

P.K. Page's Essays: A Life Story in Canadian Arts

P.K. Page *The Filled Pen: Selected Non-Fiction*. Ed. Zailig Pollock. 2007. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 131 pp.

In October of 2002, Trent University hosted *Extraordinary Presences*, a conference designed to celebrate P.K. Page's lifetime contributions to the world of Canadian arts. Fans of Page's work from inside and outside the academy gathered to discuss her poetry, fiction, travel writing, and visual art. The conference marked a shift in the direction of scholarly attention to Page: while she has been writing—and been written of—for the past seventy years, the conference challenged Page's critics to reconsider her work with attention to and appreciation for the breadth of her creativity. *The Filled Pen*, which gathers together Page's most important essays on the arts, echoes Trent's conference call by reminding readers of the range of Page's artistic output and provides a new, wider lens through which to revisit the career of one of Canada's most highly regarded poets.

The collection is edited by Zailig Pollock, who also organized the Trent conference. Readers familiar with Pollock's scholarly edition of A.M. Klein's poetry will recognize his characteristic attention to detail. In her introductory notes, Page thanks Pollock and calls him a "meticulous editor" (ix), a well-deserved compliment. Pollock's Textual Notes chart the publishing history of each essay and the textual variants between editions, noting all variations between publications of Page's essays (save minor layout changes and "obvious typographical errors" [xvii]), demonstrating important differences between Page's younger and present selves, and allowing the reader to decide for herself which avenues of Page's self-editing to follow. Pollock's footnotes follow a similar reader-directed logic. They are not numbered, and there is no marker within the body of the text to indicate the presence of a footnote below. As a result, the footnotes are unobtrusive, and allow a reader to continue uninterrupted if the explanatory note is unnecessary, making the text inviting to all levels of readers. The footnotes are further prevented from cluttering the text by Pollock's decision to assume a basic level of familiarity with Canadian literature and culture: the footnotes clarify only "obscure terms and references [and] provide relevant information concerning Page's life and times" (xvii). The overall effect of these decisions is to allow Page's own words, and not the editorial apparatus, to take the spotlight.

Two of the eighteen essays included in the collection appear here for the first time in print: the opening essay, “A Writer’s Life,” was delivered as a speech in Halifax in 1999, and was previously available only online, and “Fairy Tales, Folk Tales: The Language of the Imagination,” presented orally at a children’s festival in Vancouver, was unpublished in any form. Both of these essays provide significant insight into Page’s aesthetics by bringing to the fore her indebtedness to storytelling. “A Writer’s Life,” the more substantial of the two pieces, serves as a sort of artistic autobiography, and, as such, provides a helpful introduction to readers who are new to the details of Page’s writing life, and a reminder to those familiar with her work of the diversity of her creative career. Page here reflects on the evolution of her own poetry, and tracks moments of significance in her long artistic career. She speaks in her usual inviting and informal style of her role in some of the most exciting communities of Canadian writing. She remembers her early and isolated writing life, her introduction to Virginia Woolf—“my first great literary discovery” (8)—and her subsequent decision to work in an office in wartime Montreal in order, quite literally, to provide herself with a room of her own. She remembers her first nervous and self-conscious introduction to the *Preview* group, and the acceptance she found among these poets, whose company and conversation inspired a creative “rush of ideas” (12). She writes candidly of the naiveté of her first novel, *The Sun and the Moon*, and of the “serious misgivings” (13) that she had on seeing the book in print. She writes of the acceptance and publication of her poems, of her years of travel with her diplomat husband, of her infamous Brazilian “writer’s block” (15), and of the creative outlet she found in painting at that time. She shares her return to Canada and her engagement with the growing local interest in poetry and poets, her developing environmental interests, and her continuous appreciation for poetic form. In this artistic life story, which she modestly calls a “laundry list” (21), Page charts the many directions in which her creativity has turned, and speaks frankly about her struggle to understand artistic responsibility: “should the artist become an activist or should he/she believe absolutely in the redemptive power of art? Better still, embrace both?” (19) This forthright sharing of pivotal questions is characteristic of Page’s work, as is her probing of the role of the artist. Her poetic speakers, as in “After Rain” and “Deaf Mute in the Pear Tree,” often struggle to view subjects ethically, and demand fair representation and compassionate vision, or a “heart a size / larger than seeing” (“After Rain” *HR* 2: 109). Page ends “A Writer’s Life” by reaffirming her devotion to art, and her conviction that “the life of the artist is one of the most privileged of all lives” (22). This essay alone,

which at twenty pages is the most substantial piece in the collection, makes the volume essential for anyone interested in Page's career or Canadian poetry at large.

The essays that follow confirm the diversity of this life story in the arts. Page's talents and interests are manifold, and her commitment to artistic vision lifelong. The collection is organized not chronologically, but rather by artistic interest. After the overview of "A Writer's Life," several essays continue Page's reflections of herself as a Canadian artist. From here, the essays move to her interest in fairytales, then to her foreword to *Hologram*, which reflects Page's respect for form and her thoughts on poetic influence. The latter half of the collection features Page's responses to fellow Canadian artists, including poets, fiction writers, visual artists, and a filmmaker. This arrangement, though not intuitive, seems best suited to outlining Page's artistic expansion. Nevertheless, a brief note in Pollock's Introduction to alert readers to the rationale of this ordering would have helped readers to make sense of the trajectory of the collection.

Pollock's Introduction reveals that Page insisted that her review of *The Company of Strangers* appear as the final essay in this collection. This 1990 film, directed by Cynthia Scott, follows a group of older women who, while making what was to be a quick detour to an old family cottage, become stranded when their bus breaks down. During the quiet days that follow, each of the eight women in the cottage tells pieces of her life story. The women are gifted in various ways: some paint, some sing, some dance. Though the film is a piece of fiction, each of the women plays some form of her off-camera self. They call each other by their real names, share real family photographs and, presumably, tell real pieces of their histories. Of course, the stage is set, and the interactions are contrived, but, as Page suggests, "the wonder of it is they are not acting" (111). Perhaps Page's film review sounds a fitting final note to the collection because of the points of connection between *The Company of Strangers* and *The Filled Pen*. Like these women on screen, what Page presents here is part artistic production and part autobiography: hers is "an autobiography of the imagination," as Pollock's Introduction suggests. And like the film, Page's essays—her style of self-interruption and questioning, her insightful and often humorous sidebars, the endless connections she draws across times and worlds—generate a sense of space and possibility, opening time for thought and memory and imagination.

Collectively, the essays in *The Filled Pen* present a portrait of Page that is many-sided: Page as poet, as fiction writer, as children's storyteller, as visual artist, as art critic, as poetry fan, as Canadian literary critic. While

this whole is certainly important to any imagining of Page, it is really her role as poet that has gained her national renown. She begins her Foreword to the collection with this act of self-naming: “I see myself primarily as a poet” (xi). Her love of poetry is evident in the generous tributes to fellow poets, in the joy she takes in carefully crafted form and phrasings, and in the allusions to and quotations from poetry that regularly mark her language. The essays of *The Filled Pen* will be indispensable to students of Page’s poetry, not only because they provide an important portrayal of Page’s relationship to poetry, both her own and others’, but also, as Pollock suggests in his opening note, because of “the sheer beauty of their prose” (xv).

There are a few additions that could be made to this text. In view of Page’s insistence that the pen that writes is the same pen that draws—“the huge revolving world / the delicate nib releases” (“The Filled Pen” *HR I*: 210) is a world of text and image combined—it is unfortunate that the drawings originally published with “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman” when it appeared in *Canadian Literature* in 1970 could not be reproduced. While any reproduction of Page’s visual art would have been beneficial, these images are especially relevant, for they combine image and text directly in a manner that provides a visual display of Page’s belief in her multivalent muse. Besides the missing artwork, there are essays not present here that are important to a full understanding of Page’s creativity. While limiting itself to Page’s essays on the arts, the collection omits some of her most interesting and emotionally charged writing on the subject—namely, the essays that she contributed to *Preview* in the 1940s on the status of Canadian art and the responsibility of artists worldwide, which deal with concerns that continue to surface, though in muted form, in her contemporary work. Perhaps these earlier pieces, because they respond to a local community writing at a specific time in Canadian history, are dated in a way that her later work is not, but in a collection whose aim seems generally to be to let the reader decide for herself, it would have been beneficial to have included these early pieces. If space were an issue, then some of the more readily available works could have been sacrificed to have made room for these harder to find *Preview* pieces.

In an article developed from a paper presented at Trent’s *Extraordinary Presences* conference, Marilyn Rose catalogues the Page poems most often re-presented in Canadian anthologies, and discovers that “Page has been ‘packaged’ with remarkable consistency and in very specific ways [...] over the past five decades” (155). Despite the breadth of her career and her hundreds of published poems, Page, Rose argues, has become known

for only a handful of lyrics: “The Stenographers” and “Stories of Snow” in particular. Rose notes a subtle trend in recent anthologies to expand the representation, “opening up the P.K. Page canon” (163). The essays of *The Filled Pen* will continue the broadening of academic perspective on Page’s work, reminding readers of the diversity of her talents and allowing for new insights on her poetry. Admiration for Page will continue to grow with the release of her 2007 collection of short fiction, *Up on the Roof*, and with the promised scholarly and annotated edition of Page’s *Collected Works* from editors Zailig Pollock and Sandra Djwa. In opening the issue of *Journal of Canadian Studies* devoted to Page’s career, Pollock suggests that Page has not yet been given the critical attention her work merits because “it’s hard to keep up with her” (6). This collection does not permit P.K. Page’s readers to catch up: instead, it allows her audience to admire just how far ahead she has raced.

Works Cited

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Erica Kelly