

# THE POETRY OF P. K. PAGE

*A. J. M. Smith*

**O**F THE CANADIAN POETS who led the second wave of modernism in the Forties and Fifties, P. K. Page holds a curious and somewhat anomalous position; she had certainly not received the critical attention that the remarkable fusion of psychological insight and poetic imagination which characterizes and individualizes her poems would lead one to expect. Perhaps the effort to discriminate between the subjective and objective elements of her work, or between image and symbol or memory and desire, has been thought by the critics too unprofitable or found too fatiguing. There is no doubt that she is a difficult poet — at least I have found her so — and the difficulty is not intellectual. Her moons are not reason's, so that what the reader who is to get the maximum enjoyment needs — or the critic who is to get the maximum comprehension — is a sensibility and an intuition that have to be nourished and educated by the poems themselves as he reads and re-reads them. Though I feel a certain presumption in approaching this subject, I can say that I have found the experience of trying to come to terms with it an absorbing one. Her gardens may be imaginary, but more than the toads in them are real; and are not her angels also?

Of course the fact that P. K. Page has not received the attention that has been given to some other poets of her generation can be partly accounted for more charitably and more prosaically. Her output has not been large. She published only three volumes of verse at rather long intervals — *As Ten, As Twenty* (1946), *The Metal and the Flower* (1954) — which won the Governor-General's Medal — and a retrospective selection, *Cry Ararat!* (1967), which contained seventeen new poems. For some ten years of the Fifties and the early Sixties she was out of Canada with her husband, who was in the Canadian diplomatic

service in Australia, Brazil and Mexico, and for much of this time she gave up writing (or publishing) poetry for painting. "Gave up", of course, is not really true; her painting and her poetry complemented one another; each, I think, made the other better, or made it more deeply what it was, which is much the same thing. And then the immersion in the language, landscape and mythology of the strange, intense, and perhaps intensely unCanadian places had a stimulating and enriching influence on all her latest poems. One does not have to rely on the evidence of the poems alone to corroborate these remarks — though that would be ample. In the tenth anniversary issue of this journal, she wrote her own account of her experiences during the years of fruitful "exile", and in an article entitled "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman" in *Canadian Literature* 46, she gave an account of her philosophy of composition and of the part played by memory, dream, sensation and technique in both her poetry and her painting. These essays and her recent poems will mark, I believe, the beginning of a new, far juster and far higher estimate of her standing among our poets.

The comparative lack of attention given to P. K. Page's early work, published in the little magazines of the Thirties and early Forties when she was an active member of the *Preview* group in Montreal, is due partly no doubt to the fact that they were overshadowed by the flashy political poems of Patrick Anderson and the simpler satirical or amatory verses of Frank Scott. Even when she was most herself she was associated in the mind of a critic as alert as Milton Wilson with Anderson as a writer of "decadent pastorals. . . , whose glass-tight but vulnerable aquarium leaves me gasping for air."<sup>1</sup> This did not prevent Professor Wilson from giving us some just, discerning, and generous analyses of one or two of the most striking of the early poems.

No critic or literary historian, however, has made any serious attempt to deal at length with Miss Page's poetry or to define, illustrate, and evaluate her psychological symbolism and her strongly personal treatment of the universal themes of isolation and frustration — much less point to their transfiguration in certain epiphanies at the close of some of her remarkable poems. This, for want of a better workman, I shall try to do.

I BEGIN WITH a few generalizations and then shall turn immediately to a close reading of some of her finest and most characteristic poems. This will perhaps enable us to isolate the special quality of her excellence and help place her in the developing pattern of modern poetry in Canada.

There are certain themes that occur over and over again in her poetry and a number of archetypal images and symbols that stamp their impress on most of the best poems in each of her three books, and in her work as a whole.

Her subjects are:

Childhood, its innocent eye, its clarity of vision, and its imaginative richness of invention, all leading to the discovery of a new and other reality than that of adulthood and reason;

Love, either faithful, happy and unifying, or faithless, disillusioned and lonely — the end-point of self-regarding love — that must be mastered by a conscious effort of the will;

and lastly, Dream, where child, poet, artist and wit live and have their being in what in some poems is a garden of innocence, Eden before the Fall, and in others a briary wilderness or a sinister painted arras.

Her images and symbols are White and Green, images of snow, winter, ice and glass; or of flowers, gardens, leaves and trees; or else glass again, and salt, the transparent green suffocating crystal sea. Her symbolic world seems mostly mineral or vegetable, but there are symbols also of birds, the swan and the peacock especially, and fish. And there are breathing human creatures also: girls, adolescents, lovers, and some selfish, isolated, lonely men. But what most vividly lives and breathes here is the Eye, the Lung, the Heart, and the feeling and perceiving Mind.

What is most strange and most revealing in this world is that the workings of its Mind are almost unconscious, often as in dreams, and that even the wit is controlled from Elsewhere. Hers is in its final effect a poetry of vision, and it demands a quality of sympathy in the reader that its poetic richness helps to create. Indeed, to speak for myself, it casts a spell that has made it possible to value it not as vision only but as revelation.

I would like then, from the point of view of theme and imagery to discuss, analyse, or perhaps just talk about some of the poems that have impressed me most deeply. A rough classification might go something like this:

Poems in which images of winter predominate, where White is the colour, and ice, snow, glass, and a breathless cold make the mind and senses tingle — among these are "Stories of Snow", "Photos of a Salt Mine", "The Snowman", "Now this Cold Man", and many lines or stanzas of other poems, such as the last few disillusioned or awakening lines of "Images of Angels."

Poems of flowers and gardens, where vegetable dominates mineral, and Green is the primal symbol; many of these are dream gardens, and there are two

opposed or contrasting gardens, gardens of innocence and grace, and gardens of imprisonment or exile, or perhaps they are one garden, before and after the Fall. Until its close "Images of Angels" is of this group; so in part is "Stories of Snow". In this group also are many of the poems that deal with childhood and some of the newer poems such as "After the Rain", "Giovanni and the Indians", and "The Apple", which is followed by its sad and desolate retrospective sequel, "To a Portrait in a Gallery". The garden songs of innocence give way to songs of experience, and here are the most intense and powerful of all the poems. Close to these in theme is "The Metal and the Flower", though perhaps the antidote for the poison it contains is found in the much later "This Frieze of Birds".

Along with the poems centred around snow and ice, or green gardens of pleasure or terror — not too strong a word for "Arras" or "Nightmare" — are those where image and symbol are derived from the sea — the sea of poet and psychologist, where sleep is a drowning and the submarine world is the world of the unconscious. Among the most striking of these are "Element", "Portrait of Marina", "Boy with a Sea Dream", and "In a Ship Recently Raised from the Sea".

Other classifications might list poems under such heads as Childhood, Love, Self-love and Dream; but in all of them the same dichotomy of innocence and experience, happiness and despair, or good and evil could be discovered. Classification carried too far defeats its own end; it is time to come to a close reading of some of the poems I have named.

"STORIES OF SNOW" grows out of memories, reveries, and dreams of childhood — "some never-nether land" — where snow storms are held "circular, complete" in the crystal globes kept in a high tall teakwood cabinet. Encapsulated here are evocations of innocence and perfection opening "behind the sprouting eyes" caught in the "vegetable rain". The conciseness and allusive richness of the language and imagery of the brief opening stanza set the tone at once and imply as a leading theme the contrast between childhood's innocence (or ignorance?) and the safe and changeless purity of the sterile snowflakes imprisoned or preserved in the small glass globe where the child (or poet) may shake up a storm. The major contrast in the poem, however, is that between the white world of innocence and art and the lush tropical landscape of "countries where the leaves are large as hands/ where flowers protrude their fleshy chins/

and call their colours," which stands for the natural world of instinct and appearance, of uncontrollable organic growth, that strangles and betrays but which child and poet, or poet as child, can escape from into what the couplet that ends the poem names "the area behind the eyes/ where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies."

This somewhat esoteric ending is led up to through a series of anecdotal pictures that seem like a multiplication of the famous ice-locked swan of Mallarmé — but with a richness and dramatic variety that needs more room than the sonnet can offer.

The illustrative central part of the poem begins with the lines "And in the early morning one will waken/ to think the glowing linen of his pillow/ a northern drift, will find himself mistaken/ and lie back weeping." The dreams of this wakened sleeper in a land of fleshy flowers proliferate out of the opening stanza, become the whole poem, and lead to its climax. In Holland, in winter — we realize now that the "never-nether land" of the opening was the embryo of a pun — hunters, their breath in plumes, "part the flakes" and sail in their white winged ice-boats over the frozen lakes to hunt the swan. All the images here are of whiteness and no-colour, of snow-flakes and ice, and we see that the innocent world of the child's glass globe has taken on a new, beautiful but sinister significance.

And of the swan in death these dreamers tell  
of its last flight and how it falls, a plummet,  
pierced by the freezing bullet  
and how three feathers, loosened by the shot,  
descend like snow upon it.  
While hunters plunge their fingers in its down  
deep as a drift, and dive their hands  
up to the neck of the wrist  
in that warm metamorphosis of snow  
as gentle as the sort that woodsmen know  
who, lost in the white circle, fall at last  
and dream their way to death.

"Stories of Snow" is the outstanding success of P. K. Page's first volume, comparable in magnificence and complexity to "Images of Angels" in her second. These are perhaps the finest of the many very individual poems that seem to grow like beautiful flowers out of childhood memories, recurring dreams, and a crystal clairvoyance. Innocence and experience, illusion and disillusionment, find

expression in an overflowing of powerful emotion, remembered not in tranquillity but with a craftsmanly excitement and an exquisite shiver that sets the rhythmical pattern of all her most moving poems.

“Images of Angels”, like “Stories of Snow”, “Photos of a Salt Mine”, and some of the newer poems, “After Rain” and the finest of all “Cry Ararat!”, is a kind of sentimental education — *sentimental* not in any pejorative or ironic Flaubertian sense — that, recognizing worlds without love, seeks to explore ways of transforming them or coming to terms with them. Here images of ice and snow give way at the beginning to the daisy fields of childhood. This is the sharpening contrast to the close of “The Snowman”, the poem immediately preceding “Images of Angels” in the inclusive volume of 1967. Here are the concluding lines of “The Snowman”:

And as far as I could see the snow was scarred  
only with angels’ wing marks or the feet of birds  
like twigs broken upon the snow or shards

discarded. And I could hear no sound  
as far as I could hear except a round  
kind of an echo without end

rung like a hoop below them and above  
jarring the air they had no need of  
in a landscape without love.

And here is the beginning of “Images of Angels”:

Imagine them as they were first conceived:  
part musical instrument and part daisy  
in a white manshape.  
Imagine a crowd on the Elysian grass  
playing ring-around-a-rosy,  
mute except for their singing,  
their gold smiles  
gold sickle moons in the white sky of their faces.  
Sex, neither male nor female,  
name and race, in each case, simply angel.

This gives us the traditional almost Sunday-school picture-card of the Angel, innocent, whimsical, happy, but it is done with the wit and knowledge of the mature and *critical* grown-up poet. The angels are white, and gold, and holy; but they are to be pitied — they were made (by Whom?) “never to be loved or

petted, never to be friended". Almost at once a sinister note intrudes. Somehow the angels are realized now to be "mixed with the father, fearful and fully/ . . . when the vanishing bed/ floats in the darkness . . ."

In the body of the poem we have three witty and dramatic characterizations — representative figures who might be thought of as imagining angels: the "little notary", the financier or business man,<sup>2</sup> and "the anthropologist, with his tidy science".

For each the Angel is a special symbol. For the little notary — the scene is surely Québec — "given one as a pet", it is his private guilt, and might, if discovered, be his private shame, and he keeps it "behind the lethal lock/ used for his legal documents", guiltily shut up. Reading this today one thinks of the legal and political repression of the Duplessis days before the Quiet Revolution, an allusion impossible to have been in the author's mind when the poem was written in the early fifties. This is an illustration, I think, of the growth into an even wider significance that some poems undergo with time.<sup>3</sup>

The eleven-line stanza devoted to the business man is lighter in tone than the rest and more frankly witty; could this be the reason it has been omitted from the reprinted version? "Angels are dropping, angels going up."

What business man would buy as he buys stock  
as many as could cluster on a pin?

But the stanza ends by humanizing the business man by filling his heart with uneasiness and shame as he remembers childhood tying a tinsel angel to his children's Christmas tree, and the poem returns for a moment to the world of such innocent poems as "Christmas Tree — Market Square."

For the anthropologist, the Angel is the miraculous transcendence and perhaps the condemnation to futility of all his classifiable observations. Where in the writings of philosophers or poets has the triumph of imagination over reason been more brilliantly and wittingly put than here?

The anthropologist with his tidy science  
had he stumbled on one unawares,  
found as he finds an arrowhead, an angel —  
a what-of-a-thing  
as primitive as a daisy,  
might with his cold eye have assessed it coolly.  
But how, despite his detailed observations,  
could he face his learned society and explain?

“Gentlemen, it is thought that they are born  
with harps and haloes,  
as the unicorn with its horn.  
Study discloses them white and gold as daisies . . .

as they were described, indeed, at the beginning of the poem. This is the tone and language of light verse and intellectual prose, but the poetry rises out of the thought as naturally and inevitably as in Marvell. The union of the homely and the profound is so quietly accomplished that hasty readers may never notice it. Somewhat in this vein the poem ventures other perceptions: “Perhaps only a dog could accept them wholly/ be happy to follow at their heels . . .” and again, “Or, take the nudes of Lawrence and impose/ a-sexuality upon them; those/ could meet with ease these gilded albinos.”

The next and penultimate stanza returns to the child’s world and the child’s faith of the beginning, where the sphere of consciousness and imagination is reduced to something as small and self-contained as the glass globe of “Stories of Snow”. This prepares us for the close of the poem — unexpected and very strange: the summer imagery of daisies, sun-dazzle, and lamb-white gives way to the white of cold and snow. The child, “*this* innocent”, (the poet herself) “with his almost unicorn” (his imaginary angel, the poem up to this point) “would let it go . . .”

and feeling implicated in a lie,  
his flesh would grow  
cold  
and snow  
would cover the warm and sunny avenue.

Does this ending repudiate imagination, faith and the fairytale world of childhood so convincingly recreated not only in this poem but in many others such as the beautiful “Christmas Eve — Market Square” and the pieces gathered in the last book under the title of one of them, “The Bands and the Beautiful Children”? I do not think so. These closing lines are an affirmation of sincerity and of an integrity that is moral as well as aesthetic — a look at the worst as the images in so many poems of flowers and sun and summer are an attempt to find the best.

**B**EFORE ATTEMPTING an analysis of “Arras”, which I think is the finest, if among the most difficult of the poems, let me jot down a few notes on some in which imagery and symbol are drawn from the sea and from



salt or metal. In some the sea is clearly, like sleep, a symbol of the unconscious and, indeed, for the sensitive and perhaps easily hurt spirit of the poet a dark place of refuge. This is the theme of one of the shortest but most explicit, the beautiful and touching "Element": "caught and swung on a line under the sun/ I am frightened held in the light that people make/ and sink in darkness freed and whole again/ as fish returned by dream into the stream." Although the key statement is the line "I am not wishful in this dream of immersion," the poem ends with the agonizing image of "gull on fire or fish/ silently hurt — its mouth alive with metal."

Much more objective and therefore free to be more witty, but inevitably less intense is "Boy with a Sea Dream". Here are images of masts of ships, ancient hulls, and keels rusting in the iodine air — a dream of immersion again "where like a sleep/ strange men drown drowsily/ spiralling down the sea's steep underlip. . ." Once again the sea is a symbol of dream as the cinema of the unconscious, but without any of the jargon of the clinical psychologist. For the critic, who like the poet ought to have a poetry-crammed head, the associations are with the music and imagery of "Lycidas", "Full Fathom Five", and the "Voyages" of Hart Crane.

The end is strange and subtle, a sort of inside-outside reversal recalling, distantly, of course, some passages in Jay Macpherson and Robert Graves.

... like the perfect schooner which is pushed  
 through the slim neck to fill a bottle's shape  
 his dream has filled the cavern of his head  
 and he, a brimful seascape,  
 a blue brine,  
 with undertows and sudden swells  
 which toll his bells  
 and watery laws to be obeyed  
 and strange salt death to die

Images of sterile salt and metallic cold are found in a number of poems that analyze self-love with what can only be described as a kind of cold fury. Among these are "Isolationist", "Only Child", "Foreigner", "Man with One Small Hand", "Mineral" and "This Cold Man". The last three are particularly impressive for the concentrated angry wit that turns experience into a new universal and instant myth.

A striking quality of many of these poems is the sudden immediacy of perception and emotion.

Look, look, he took me straight  
to the snake's eye . . .

begins "The Apple" — a magnificent opening, equalled only perhaps by Anne Hébert's awakening in "La Chambre fermée" —

Qui donc m'a conduite ici?  
Il y a certainement quelqu'un  
Qui a soufflé sur mes pas . . .

It is these quick exclamations of bewilderment, horror or agony that give so much of its intensity to the haunted dream garden of "Arras". Here the perfection and purity of the classical Eden has been violated by a strange and somehow sinister intruder:

. . . a peacock rattling its rattan tail  
and screaming  
has found a point of entry. Through whose eye  
did it insinuate in furred disguise. . . ?

The agonizing questions come thick and fast: "Who am I/ or who am I become that walking here/ I am observer, other. . . ?" "What did they deal me in this pack?" Alice's looking-glass garden has grown menacing and lonely. "I want a hand to clutch, a heart to crack . . . the stillness is/ infinite. If I should make a break . . ." Then the truly terrifying line:

The stillness points a bone at me.

And now the prisoned dreamer breaks under the reiteration of the self-imposed questioning:

I confess:  
It was my eye.  
Voluptuous it came.  
Its head the ferrule and its lovely tail  
folded so sweetly; it was strangely slim  
to fit the retina . . .

This fearful magnificence gives way to a simple homely cry, which in its context has a grandeur beyond the reach of rhetoric — "Does no one care?"

This poem alone would be sufficient to place P. K. Page among the fine poets of this century, and it is good to know that while it is perhaps the high point of her achievement it is also the high point of a school of symbolist Canadian poets

among whom I would name Anne Wilkinson, Anne Hébert, Jay Macpherson, Daryl Hine and Gwen MacEwen.

These are the poets in Canada who write not for the immediate moment alone. They are the poets who will live when the urbanized hitch-hiking social realists or the lung-born egoists of instant experience have been long forgotten.

### *Postscript*

THAT GREAT MAN, Frank Underhill, once sent me a collection of his political essays, not ironically but too modestly inscribed, as to a poet, "these prosaic offerings." When I read the poems of P. K. Page and her equally profound notes<sup>4</sup> on poetry, painting and magic I am conscious of how prosaic *this* offering is. My hope, however, is that it may lead other critics to write of her work with their own perceptions.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Other Canadians and After," in *Masks of Poetry*, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Toronto, 1962), p. 126.
- <sup>2</sup> The stanza on the business man has been deleted from the poem as it appears in *Cry Ararat* (1967). I enjoyed the passage and cannot feel that it is out of keeping with the rest of the poem.
- <sup>3</sup> Poems by Shelley, Auden, Anne Hébert and Frank Scott might be cited in further illustration.
- <sup>4</sup> The article in *Canadian Literature* 46 referred to above, and the earlier and briefer "Questions and Images" in *Canadian Literature* 41.

# THREE POEMS

*P. K. Page*

## LEVIATHAN IN A POOL

### I

**B**LACK and white plastic  
inflatable  
a child's giant toy  
teeth perfectly conical  
tongue pink  
eyes where ears are  
blowhole (fontanelle  
a rip in a wet inner tube  
Third Eye)  
out of which speech  
breath  
and beautiful fountains flower

So much for linear description  
phrases in place of whale

This creature fills that pool  
as an eye its socket  
moves, laughs like an eye  
shines like an eye — eyebright  
eyeshaped, mandorla



THREE POEMS

of meeting worlds  
forked tail attached  
and fin like a funny sail

It is rotund and yet  
flexible as a whip  
lighter than air going up  
and heavy as a truckload of bricks  
It leaps sky high — it flies  
and comes down whack  
on its freshly painted side  
and the spectators get wet  
drenched, soaked to the hide

Tongue lolling like a dog's  
after a fast run  
pleased with itself and you  
it seems to want to be petted  
rears its great head up  
hangs it, its tiny eyes gleam  
Herring, minute as whitebait  
slip down its throat  
Dear whale, we say, as if to a child  
We beam

And it disappears. Utterly  
With so dark a thrust  
of its muscle  
through silver tines  
of water  
only streamers of brine  
tiny tinsels of brine remain

II

“SWIM ROUND the pool vocalizing,” the boy says  
and “Toot” they call through their blowholes  
“Toot toot. Toot.”

At sea they will sometimes sing for thirty minutes  
cadences, recognisable series of notes, songs which carry  
hundreds of miles. Sing together. Sing singly.  
Here in a small pool they vocalize on command  
joyous short toots, calls.

Why am I crying?

III

HAIDA AND NOOTKA respond to whistle signals.  
Each whistle has its own pitch  
and each whale knows which is which.

Haida and Nootka respond to hand signals.  
Fresh from the wild Pacific  
they answer to hand signals.

(The words are for us  
who have not yet learned  
that two blasts  
mean:  
'Give your trainer a big kiss'  
or a flick of the wrist  
means: 'Vocalize.')

Chimo white as Moby  
albino and still a baby  
is deaf  
and has poor vision  
like white cats

(white men and women?)

so Chimo  
cannot respond to hand or whistle.

Yet this high spirited  
'lissom'  
girl of a whale

### THREE POEMS

unexpectedly pale  
as if still not dressed  
responds:  
she leaps like Nootka  
flaps like Haida  
vocalizes.

What are her cues and signals  
in what realm  
do her lightning actions rise?

I lean upon the pool's wet rail  
through eyes'  
sightless sideways glances  
seem to see  
a red line on the air  
as bright as blood  
that threads them on one string  
trainer and whales.

## PREPARATION

**G**o out of your mind.  
Prepare to go mad.  
Prepare to break  
split along cracks  
inhabit the darks of your eyes.  
Inhabit the whites.

Prepare to be huge.  
Be prepared to be small  
the least molecule of  
an unlimited form.  
Be a limited form  
and spin in your skin  
one point in the whole



Be prepared to prepare  
 for what you have dreamed  
 to burn and be burned  
 to burst like a pod  
 to tear at your seams.

Be pre-pared. And pre-pare.  
 But it's never like that.  
 It is where you are not  
 that the fissure occurs  
 and the light crashes in.

## CULLEN REVISITED

**C**ULLEN AT FIFTY, arsonist, set fire  
 to the whole accumulation. Rings, wrongs, rights  
 from buds of flame burst into flower  
 burned like magnesium, white, or red as rags.  
 The bag of tricks banged off — flared, fumed, smoked.  
 Butt ends of jokes, lexicons, old chains like briars  
 glowed on the night sky, dimmed, spluttered, blacked out.  
 The conflagration could be seen for miles.

Cullen among the charred remains, himself  
 down to the bone, scuffed, shuffled, poked,  
 recognized nothing. The span of his life reduced  
 to nails, pearl buttons, gravel, twists of wire  
 all hard, all black, all useless. Cullen smiled  
 and a wind arose like the wind the Holy Ghost  
 bears in its wings and the flames broke out and smoked  
 and flickered in white and gold before they died  
 for the second time in a feathery ash as grey  
 and soft as feathers plucked from a dove.  
 Cullen departing stubbed his toe, upturned  
 — darkened face of the moon in solar eclipse —

a disc, heart-sized and heavy for its size,  
makeweight, touchstone, lodestar? And this he kept.  
It squinted where he rubbed it, like an eye.

So Cullen began again. Trees bloomed. Sun shone.  
And he, the Ace of Wands, green-sprigged, was borne  
high in a Giant Hand through a running sky.  
At night in a rain of shooting stars he slept.  
Parrots, peacocks, miraculous plants and jewels  
in underground caverns filled his head.  
Veins on fire he slept the grey days through  
like a wintering bear.

He waked

to tea-colored kings and queens upright as staves  
small, wren-boned, walking in purple, heads  
bound in embroideries, braceleted wrists —  
and all reflected as though in water, twinned  
as royalty in a card deck. Cullen slept  
and tall black naked warriors like divs  
sprang from the earth like grain — green at the groin —  
constructed walls of intricate mosaics, each stone  
polished and cut and then exactly placed.  
He waked again. The rubbed disc winked and shone.

All this was in World One.

World Two was where

he explored the golden ship — cabins and hold,  
hoisted its golden sails and from its gold  
crow's nest sighted the Third World  
hazy at first and seen from his position  
half way between earth and heaven  
half blinded by the sun — seeming to rock and hum.