direction that led to a deep split at the core of those early poems. Many of the best of them describe the dilemmas of office girls, with an obviously genuine compassion. Yet even the good poems like "The Stenographers" are oddly unsatisfying because the poet's verbal facility betrays her. The attention she gives to metaphor distracts from the human dilemma that is her theme. Images seem self-conscious, even flippant: "handkerchiefs between the breasts, alive / flutter like pallid bats" or "the pin men of madness in marathon trim / race round the track of the stadium pupil." We tire of the surrealistic brilliance of metaphor. The poems, as John Sutherland once wrote, suffer from monotony of form; for even excessive variety is eventually repetitious.<sup>6</sup> It is the personal poems from among the early ones that are most powerful. The disjunction that mars the others is not present either because metaphor is subordinated to subject or the spontaneous exfoliation of metaphor is itself the poem's theme.

Many critics have been puzzled by the incipient terror under the smooth,

urbane surface of the early poems, betrayed by the hallucinatory intensity of images like "the pool brims like a crying eye," or in poems such as "Some There Are Fearless" and "Element," a fantasy of escape in a dream of emersion into the anonymous dark. The cause of this pervasive sense of fear is unlocated in any specific way, but it does seem to be metaphysical in implication. One of the best of the early poems is "If It Were You," which describes the approach of madness and details the physical sensation of vertigo with terrifying precision. The poem's impact comes from the immediacy of the personal address and from throwaway lines like "If it were you . . . not me this time," which buckle against the tight control of the imagery. The experience described is one of entrapment in the blind circle of self with the mind held in "walls of air," "single and directionless in space." It is as if the spinning world of "After Rain" has suddenly solidified. A recurring image of stasis in a metaphoric garden, "the spinning world . . . stuck upon its poles" is Page's private image of hell:

And there you might stay forever, mechanically  
occupied, but if you raised your head  
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.

The verbal dexterity that propels the images through several involutions here perfectly transcribes the sense of diminishing focus that the poet wants to convey; and there is a rhythmic precision that keeps everything under control and leads inexorably to the final couplet: "as all the exquisite unborns of your dreams / deserted you to snigger behind their hands?" Page has written in an essay on A. M. Klein that she was struck by the way in which, "for all his acceptance of ideological and psychological theory, he seemed to reach beyond both to a larger reality. And this, though I comprehended it only vaguely, I recognized as real."<sup>7</sup> Many have tried to account for the anguished sense of loss in the early poetry as a longing to return to the pristine innocence of childhood, but, of course, this is only a metaphor. Deeper at core is this reaching beyond to a larger reality, intuited in a poem like "If It Were You," and articulated with a growing assurance throughout her work. The discrepancy between the ideal world of the imagination, the potent world of dream, and the real world of the senses becomes one of her most obsessive subjects. Her finest early poem, "Stories of Snow," describes this with exquisite precision. It is one of those rare things, a perfect poem, in which language and metaphor have a compelling inevitability and rightness. The poem is a kind of parable. In countries of lush vegetation, the imagination seeks

the opposite, the stark imagery of snow; as if the imagination, never satisfied with the real, must seek the fantasy, the ideal, impossible other. And any attempt to match the made to the sensed always falls short of the dream; the dreamer of snow is left with one of those bizzare glass globes enclosing a winter scene, familiar from everyone's childhood, now locked safely in a teakwood cabinet — a poignant image of the atrophied imagination. To lose the dream causes anguish; finding himself mistaken in his expectations that the dream has been actualized, the dreamer "lies back weeping." Histrionic, except that the poem makes us believe in snow as symbolic of imaginative vision, and believe that vision is the only means to Ararat, the paradise regained. The poem has an extraordinary surreal quality as images devolve into their opposites: lush green to abstract white; the swan a warm metamorphosis of snow. There is a frightening dimension to the poem when the imagination's hunger becomes so intense that even death seems a gentle seduction. The poem ends with one of those remarkable inversions that were to become Page's signature:

And stories of this kind are often told  
in countries where great flowers bar the roads  
with reds and blues which seal the route to snow —  
as if, in telling, raconteurs unlock  
the colour with its complement and go  
through to the area behind the eyes  
where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies.

Commenting in retrospect on the image, Page has written: "My subconscious evidently knew something about the tyranny of subjectivity when it desired to go 'through to the area behind the eyes'." The escape from subjectivity is through the symbol-making process; to understand this process it may be most helpful to turn to another medium altogether.

Given the visual intensity of Page's poetry, it is not surprising to learn that she is also a painter. She began painting in Brazil, when her husband was appointed Canadian ambassador there. In a fascinating essay in *Canadian Literature* called "Questions and Images" she describes how "Brazil pelted me with images." Reduced to wordlessness in a foreign culture, as if "starting again from a pre-verbal state," Page describes how the old compulsion to record, which had been verbal, sought a visual outlet in painting. The image world was rich and suggestive:

What was that tiny fret, that wordless dizzying vibration, the whole molecular dance? . . . What was that golden shimmer, the bright pink shine on the anturias, the delicately and exactly drawn design of the macaw's feathers? Why did I suddenly see with the eye of an ant? Or a fly? The golden — yes, there it was again — web spun by the spider among the leaves of the century plant?<sup>8</sup>

"Brazil," it is clear, is a state of mind: the daylight world of infinitely reverberating detail of a densely textured poem like "After Rain," so clearly transcribed on

many of her canvases. Its counterpart, and the opposite pole of images in her work, is the night (or dream) world of Mexico where she lived for several years:

If Brazil was day, then Mexico was night. All the images of darkness hovered for me in the Mexican sunlight. If Brazil was a change of place, then Mexico was a change of time. One was very close to the old gods here. Death and the old gods . . . Coming as I do from a random or whim-oriented culture, this recurrence and inter-relating of symbols into an ordered and significant pattern — prevalent too in the folk arts of pottery and weaving — was curiously illuminating . . . Great or little, for me it was still a night world — one into which the pattern was pricked like a constellation — bright, twinkling, hard to grasp, harder still to hold. A dreaming world in which I continued to draw and to dream.<sup>9</sup>

The transition from Brazil to Mexico describes a creative metamorphosis: images dissolve into their symbols. The two countries define precisely the *bouleversement* of the final image of "Stories of Snow": from the disturbing multiplicity of detail through the vortex to patterned space. The mandorla or "eye" image occupies the symbolic centre of this pictorial world. On one side of the eye, the sensuous multiple world; when pulled through the aperture, unrefracted whiteness.

Page asks: "I wonder now if 'brazil' would have happened wherever I was?" It is a teasing conundrum. Does the occasion create the artist, or does the place, any place, become catalyst, activating a potential that is incipient? In any case, these two poles, the sensuous day world of "brazil" and the symbol-ridden mystic night world, define a dialectic central to her poetry.

IN AN ESSAY IN *Canadian Literature*, "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman," Page has frankly defined the "larger reality" she seeks as a mystic wholeness. Using a typically domestic image, transformed and made exotic, she writes:

I am a two-dimensional being. I live in a sheet of paper. My home has length and breadth and very little thickness. The tines of a fork pushed vertically through the paper appear as four thin silver ellipses. I may, in a moment of insight, realize that it is more than coincidence that four identical but independent silver rings have entered my world. In a further breakthrough I may glimpse their unity, even sense the entire fork — large, glimmering, extraordinary. Just beyond my sight. Mystifying; marvellous.

My two-dimensional consciousness yearns to catch some overtone which will convey that great resonant silver object.<sup>10</sup>

Only in moments of stillness, at-tension, is such a *bouleversement* of the normal world possible. The ideal condition is one of pure receptivity, inner silence. One thinks of Wordsworth's wise passiveness or Theodore Roethke's long-looking. Such silent patient waiting is an activity more potent than any searching. Thus

Page's best poems always describe still moments of the psyche which reveal the mind in the act of transition to, as her finest poem would have it, another space.

P. K. Page has written: "Most of my poems have been doors closing. A few were doors opening."<sup>11</sup> I find myself turning to Rilke to identify a sense of anguish, mystical in implication, which is beneath the baroque surface of her poems:

Surely there is a degree of need to which the angels must lend ear, radiations of extreme emergency which men do not even perceive, which pass through their dense world and only over yonder, in the angel's aura, strike a gentle, sorrowful note of violet, like a tinge of amethyst in a pocket of rock crystal.<sup>12</sup>

Page's best poems are "radiations of extreme emergency," expressions of a compulsion to find a visionary world commensurate to the needs of the imagination. The penultimate poem of *Poems Selected and New*, "Cry Ararat!" is a poem that seeks to open doors. The title alludes to Mount Ararat, the mountain on which the dove landed after the flood. It is an image of a second Eden, recovered by the imagination in the dream state of "focused reality":

First soft in the distance,  
blue in blue air  
then sharpening, quickening  
taking on green.  
Swiftly the fingers  
seek accurate focus  
(the bird  
has vanished so often  
before the sharp lens  
could deliver it)  
then as if from the sea  
the mountain appears  
emerging new-washed  
growing maples and firs.  
The faraway, here.

Against this image is set the deflation of normal reality:

This is the loss that haunts our daylight hours  
leaving us parched at nightfall  
blowing like last year's leaves  
sibilant on blossoming trees.

The most valued moments in Page's poetry are moments of fantasy and dream because

When dreaming, you desire  
and ask for nothing more  
than stillness to receive  
the I-am animal,



the we-are leaf and flower,  
the distant mountain near.

She is speaking of the state of at-tension when external reality is invested with a sense of presence; a condition known only by the child who lives in a "quick" landscape where objective nature is a world of answering subjects. The adult recovers this world only in rare moments when penetration to the unconscious self in dream states releases the transcendental powers of the self. Page speaks of this self as a "dimensionless point in my absolute centre," to reach which "requires the focus of the total I." The expression describes emotional integration as though consciousness comes into contact with deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substrata of being and to which we rarely penetrate. Such moments are charged with numinous energy and bring a sense of completeness "as if I had drawn a circle in my flight / and filled its shape — / find air a perfect fit." The problem with this emotional kind of mysticism is that the experience is transient, involving an overwhelming sense of revelation of a noetic quality but without intellectual content. It implies another kind of consciousness, non-rational and potential, if rarely actualized. But the intuition remains incomplete and the fall from assurance is inherent in the experience itself. The poet's anguish comes from the recognition that our sense of deepest reality is dependent on whimsy: " 'Must my most exquisite and private dream remain unleavened?' " The poem's chief poignancy lies in its sense of a reality intuited, which must remain forever undefined. The poem ends with the remarkably cogent couplet:

A single leaf can block a mountainside,  
all Ararat be conjured by a leaf.

A perfect couplet to describe the evanescence of the mystic dream. In retrospect, it becomes obvious that the title of the poem is an imperative.

The poem falls short of its dream, and partly for technical reasons. In an effort to convey a sense of mystical reality, Page reverts to traditional symbolism, but it intrudes upon the poem by calling attention to itself. The problem is similar to that of another great poem, Theodore Roethke's "In A Dark Time." In both cases, the poet has no traditional and still workable structure of belief which can provide him with the metaphors essential to his vision. In "Cry Ararat!" we balk at the line "the world stopped at the Word" and in Roethke's poem at the final metaphor: "one is One, free in the tearing wind," because the language carries no realizable meaning; or perhaps, more precisely, because the inherited structure of meaning implicit in the words is too potent. The poet cannot use them without calling on the traditional beliefs that give them meaning. This is not only the poet's responsibility. It is symptomatic of the disjunction at the core of our modern culture that now our most potent metaphors "remain unleavened."

The final poem of *Poems Selected and New*, "Another Space," is P. K. Page's

finest work. Its brilliance is a matter of perfect technical control. Its subject is a dream in which the poet sees a mandala: a personal vision of the archetype of the cosmic dance — the poet, a solitary viewer, is reeled into a human circle connected by an invisible axis to a starry spool. In such a poem, the poet must convince that she offers more than a formal arrangement of archetypal symbols. Page's poem convinces entirely; there is a feeling of recognition, a leap in response as if an elemental feeling larger than personal experience were tapped by the poem. Part of the achievement is a consequence of the rhythmical rightness of the poem. A precision in the use of line break catches the compulsive, hypnotic rhythm of the dream state:

Those people in a circle reel me in.  
Down the whole length of golden beach I come  
willingly pulled by their rotation  
slow  
as a moon pulls waters  
on a string  
their turning circle winds around its rim.

There is a pulsative "surging and altering" rhythm even to the images which alternate in a sequence that one can only call an exfoliation of images: from rose to sunflower to bumble top to Chagall figures. One has the sense of looking into a kaleidoscope. No change is abrupt; as in dream, the principle is one of metamorphosis.

The primitive ritual dance (a reference to Chagall brings to mind the Chasidic dance)<sup>13</sup> expresses the ultimate wholeness and harmony of a universe that is forever surging and altering, yet forever one. The dream's meaning comes as a revelation of a subjective synthesis as the barriers of the self dissolve. The experience is so simple and so profound that it staggers the mind. I think of a line by Theodore Roethke to describe the change of state: "To what more vast permission have I come." The oxymoronic quality of the dream is caught in the image "staggering lightness," as the dreamer is pulled into the archetype by the "blow of love." Throughout the poem Page has used traditional diction — circle, axis, fixed parts, rose — but in such a way that the private integrity of the experience is never invaded, and yet a recognizable structure is given to the whole. Traditionally, as in Sir John Davies' *Orchestra* or in the *Divine Comedy*, the controlling principle of the cosmic dance is Divine Love. Page convinces us that the breaking down of the isolation of the self in the dream state gives access to an overwhelming sense of numinous energy, and that to define the impulse behind this most profound reaching out beyond the limitations of the self, the only adequate word is love.

Stasis, solidification, has always described a hell state for Page; the bright osmosis in which the self dissolves and is integrated with its deeper substrata is

described as a molecular dance. Fluidity leads to new direction, another seeing in a "dimension I can barely guess":

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.

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

It is fitting that these stanzas recall the earlier prayer: "And choir me too to keep my heart a size / larger than seeing." The momentary glimpse of an informing structure initiates the longed-for break from solipsism. The poem's humility is moving. It recognizes that the trembling or shaking is in the human eye, but that this does not call into question or invalidate the assurance of informing structure. And only once that order is sensed can the validity of the personal or other persons be reached; only then does the heart melt. This understanding points a "new direction" in Page's poetry as she continues to explore her vision of the poet as Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Poems Selected and New* (Toronto: Anansi, 1974). All other references are to this edition.
- <sup>2</sup> "The Sense of Angels," *Dialog* (Passover 1973), pp. 18-19.
- <sup>3</sup> Rpt. in *The Sun and the Moon: and Other Fictions* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973).
- <sup>4</sup> John Keats, "To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818," *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), pp. 279-80.
- <sup>5</sup> *Cry Ararat!: Poems New and Selected* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967).
- <sup>6</sup> *Essays, Controversies and Poems*, ed. Miriam Waddington (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), p. 107.
- <sup>7</sup> "The Sense of Angels," p. 19.
- <sup>8</sup> "Questions and Images," *Canadian Literature*, 41 (Summer 1969), p. 18.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>10</sup> "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman," *Canadian Literature*, 46 (Autumn 1970), p. 36.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted by Tom Marshall in "Inferno, Paradise and Slapstick," *Canadian Literature*, 64 (Spring 1975), pp. 104-7.
- <sup>12</sup> *Letters to Benvenuto*, trans. Heinz Norden (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 17.
- <sup>13</sup> Marshall, p. 104.