DOUBLE LANDSCAPE

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THE CENTRAL TENSION in P. K. Page's poetry arises from the effort to mediate between the private world and the external one. It is possible to describe this tension in political terms, but it would be misleading, in my opinion, to trace its source to a sympathy for political minorities or for the underdog or for the "victims" of society who are isolated in some way, but cannot subscribe to their external reality. These elements exist, but are not, I think her major preoccupation. As I hope to show, her "involvement" is primarily that of an artist, rather than political. The two kinds of involvement are not mutually exclusive; but the second is subordinate to the first, and is, indeed, an extension of it. That the artist must make the effort to mediate between the internal and the external is central to her poetry. No matter how painful the process may be there can be no turning away, no ivory tower aestheticism. Even the observer's stance is rejected and though several of her poems deal with it, she is extremely critical of its validity. That the temptation exists is an almost inevitable result of the tension at the core of her poetry. The individual trapped in his ivory tower of memory and reminiscence, the victim in the grip of impossible social circumstances, are merely off-shoots of the central persona: the woman caught within the confines of her inner reality, her personal Noah's Ark, seeking some way to reconcile the internal and external, to make a harmony out of the double landscapes. And for this woman the essential mode of mediation is the artist's activity, the painter's art (helped out, as always, with a little luck of what is otherwise known as grace).

Initially an examination of her "political" poems — those that deal with victimization in some form or another — is instructive. Not only do they clarify her position, but even in these poems it is possible to see a secondary issue emerging that is more characteristic of the body of her poetry. The *Preview* group of which she was a member had leftist leanings, and several of her poems reveal

what may be termed a "pro-proletarian" consciousness. In poems such as "The Stenographers", "Shipbuilding Office" and "Offices"[1] (quoted below) she seems to be drawing upon personal experience.

> Oh believe me, I have known offices —
> young and old in them both —
> morning and evening;
> felt the air
> stamp faces into a mould . . .

There is "class consciousness" in her poetry, but it is a rather white-collar, anglicized one.[2] Poems such as "Bank Strike — Quebec — 1942" and "Squatters — 1946" deal specifically with strikes, but her most obviously political poem perhaps is "Election Day".[3] In the poem she votes against the Tories and casts her ballot, "a bounder, in the box". She has, of course, deliberately stolen the word "bounder" from the vocabulary of the class that she votes against, but her very familiarity with it gives her away. Again, when the election is over, the threat at the end of the poem, whether it refers to a future Tory defeat or a coming insurrection (probably the former), sounds childishly defiant and quite hopelessly innocuous:

> I pass the empty lot. The old dog
> has trotted off to bed. The neighbourhood
> is neatly hedged with privet still, the lights
> are blinking off in the enormous homes.
> Gentlemen, for the moment, you may sleep.

What is most interesting about the poem, however, is the distinction that P. K. Page makes as a matter of course between the private and personal. When she goes out to vote, she leaves behind the "tight zone" of her "tight and personal thought". As she listens to the election results she is aware that for the moment her privacy is no longer intact, though on this occasion she does not seem to mind very much.

> Radio owns my room as the day ends.
> The slow return begins, the voices call
> the yes's and the no's that ring or toll;
> the districts all proclaim themselves in turn
> and public is my room, not personal.

It is difficult not to feel that she has done her duty as a good citizen and can now return to her normal pre-occupations.

Certain other poems are concerned with issues that have only recently become "political". "Outcasts" appears to deal with sexual deviants.

> Subjects of bawdy jokes and by the police
> treated as criminals, these lovers dwell
> deep in their steep albino love —
> a tropic area where nothing grows.

"The Condemned" describes people in prison, "In separate cells they tapped the forbidden message". And the poem "His Dream"[4] could be given an interpretation that the Women's Liberation Movement would approve of, though it would be misleading, I think, to see P. K. Page as a Feminist on the strength of one poem.

> He dreamed his eyes made colours as they looked
> at roses, sky and sun,
>
> . . .
>
> He was charmed
> that all were eager for his coloured stare.
>
> But, for the woman, he was unprepared.
> She stood beside him but refused to take
> what she was offered, even with a choice
>
> . . .
>
> . . . one by one
> each object he had coloured now rejected
> the colour he had given it, instead
> made of itself the colour it had needed:
> sky-blue, sun-yellow, and the roses — red.

It is possible to see the woman as a figure denying a male definition of her, but it is more accurate, I think, to see her as the artist's conscience refusing any mediation that is not truthful.

As a rule, the poems in which P. K. Page deals with tyranny in one form or another reveal a sympathy for the victims rather than an identification with them. There are, however, two poems, which to my mind, form an exception. These are "Only Child" and "Portrait of Marina".[5] In the first the only child grows up into his mother's image of him, "her very affectionate son, the noted naturalist", but at the very moment of her triumph his dream recurs. He finds himself catching the birds one by one, naming them, breaking their necks, and tossing them on to the wide material lap. Marina is a more passive victim. She is made to devote her life to the re-creation of her father's sea experience in tapestry.

Now, what is most noteworthy about the poems "Only Child" and "Portrait of Marina" is not the fact of victimization as such, but the precise way in which the tyranny is exercised. The only child is not permitted to work out the relationship between his feeling for the birds and the fact of their external existence in his own terms. Instead, he has to accept the relationship worked out by his mother. As it happens, for her, mere labels and classifications suffice as mediators.

> There were times he went away — he knew not where
> . . .
> suffered her eagerness on his return
> for news of him — where had he been, what done?
> He hardly knew, nor did he wish to know
> or think about it vocally or share
> his private world with her. . . .
>
> . . .
>
> He had no wish to separate them in groups
> or learn the latin.
> or, waking early to their song remark, "the thrush,"
> with certain swervings flying,
> "Ah, the swifts."

Marina's case is a little different. She has a specific task to perform. She has to make the picture out of blue wool for her father, but the experience out which she creates is not her own.

> To her the name Marina simply meant
> he held his furious needle for her thin
> fingers to thread again with more blue wool
> to sew the ocean of his memory.

The picture that it would have been right for Marina to make would have involved the inter-action of her private universe with the external world. This is what Marina has been denied. And this mediation between the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the world is P. K. Page's central concern. The problem of power relationships is peripheral and only arises when the freedom to mediate is denied. The denial of this freedom is tyranny. There is an involvement, but it cannot be expressed adequately in purely political terms. Even in the poems which are concerned with power relationships her chief preoccupation is still in evidence.

From the foregoing it should be possible to guess that P. K. Page would not agree with the point of view of the isolationists, those who deliberately cut them-

selves off from their surroundings. The poems in which she deals with people who take the observer's stance, the outsiders, foreigners, permanent tourists, do, in fact, show that she is familiar with the stance, but considers it wrong, even unnecessary. There is a hint of compassion for such people, and the reason is obvious. They have, of their own will, deprived themselves of the chance to mediate between the internal and the external. They are their own victims, and the fact of their estrangement denies them the possibility of harmony. She addresses the "foreigner" as follows:

> A room will hold you a smile
> but you will not look.
> From a long past of walking you have come
> wearing blinkers and the balanced look.

"The Permanent Tourists" are described as "the terrible tourists with their empty eyes/ longing to be filled with monuments". And of the "Isolationist" she says that he "Lived like a saint and finds himself a leper". Even the poem "Old Man",[6] in which she is reasonably sympathetic to the European emigré, who does not feel at home in Canada, ends with the lines:

> He hates this pallid place
> and dreams of a bright green future in the past.

The irony is evident. For the totally estranged there can be no reaching out from the ark of isolation.

THE MAIN BODY of P. K. Page's poems deals with the individual's attempt to bring the microcosm into alignment with the macrocosm, so to speak, more directly. Very frequently the dichotomy corresponds to two landscapes and almost as frequently one of the two is white, perhaps, and the mediation between the two worlds then corresponds to the painter's activity, or occasionally to that of the gardener. However, it would be a mistake to look for any consistency in the representation of the landscapes or in the way in which the attempt to mediate is viewed. In different poems the snowscape can represent an idealized landscape, a childhood scene, a harsh reality, a blank canvas or an internal dream. Nor is the inner world shown as consistently superior to the external reality. The inner world may correspond to a nightmare, a wishful dream, a pleasant memory, an artificial reality or a genuine perception. Similarly, the

external world may correspond to a reality of false conventions (the tea-table), a man-made dystopia enclosed by office walls, a formal garden, an elaborate tapestry, a climate of winter, a climate of summer, an area of whiteness, or an overgrown area of lush vegetation.

The artist's effort is directed towards bringing the two landscapes into some sort of alignment that permits a glimpse of the truth. Curiously enough this effort is often accompanied by a great deal of pain and the outcome may be either frustration or despair. These negative feelings arise, I think, from four major causes: the stress inherent in the situation; a fear of the more cruel and unkind aspects of the external world; the hopelessness of trying to make other people see what she sees; and an anxiety that the artist in her eagerness to depict what she sees may, in fact, have depicted what she wishes to see. An examination of some of the key poems should make this clear.

The title of an early poem, "Schizophrenic" is revealing:

> Strong for the dive he dived one day at tea —
> the cakes like flowers, the cups dreamy with cream —
> he saw the window a lake and with a scream
> nobody heard, shot by immediacy[7]

The window corresponds to the human eye, of course, which is the gateway between the two worlds.

At times the discrepancy between the two landscapes is indicated in terms of summer and winter. The white sheets of paper that the stenographers use are representative of winter, and may have suggested the thoughts of the ice-man, but these thoughts are, in fact, memories of summer.

> their eyes . . .
> flutter in the snow-storm of paper . . .
>
> . . .
>
> In the pause between the first draft and the carbon
> they glimpse the smooth hours when they were children —
> the ride in the ice-cart, the ice-man's name,
> the end of the route and the long walk home . . .

And since the eye is the gateway between the two worlds, the last lines of the poem have a certain inevitability.

> In their eyes I have seen
> the pin men of madness in marathon trim
> race round the track of the stadium pupil.[8]

The sense of frustration is the result of a total inability to make the two worlds cohere. Even insubstantial memories seem preferable to the mechanical "realities" of office life.

In a later poem, "Arras", the disquiet arises from another cause. The peacock introduced by the eye into the external tapestry is vaguely sinister. The tapestry is like a formal garden.

> But a peacock rattling his rattan tail and screaming
> has found a point of entry. Through whose eye
> did it insinuate in furled disguise . . .
> I confess:
> It was my eye.
> Voluptuous it came.

The sense of fear in the poem derives from the fact that no one else sees it:

> I thought their hands might hold me if I spoke
> . . . but they stand
> as if within a treacle, motionless,
> folding slow eyes on nothing.[9]

Here she almost seems to derive a grim satisfaction from the fact that the peacock is a disturbing element, even though the others fail to perceive it.

There are poems, however, in which P. K. Page shows a mistrust of the painter's activity, particularly of the painter's infusion of colour into objects. To paint can also mean to paint over. She prefers the whiteness to a tinted landscape, and this corresponds in certain poems to a preference for snowscapes. "Stories of Snow" is an example of such a poem:

> Those in the vegetable rain retain
> an area behind their sprouting eyes
> held soft and rounded with the dream of snow.[10]

Now, the distinctly "Canadian" elements in the terms of the dilemma are, of course, obvious: the white landscape, the months of being confined within four walls, the sense of not quite belonging, the duality which arises from a reality within a reality — a temperate almost tropical climate inside and winter outside. However, it is worth pointing out that the traditional associations of snow within the framework of English literature do not correspond to the Canadian experience of snow, and that P. K. Page is aware of the discrepancy and uses it to great effect. In Canada the snow is neither ephemeral, nor exotic, nor merely a cover

for some hidden reality. To a large extent the snow, embodying as it does the menace of cold, is the reality. The deliberate exoticism of the "stories of snow" in juxtaposition with tropical exoticism transfigures the snow stories into a fusion of the extraordinary and the everyday, the fantastic and the familiar, even — if one chooses to use the terms — of the ideal and the real. "Images of Angels" employs a similar technique. In the transfigured landscape (a white and gold landscape) those extraordinary angels "part musical instrument and part daisy"[11] are entirely convincing.

It would be incorrect to assume that the effort to make the two worlds cohere invariably leads to failure or feelings of frustration and suspicion. The writing of the poem is in itself an achievement; so is the transfigured snowscape described above. There are, in addition, certain poems in which the sense of being in harmony with the world comes through more explicitly. "Now This Cold Man . . . " is a case in point. The act of gardening (re-arranging the outside world) corresponds to the activity of the painter; a harmony is achieved, and the thawing of the cold man accords with the external thaw.

> Kneeling in welters of narcissus his
> dry creaking joints bend with a dancer's ease,
> the roughened skin softens beneath the rain . . .
> and something rare and perfect, yet unknown,
> stirs like a foetus just behind his eyes.[12]

The poem "As Ten As Twenty" which appears as "Love Poem" in her first book of poems expresses this feeling of oneness in a different way:

> For we can live now, love;
> a million in us breathe, . . .
> They, in us, free our love,
> make archways of our mouths, . . .

Here the individual breaks through his isolation, his personal "ark", and experiences a feeling of kinship with the whole world. The last stanza can in fact, be interpreted in such a way as to suggest a reference to Noah's ark.

> As ten, as twenty, now
> we break from single thought
> and rid of being two,
> receive them and walk out.[13]

Such an interpretation, perhaps, stretches the imagery a little, but does not alter

the essential meaning. As its first title indicates, it is, of course, a love poem, but it includes the world.

However, it is the poem "Cry Ararat!", the last poem in her last book of poems, which is in my opinion, her most successful effort at bringing the private world and the external world into alignment. "Ararat!" is the cry of the isolated individual trapped within the confines of his private ark. A glimpse of Mount Ararat affords him the hope of a possibility other than the chaos of the flood outside, or the stifling closeness of his own four walls. He need not withdraw into his private world, nor is his individuality submerged in the flood.

> In the dream the mountain near
> but without sound
> A dream through binoculars . . .
> Swiftly the fingers
> Seek accurate focus . . .
> then as if from the sea
> the mountain appears . . .
> These are the dreams that haunt us,
> these the fears.
> Will the grey weather wake us,
> toss us twice in the terrible night to tell us
> the flight is cancelled
> and the mountain lost?
>
> O, then cry Ararat!

The dove returning to the ark with a green twig in her beak serves as a mediating agent. The promise of land that she brings with her justifies the effort, if justification were needed.

> The dove believed
> in her sweet wings and in the rising peak
> with such a washed and easy innocence
> that she found rest on land for the sole of her foot
> and, silver, circled back,
> a green twig in her beak.

The last few lines describe the kind of effort and concentration demanded of the artist.

> The leaves that make the tree by day,
> the green twig the dove saw fit . . .
> The bird in the thicket with his whistle

> the crystal lizard in the grass . . .
> this flora-fauna flotsam, pick and touch
> require the focus of the total I.

It is fitting that this poem should give its name to the book which contains her poems "new and selected". It is a definitive and serious investigation of her theme, and brings the dilemma postulated by her to a final resolution.

As a postscript I cannot help expressing a minor misgiving. Must a deluge occur before such serenity can be achieved?

NOTES

[1] For "The Stenographers" see P. K. Page, *Cry Ararat!* (Toronto/Montreal: McClelland & Stewart, 1967), p. 71; for "Ship-building Office" *Preview*, Montreal, No. 15, August 1943; and for "Offices" *Preview*, No. 16, October 1943.

[2] The poem "Ecce Homo" (*Contemporary Verse*, No. 1, September 1941) is of some interest as a first reaction to London.

[3] For "Squatters-1946" see *Contemporary Verse*, No. 19, Fall 1951; for "Bank-Strike-Quebec-1942" see *Unit of Five*, ed. Ronald Hambleton (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1944), p. 37; and for "Election Day" see *Cry Ararat!*, pp. 65-55.

[4] For "Outcasts" see *Contemporary Verse*, No. 16, January 1946; for "The Condemned" see P. K. Page, *As Ten As Twenty* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1946) pp. 18-19; for "His Dream" see *Contemporary Verse*, No. 31, Spring 1950.

[5] See *Cry Ararat!*, pp. 44-45 and pp. 83-85.

[6] For "Foreigner" see *Cry Ararat!*, p. 61; for "The Permanent Tourists" *Cry Ararat!*, p. 76; for "Isolationist" *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, 6:4, March 1943; and for "Old Man" *Canadian Forum*, 25:299, December 1945, p. 216.

[7] *Contemporary Verse*, No. 10, April 1944.

[8] "The Stenographers", *Cry Ararat!*, p. 71.

[9] *Cry Ararat!*, pp. 100-101.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

[11] *Cry Ararat!* pp. 34-35.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 63.