P.K. Page's "Religious" Homecoming: Writing Out of the Mexican Night

By Margaret Steffler

P.K. Page's unpublished Mexican journal contains raw observations and thoughts not accessible in her edited and retrospective writing. The dark Mexican material functions as a contrast or shadow to the well known *Brazilian Journal*, published in 1987, which documents what Page dreamily remembers as a "golden, perfect, complete" period of her past (*BJ* 241), the years 1957-1959, spent in Brazil with her husband, Canadian ambassador Arthur Irwin. The Brazilian years occupied the middle portion of an eleven-year period abroad; Irwin held diplomatic posts in Australia (1953-1956) and Mexico (1960-1964) before and after Brazil. Although the Australian and Mexican years were recorded by Page in journals, they remain unpublished except for short excerpts. In *Brazilian Journal* Page explores the poetic "silence" that overcame her in this posting, along with her subsequent shift to drawing and painting, speculating that these rather puzzling changes were the result of her lack of Portuguese and the attraction of her eye to the vibrant imagery of Brazil's landscape. The Mexican journal, in contrast, reveals Page's struggle against what she thinks of as her "seduced" eye/I, which had been overwhelmed and developed by the sensuousness of Brazil. In this paper I examine Mexico as the period and place during which, after Brazil, Page resisted this insistent eye, an eye which sought sensation at the expense of meaning, fragments as opposed to the whole, and external imagery over internal insight. This resistance allowed Page to write herself out of the introspective and sobering depths of the Mexican "night" ("Questions" 37) when in 1964 she returned home to Canada and to poetry, homecomings which reflected the "religious" shifts that had occurred in Mexico.

"Have thought about the bull fight a good deal since last week. It was a most tremendous and extraordinary spectacle," writes Page in a journal entry on 29 May 1960, two months after arriving in Mexico. She examines in particular the difference between the response of her husband, Arthur Irwin, who "by seeing it whole, by at no point being emotionally seduced by the beauty, is revolted by so inhumane a slaughter" and herself, who

"unable to see it whole, seduced as always through my eye, have moments of pure rapture" (container 113, file 26: I, 36).[1] Page's Mexican journal expresses concern about her inability or unwillingness to feel compassion at the expense of aesthetic appreciation—to respond to the meaning rather than the separate images of what she has witnessed. In a later entry of 7 October 1962, Page expands on the differences between her reactions and those of Arthur:

> I am compulsively drawn by the primitive. Arthur feels the primitive represents poverty and disease which he deplores and in the deploring cannot see its beauty. We fall on the same sides of this line with a bull fight: I say I know it is cruel, the killing is vile and the picadors horrible, but for all that it still has an extraordinary beauty. A. says it's barbaric and cruel and if there is beauty it's a beauty I don't want to see. The same re the badlands...the terrible eroded high lands here. I say what beautiful forms and colors. A. says it's a terrible land, neglected and unloved, it gives the people who live on it the minimum of food and a life of hardship. How can it be beautiful? (container 114, file 3; II, 7; ellipsis in original)

Brian Trehearne argues that in "Cry Ararat!," "the first major poem of Page's return to her work" (103) after Mexico, or more accurately to her *poetic* work, Page conveys "a deep recognition of the I-ness of all perception," and thereby resolves the troubling dilemma of an earlier poem, "After Rain," a dilemma that involves the speaker's "awareness of the contradiction between her sympathy for Giovanni and her visionary eye" (104).[2] "After Rain," written by 1955, and "Cry Ararat!," written by 1966, indeed indicate changes in Page's perception traceable to her experiences in Mexico. The "I-ness" referred to by Trehearne was studied by Page in the form of the "I principle" in Mexico. In 1962 Page copied into her journal a friend's notes on lectures given by Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, which include the following definition: "This 'I', I call the 'I principle'. The I principle is the back drop, or substratum against which our apparent and thinking lives play themselves out. And it is this I-principle which we are here to consider and realize" (container 113, file 26; I, 210). This "I principle" plays a part in answering Page's longing for an "unseduced" eye—a longing identified in her analysis of her response to the bullfight in 1960, but clearly articulated five years earlier in "After Rain," before the seduction of Brazil or the resistance of Mexico:

> And choir me too to keep my heart a size
> larger than seeing, unseduced 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.
("After Rain," *CA*)[3]

The speaker's strategy in "After Rain" involves the separation of eye and heart, based on the assumption that the heart must be protected from the hopelessly "seduced" eye. Page worked with all that Mexico offered in order to overcome what had become for her, after Brazil, a debilitating hierarchy of eye over heart. Moving inward, below senses and surfaces, Page deliberately explored the darkness of the "old gods" of Mexico ("Questions" 37), along with the spiritual depths and possibilities of her own darkness, as she riskily moved her heart closer to her eye.

In a 1987 interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Page claimed "I had an extraordinary insight one day when I awakened and realized that I was not the unreligious Christian that I'd always thought myself to be. I realized in a sort of flash that I was a very religious non-Christian" ("That's Me" 59). This "extraordinary insight" is referred to in less certain terms by Page—in bracketed questions—in her 1969 essay, "Questions and Images," in which she considers the night and dreaming worlds of Mexico as an "(Initiation? Into what? A non-religious Christian? A religious non-Christian?)" (39). Earlier still, in a journal entry of 21 October 1961, Page records the raw and immediate event itself without any of the "insight," "flash," or musing of the retrospective accounts. Within the Mexican journal, on a page entitled "Three Very Disconnected Things," Page simply writes that "after all my life thinking I was an unreligious Christian I now think I am a religious non-Christian," and she comments that "this is a comforting conclusion" (container 113, file 26; I, 166). In retrospect Page noted a "very big change in me…when I came back [to Canada from Mexico]" ("That's Me" 58); this change was without doubt the result of her immersion in a slow and painful process of spiritual searching in Mexico, which consumed her from October 1961 to January 1964 as she pursued the implications of her newly realized "religious" identity.

Page constructed her 1964 homecoming as a starting over, almost a rebirth, and disparagingly referred to herself immediately after Mexico as an indulged "imbecile" ("That's Me" 57). With respect to her art, she carefully narrated a "closing": "I had a small retrospective show shortly after coming home, followed by the publication of a book of 'retrospective' poetry. The shutting of twin doors. Not necessarily on drawings and poems

but on *those* drawings and *those* poems" ("Questions" 40). Focusing on the culture shock of a changed woman coming home to a changed nation, Page described herself upon her return as "not understand[ing] what was going in the world" ("That's Me" 58). But just as the myth of the loss of the ability to write in Brazil was, to a certain extent, deliberately constructed, so too these scattered references to the Canadian homecoming self-consciously create a mythic story—in this case, one of new beginnings. In the public story of how writing deserted Page, Brazil is depicted as exotic and other; in the partner or completion narrative of how writing returned to Page, Mexico is the dark night or subconscious. Emily Ballantyne and Zailig Pollock have recently studied Page's unpublished "Natural History Museum" (container 27, file 5), which contains "material from the transitional months of 1957 that mark the beginning of her time in Brazil and her abandonment of poetry for painting" (forthcoming 2011). They demonstrate that the unpublished material tells a private story very different from the retrospective one offered to the public. Similarly, the Mexican journal provides glimpses into the personal process through which Page returned to writing or writing returned to Page—glimpses that complicate the public narrative of external forces operating on the poet, doors opening and closing and an *ingénue* starting over as a stranger in a changed homeland and world.

Page concludes the essay "Questions and Images" by referring to "the handful of poems written recently," claiming that she does not know if the "writing has 'started' again" or if "there is an advance over earlier work" (42). This "handful" of poems would have been written between 1964 and 1969 as Page made the transition to life in Victoria, B.C. The impulse of these poems is retrospective in that Page deliberately works herself backwards and inwards in order to find a point from which she can launch herself into the desired new beginning she is narrating for herself as part of her homecoming. According to Page's account, as the light and colour of Brazil dazzled her away from words, so the darkness of Mexico drove her back to them. As the vibrant imagery of Brazil in its intricate detail drew her out of herself toward the images, so the shadows of Mexico pushed her back down into herself. In the story that Page constructs for herself and her public, Brazil and Mexico, working with powerful agency, determine her direction. Page's own deep participation in the shadows of Mexico, however, suggests that she played a much more active role than she perhaps admits or remembers, and that the force ascribed to Mexico is intensified and augmented by Page's receptivity to its pull.

In my study of this "handful of poems" written out of Mexico, I argue that their movement backwards and inwards clears poetic space that resonates with the personal interior space resulting from Page's spiritual search, and that it is this clearing of space that allows the contradictory tension of image and meaning, clearly identified by Page in her response to the bullfight, to be brought together. Page posits that "If Brazil was a change of place, then Mexico was a change of time" where one is close to "death and the old gods" ("Questions" 37). Page's searching in Mexico and her affinity with the "old gods" precipitated her realization that she was a "religious non-Christian," and the poems emerging from this period employ metaphors that demonstrate this discovery. In considering the etymology of the word "religion" in "The Sense of Angels: Reflections on A.M. Klein," Page focuses on "ligare" ("to bind"), speculating that religion binds together "what is, in reality, bound; of what appears fragmented only when seen through the prismatic eye of unregenerate man. Metaphor, then, becomes religion's handmaiden" (68). Page's religious eye/I in Mexico deliberately and with some difficulty begins to draw and follow lines that create patterns and connect worlds through metaphor, struggling against the sensuous eye/I that seeks or is "seduced" by individual fragments and images.

The religious nature of this "handful of poems" lies in their liberating tracing of what Page calls the "small design," a movement encouraged by an eye that has seen and sought the patterns of symbols in the "dark Mexican night" ("Questions" 40), along with a mind trained by philosophical reading and thought to connect the inner and outer, the small and large, the intimate and grand. In "Questions and Images" Page notes that while in Mexico she "raced back and forth among the *Collected works* of Jung, *The Perennial Philosophy*, *The Doors of Perception* [both by Aldous Huxley], Zen, C.S Lewis, St. John of the Cross" (39). During these years she was also deeply influenced by Mary Anne Atwood's work on alchemy, Peter D. Ouspensky's *Fourth Way* and *In Search of the Miraculous*, George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff's *All and Everything* and *Meetings With Marvellous Men*, Maurice Nicoll's *Living Time*, and Jiddu Krishnamurti's work on desire (container 113, file 26; container 114, file 3; I and II, *passim*). The volume and extent of this esoteric reading of psychology, philosophy, mysticism, and the occult indicate the depth and extent of Page's spiritual search. Religion in the etymological sense of *relegere*, to read over again, makes sense here as Page literally rereads the world and word in a new way, but religion as *religare*, "to bind together," is more relevant as the eye and mind actively seek connections. It is important to note, however, that this bind-

ing is not limited to the functional union or constraint inherent in the Latin *religare* and the rarely used English "religate" ("To bind again; to constrain; to bind *to* something" *OED* def. 3). The attention paid to the metaphoric lines that connect the small design with the larger one involves an appreciation of the lines' directions, textures and shapes, but moves beyond their functionality in order to risk an arrival at the "religious" meaning (the bound together whole) implicit in the poetics and aesthetics of the pattern. The connecting lines, however, rather than simply pointing to meaning, are embraced as an integral part of the meaning to which they have led.

The "handful of poems" written out of Mexico includes "Brazilian Fazenda," "Cry Ararat!," "Dark Kingdom" and "Blowing," published in *Cry Ararat! Poems New and Selected* (1967), as well as "Backwards Journey," "Another Space," "Fly: On Webs" and "Knitter's Prayer."[4] The movement in these eight poems reflects the physical movement backward, inward, and downward initiated by Page in her spiritual searching, as well as the movement between the internal and external world she both perceives and creates during this process. The result is the binding together through metaphor of what appears disparate to a non-religious eye but unified to a religious one. The magic, however, consists in holding simultaneously both the fragments and the whole, noticing and valuing the individual lines that connect and the extraordinary power of separate images even while taking in the overall pattern and comprehending its meaning. Page is never able to discard the image or fragment in favour of completion. Looking through a kaleidoscope involves the sensation of seeing the overall pattern with an awareness of the presence of the individual pieces.[5] After Mexico, Page is better equipped to let the pieces serve the pattern, but she never forgets the pattern's absolute dependence on the existence of those pieces.

Several of the poems written out of Mexico focus on the literal clearing of space. "Knitter's Prayer," using the metaphor of completed knitting as developed self, is the most direct statement of the basic desire to get rid of substance in order to go back to a blank beginning and start again:

> Unknit me—
> all those blistering strange small intricate stitches—
> shell stitch, moss stitch, pearl and all too plain;
> unknit me to the very first row of ribbing,
> let only the original simple knot remain.

Then let us start again.
(*HR*)

The fact that all elaborate stitches and patterns depend for their effect on two stitches' relationship and proximity to each other (plain and purl) emphasizes the dependence of the whole on the part and the creation of complexity from the careful and limited arrangement of simplicity. The "original" knot denotes an anchoring strength when contrasted with the "blistering" or raised stitches that seem to annoy in their whimsical intricacy, but are demanded and expected because the plain are "all too plain." Even the ribbing, the solid and less complex basis, must be unravelled in order to take the work back to its origin. Employing a rather imperative supplication in the abrupt first line, "Unknit me," the prayer/poem ends with a confidently assured invocation in the appeal to "us" in "Then let us start again." With the stress on "then," the line does not mean "allow us," but rather "we will." Knitter, poet and supplicant are making a request that seems to have already been granted as Muse and God are put in the position of obeying the speaker's lead in order to take the step that will swiftly unravel the wool, undoing in a moment what has taken ages to create.

In her Mexican journal Page refers to a chaotic "undoing" rather than a premeditated unravelling. On 30 May 1963 she writes "Have been going through one of the blackest periods of my life in which I have felt that everything I have done so far in life [has] been a waste of time or worse—an 'undoing'" (container 114, file 3; II, 86). She goes on in this entry to talk about the impact of her reading, concentrating eventually on a picture of "the atomic structure of the astral body" in *The Projection of the Astral Body* (1929), by Hereward Carrington and Sylvan Muldoon. The picture reminds Page of an unrecorded and obviously important vision experienced during the early years of the war, in which a young friend, who had died, appeared and disappeared to Page in the form of vibrating "grains of rice." This remarkable vision convinced Page that there was life after death and drew from her the claim that she "was no longer unhappy about her [dead friend]. From that moment on I felt quite at peace." Years later in Mexico, having seen this picture in Muldoon and Carrington, Page feels "more convinced than ever" that a spiritual realm exists; she connects the atomic structure with her interest in "vibratory forms" and the idea that everything is "composed of just such a material of varying degrees of density" (container 114, file 3; II, 87). The next entry, two days later, talks of Page's own experimentation with astral projection and "almost 'going home'" (container 114, file 3; II, 87); and then a few days later, after referring to the importance of "the entire body rising through a minute aperture"

(container 114, file 3; II, 88), Page turns to a consideration of the circling soul and the attachment of the divinity to the centre as conceived in Jung's *Aion*. A journal entry beginning with the blackness of an "undoing" works itself in a matter of days into a conviction of a coming together that moves beyond the unified body composed of particles. And yet the vibrating grains of rice remain the central image of the experience, highlighting the transformation of pieces to something greater than themselves while simultaneously emphasizing their fragmentation and never allowing the whole to subsume the parts. The process itself, in conjunction with the outcome, fascinates Page. She concludes with the query, "But if the significance of the image for me stems from the memory of the 'flight' of the astral body, what relationship does this flight bear to the God-image?" (container 114, file 3; II, 88). Stopping short of taking the metaphor to a conclusive profession of faith, Page remains attached to the process, to the formation and disintegration, to the exact moment of transformation, when vibrating grains of rice and solid human body exist simultaneously.

Page's own attempts at astral projection were pursued within the Subud movement, which occupied her during the latter part of her time in Mexico. Founded by "Javanese mystic Pak Muhammad Subuh," Subud is "a system of exercises by which the individual seeks to approach a state of perfection through the agency of the divine power" (*OED*). Page records her experiences in the spiritual exercises or latihans held during Subud meetings:

> A change in the latihans. At the last but one, I felt an incredible stillness upon me and the change of vibration which precedes change of 'place.' Unfortunately I was unable to 'move.' Some part of myself, afraid, resists and I find myself as if reacting from the pull of a height. (container 114, file 3; II, 59)

Perhaps such resistance is not wholly based on fear but also on desire, for the resistance prolongs the excruciating yet exquisite edge on which moving parts are poised for transformation, anticipating solidity and wholeness, but stopping just short of falling into them.

The unravelling of "Knitter's Prayer" is also apparent in Page's well known poem, "A Backwards Journey" (*PSN*), which similarly converses with earlier recorded thoughts in the Mexican journal. "A Backwards Journey" explores the process of penetration rather than undoing, but with the same desired goal of clearing space through its response to "the very busy Dutch Cleanser woman" who holds "a yellow Dutch Cleanser can / on which a smaller Dutch Cleanser woman / was holding a smaller Dutch Cleanser can / on which a minute Dutch Cleaner woman / held an imagined Dutch Cleanser can." The eye moves beneath the surface into the interior

of the Dutch Cleanser container and eventually into the child's mind. The layered pattern attracts imagination and faith, which depend on having "serious attention to give / to everyday objects" in order to achieve "the delicate jet" of "attention." Breaking through the limitations of the material surface in order to reach a deeper level requires an attentiveness that sustains the necessary concentration on "the smallest point." The title, "A Backwards Journey," indicates on one level the speaker's return to the serious attentiveness of childhood. Responding to her participation in latihans, Page comments on the reliving of life from the beginning: "One should be free to move in a latihan—in fact the movements one makes—crawling on the floor, dancing etc. are the re-living of one's life from infancy" (container 114, file 2; II, 66). She also talks about the intrusion of childhood into her sleepless nights while she is reading Gurdjieff's esoteric and mystical work on self awareness, and participating in Subud meetings:

> An odd night altogether with various 'sensations' strangely reminiscent of childhood—flavours long-forgotten—intense—but so far meaningless. This is something that has increasingly happened to me since I've begun this reading—undefinable states, known from childhood & forgotten, have returned—" (container 114, file 13; II, 37)

During this period, Page dreamt of being told that "the reversing of the natural order was a key to a mystery" and was informed by her close friend and surrealist painter Leonora Carrington that these are Gurdjieff's "exact words" (container 11, file 3; II, 15). With the guidance of Carrington, Page concentrates on moving "into places that nudged you into remembering that you knew those places almost.... She [Carrington] knew that we are not whole and we want very much to be whole.... She would say...'create interior space for digestive purposes'" (Sullivan, "Meeting" 30).

Although reversal is attractive, it is in combination with transformation that it leads Page to the lightness that ushers in empty space. In "Blowing" (*CA*) she contemplates transformations from solid to abstract, heavy to light, and ground to air as she moves back in time to consider the sources of the blowing dust, fibres, and mushroom spores that were once birds' bones, "the wool of ancient ewes / that stood as still as stone" and "outcropping firm and white." Now "light as featherweight" and "blown like thistledown," the solid three dimensional world becomes airy and insubstantial, approaching and promising nothingness. The processes of undoing down to the single knot ("Knitter`s Prayer"), penetrating to the "tiny image" that "could smash the atom of time and space" ("A Backwards Journey"), and reversing to the "birthbone and flesh" that over the years

"become / light" ("Blowing") clear away complexity in order to establish space and minimize material distraction and stimulation. Conscious explorations of processes that sustain space prepare the eye to follow and make connections, concentrating on relationships between different spaces and worlds. In this way the eye resists being overwhelmed and distracted by detailed colours, shapes and images of concrete elements that privilege material form over abstract meaning.

In "Fly: On Webs" (*EDGF*) and "Dark Kingdom" (*CA*) respectively, Page probes the pull from this world to external beauty and internal darkness. In these poems the speaker drowns in a place either too high or deep for comfort. The episode described in "Fly: On Webs" occurred in Brazil, as did Page's first version of the poem, written in Portuguese in 1958.[6] Page repeatedly returned to this image, however, and the 1969 poem was influenced by the Mexican experience out of which it was written. Particularly striking is the religious diction; the speaker is "singing hosannas" in a moment of synaesthesia, "compelled" by the web's "filigree, gold / as the call of the trumpet." The source of sensuous richness is in perception, in the "myriad-faceted eye," which makes the web into other worlds—"A sun," "A season," "A climate." Despite the Icarus-like "struggle" and drowning, it has been worth it simply to experience the "dazzle," to make the connections between microcosm and macrocosm and thus play a role in creating the emptiness rather than being tricked into it, by being "…bounced on a flexible wire, / caught by invisible guys."

The vertigo of "Dark Kingdom" causes "dizzy" rather than "dazzle," as the staring speaker, "Wheeling around a point / that drives me through and through," finds that "the very stars grow faint." Knowing "not up nor down," "not in nor out," the speaker's exhortation to the Jungian shadow to "take my hand" is accompanied by a request or prayer to "Emblazon on the night / resplendent—though I drown— / the Crowned Hermaphrodite." Page was deeply immersed in Jung's writing while in Mexico; musing in her journal about "the purpose of the shadow," she writes: "It occurs to me now, that the shadow throws up the light and gives dimension—gives in fact, a kind of 3-dimensional reality" (container 114, file 3; II, 15). In a conversation with Stella Kent, her mentor in the Subud movement, Page records Kent's ideas about the shadow: "the shadow is not necessarily composed of one's dark aspects—it is merely the part in the shadow—unseen— much of which is good, parts of which in fact are like children in need of food & help" (container 114, file 3; II, 35). As a provider of contrast and relief, the shadow is a potential source of connection between disparate worlds. Struggles, connections and unions between male and

female, represented by Page in this poem through the "Crowned Hermaphrodite," appear in more tentative forms in the Mexican journal where she writes that "in art too the divine hermaphrodite must be born" (container 114, file 3; II, 85) and that she is "just beginning to understand the symbols of the hermaphrodite & of the Divine Child" (container 114, file 3; II, 42). Attracted to binaries, Page uses them in their divided form to forge connections, working hard to move beyond the pull of the binaries themselves toward something more spacious and meaningful. That "something," however, in its clarity and wholeness is less complex than the binaries, which operate on the margin between blocked and exposed meaning. This is the resistant edge that threatens but stops short—just barely—of allowing meaning to dominate image. Moving just over that edge, but not too far over, allows meaning and image to coexist.

Through the clearing of space, Page is able to make significant metaphorical connections in "Brazilian Fazenda" (*CA*), which allow her to perceive meaning through sensuous responses to images instead of losing herself in an indulgent submission to them. This visit to the *fazenda* (farm or estate), which, like the observation of the spider's golden web, took place in Brazil, was originally recorded in Page`s journal and then published with alterations in *Brazilian Journal*. The poem, however, was written after Mexico and differs from the journal accounts, demonstrating in particular how Page in Mexico trained herself to empty enough space to control an indulgent eye always eager to forego meaning for sensation. The coloured parts of the house that make up the whole—"the sugar-white pillars / and black lace grills / of this pink house"—are left to the last three lines of the poem, after the meaning lodged in the house, the colonial story, has been told. Like the child concentrating on the Dutch Cleanser bottle, the speaker in the poem concentrates on the house, in this case not with a self-conscious awareness of the eye and the process of penetration, but with an imaginative openness to the meaning embedded in the building and the land. Juxtaposing the colonial past and the present, imprisonment and freedom, virginity and fertility, Page allows the binaries to serve the story, which moves from the rusty margin of a slave narrative to the magnificence of a religious and royal fairy tale, in which "the chapel was lit by a child's / fistful of marigolds on the red velvet altar / thrown like a golden ball." The white pillars and black grills of the pink house tell the colonial story, but the shapes and colours are not permitted to overpower the narrative. The speaker, placed in the bridal hammock in the middle of the poem, hears and tells a story that depends for its meaning *and* effect on the sensuous pieces of the *fazenda*. The land and house serve as metaphors for the

families, societies, and worlds that have inhabited them, while the rich and jarring extremes of the place suggest the complexities of the historical eras. The active participation of this poetic speaker, who contributes to the creation of meaning, contrasts with the strangely passive response of Page to the bullfight, when she prevents herself not only from imagining meaning but even from perceiving meaning that exists. "Brazilian Fazenda" is an evocatively disparate poem in its mixture of past and present, but the individual images—the marigolds, bell flowers, moo, red ripened coffee beans, rusting anklets—come together in a powerful manner to tell a story that is as memorable as its parts, epitomized by the "bits [that] fell out of the sky." The accumulation of those bits through the repetition of the conjunction "and" gathers them together into a story in which the *fazenda* is a metaphor for the nation and world in which it existed and exists. The metaphor avoids being overpowered by the beauty of the pieces, but instead is served by them as they point to and encompass meaning.

The speaker's desire to return "on a day / when nothing extraordinary happens" so she can "stare" at parts of the house reveals an awareness of the need to maintain a cleared space free from the danger of too much stimulation. This current story positions itself on the edge, in danger of being overpowered and fragmented by the magnificence of its "bits" and pieces. Triumphantly, however, the pieces coalesce, individual images functioning as small metaphors linking present place with past time. The ripened coffee beans, for example, "like beads on a bush or balls of fire / as merry as Christmas" do not exist in isolation as sensuous signs of fertility and fruition, but as a response to the freed slaves. The eye feasts on them, but is not taken over by them, as is the speaker's eye in "After Rain" when the "small snails as pale as pearls" "encumber" the "pure line" of the "meaning" of the "whole." In "Brazilian Fazenda" Page deliberately begins with the story, positions the speaker gently singing and whistling in its centre, and only allows the self-reflexive eye to intrude in the final stanza where it is relegated to another day and time, when it will hopefully continue to resist "seduction."

In "Another Space" (*PSN*), the poem written out of Mexico which is most directly connected with the Mexican years, the insistent eye disappears altogether. The speaker is struck and penetrated by a force from an external sighting, which melts "something" in her—a "glass partition" that "halved [her] heart." The icy partition is the result of an eye that seeks image rather than meaning and aesthetics above emotion, particularly compassion. The result of being struck in her "absolute centre" is that "to-fro all the atoms pass / in bright osmosis," a process that provides tremen-

dous relief in its instigation of a mutual exchange between inner and outer, releasing atoms that previously existed separately "in stasis locked" due to the control of an eye intent on fixing or freezing every particle it perceived. The outcome of the melting, itself the result of the blow of love, is "a new / direction open[ing] like an eye." The open eye is permeable, receiving as well as projecting, and allowing an interchange and equitable concentration of atoms on either side of its lens or membrane.

"Another Space" is based on a dream recounted in a journal entry on 14 September 1960 during time spent in New York City after the first year in Mexico. Page explains the poem's genesis in a 1984 interview with John Orange:

> The whole poem "Another Space" was a dream, but I didn't dream the poem. I dreamed about those people on the beach and I carried the dream around in my head for about seven years. I didn't understand what it meant but I felt it had real meaning for me. Then one day it started to write itself as a poem. ("Conversation" 74)

In addition to carrying the dream in her head, she also carried it in writing on a page in her Mexican journal, beginning "About the dream:—and I wish I had written it down right away as I have lost almost all of it now—" (container 113, file 26; I, 70). Page goes on:

> I was walking along the sand and saw in the distance something that was obviously highly ceremonial and mediaeval. There were groups of I think men on the sand forming dense circles. They were dressed in strange clothing, dark deep reds, blacks, rather like Lapp costumes and those on the outside ring of the circle had instruments which were a mixture between a violin, a kite and a bow and arrow. They were curious instruments with yards and yards of black string from which the bow (violin) or arrow (bow and arrow) was launched. As we approached I was vaguely aware that we were intruding into some secret rite and became uneasy. And I indeed learned of this quite directly the next moment by receiving exactly on the crown of my head, a bow? arrow? kite? – which hit with such delicacy that I at once knew the immense skill [as well as the immense gentleness of the man who "shot" me] of the man who could so incredibly control his – stroke. (container 113, file 26; I, 70) (words in square brackets added later in handwriting)

Finding the dream baffling in that it evokes "100 things that seem not connected with the dream but connected with something quite vital in my life," Page says she is "drawn to those people who seem as if they are falconers and of my blood" and that "what is uncanny is the feeling I have of

almost having known that disciplined immensely powerful and yet so gentle strength of the unknown person who hit me on the head" (container 113, file 26; I, 70).

When questioned by Sandra Djwa about the influence of Sufism on "Another Space," Page says that "before I wrote it I may have read some Sufi material," but insists that "it didn't alter the images. The images were the dream images" ("Biographical" 50). Sufi scholar, writer, and teacher Indries Shah, author of *The Sufis* (1964), is first mentioned in the Mexican journal as "A Mr. Idries Shah" in a 12 October 1963 entry, when Page's spiritual focus was shifting from the Subud movement to Sufism. Journal entries at this time reveal that Page and others, with the help of Stella Kent, managed to obtain and read Shah's *Oriental Magic* (1956) and *Destination Mecca* (1957), along with "literature prepared by him which has nothing to do with his books—but is the net to catch disciples" (container 114, file 3; II, 120-22). One of these pieces, according to Page, turned out to be "the first chapter of *The Sufis* (1964), entitled 'The Islanders'" ("Biographical" 48).[7] Page thus read Shah's work three years after the dream and five years before the completion of "Another Space," so the whirling dream images existed on paper in journal form before any exposure to Sufism, whirling dervishes, or the concentrated esoteric reading that preceded Sufism. Those dream images, however, evolved and took shape in the poem during the early stages of Page's study of Sufism.

The dream experience of "Another Space" seems to be a prescient description of the way in which various writers, mystics and philosophers such as Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Nicoll and Shah entered Page's consciousness in Mexico. On 9 December 1962, more than two years after the September 1960 entry recording the dream, Page notes that "what becomes increasingly interesting is that Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Nicoll, <u>all use the same language</u> and much of it is ancient language: As above, so below. Seek and ye shall find etc. etc." She claims that "in reading these books I am brought back to many things I seemed to <u>know</u> when I was younger. I seem to remember a stage when I had very few negative emotions. I once knew with complete certainty that the more sensitive one was to oneself, the less sensitive one was to the external world. I once felt things" (container 114, file 3; II, 19). Constance Rooke comments that "in growing up, we take on shape; but Page customarily sees this process as rigidification, a closing of the waters of vision" (184). This unravelling or reversal to earlier languages, times, and selves clears away distractions and rigidity. At the bottom of this journal page of 9 December 1962 are a few handwritten lines dated Dec. 11: "During a

sleepless night it occurred to me that there is only the difference of a vowel between LIVE & LOVE. Almost as if they are 2 forms of the same verb" (container 114, file 3; II, 19). In "Another Space," it is of course "the blow [that] is love" that melts ice:

> 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.
>
> (*PSN*)

The kaleidoscopic compass rose of the poem—" What kaleidoscope / does air construct / that all their movements make a compass rose / surging and altering"—emerging from the "dense circles" of the journal dream moves the poem's speaker to "speculate / on some dimension I can barely guess." Between the dreaming of the dream and the writing of the poem, Page's immersion in the work of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, among others, brought the "fourth dimension" somewhat closer.

Rosemary Sullivan, connecting the heart of this poem with the heart of the earlier "After Rain"—"And choir me too to keep my heart a size / larger than seeing"—argues that in the later poem "the trembling or shaking is in the human eye" and that "the momentary glimpse of an informing structure initiates the longed-for break from solipsism" ("Size" 42). In her reading and searching in Mexico, Page was indeed seeking an "informing structure" that would draw her heart toward meaning while tempering her overly active eye; she wanted to be able to feel pity for the bull even as she marvelled at the fragments that made up the spectacle of the bullfight. Similarly, she longed to experience compassion for the poverty imposed by the badlands, but did not want to disregard the elements that formed the beauty of that landscape. Does Page manage to achieve this demanding and tenuous balance of eye and heart coming out of Mexico? The passionate effort invested in this quest is apparent in the many pages of the Mexican journal devoted to Subudian "openings" and "vibrations," which presumably have the potential to expand and disturb the established habits of a particular way of seeing. The persistence of these efforts emphasizes Page's conscious participation in the Mexican night and her deliberate nurturing and development of a more permeable lens and open eye. Although the speaker is "reeled in" by the cosmic spinning of the dancers on the sand and "struck" by the arrow in "Another Space," Page has actively prepared the ground for such entanglements and assaults through her immersion in eso-

teric reading, dreaming and experimentation in Mexico. "Another Space" emerges from dream images which are definitely present and recorded before the philosophical reading and searching begin, but are transformed by those philosophies into something more definite and articulate. Page initiates and orchestrates these transformations.

Herein lies the power of P.K. Page's vision coming out of Mexico. Never willing to indulge in "belief" and repeatedly using the word "almost," she refuses to allow inner and outer space to solidify into separate entities, but she also refuses to prolong the union of image and meaning.[8] It is the fleeting and tenuous quality of the balance of eye and heart that defines its exquisite nature. The osmosis of moving particles permeating the membrane of the eye breaks down the dominance of that eye, but does not eliminate it. To live in balance requires effort, the balance always threatened by the emergence of that insistent eye at any point. Page's reading and searching in Mexico did more than anything else up to that point to calm the eye by clearing interior space in preparation to receive meaning even while responding to and giving shape to external forms. It is not a matter of heart over eye or even of a larger heart than eye, a comparative that Page considers with respect to Arthur as she wonders about their difference: "Whether he has a more highly developed social sense or a less highly developed eye, I wouldn't know" (container 114, file 3; II, 7). For Page, it is a matter of developing the heart to a point where it can balance the eye so that both can function abundantly. The religious binding together is of eye and heart, which invites metaphoric connections between inner and outer space and between this and other worlds. In the Mexican night Page deliberately cultivated the darkness in order to balance the light, delving into it knowingly and willingly, aware of her need for the internal shadow that would control the attraction of the eye to external brilliance. The yoking of image and word in *Cry Ararat!: Poems Selected and New,* and the title poem's awareness of the ability of fragment and image to both hide and reveal meaning—"A single leaf can block a mountainside; / All Ararat be conjured by a leaf"—reflects a new relationship between seeing and vision that can be traced to the shadows of Mexico, where the clearing of space encouraged the tracing of lines that bind together to illuminate the pattern and meaning of the whole without erasing the individual image and detail.

P.K. Page takes responsibility for the vulnerable seduction of her eye, knowing from the bullfight and badlands that she is predisposed to allow the leaf to block rather than conjure the mountainside. In Mexico Page learned the art of conjuring by developing the "total I" in order to balance

the seduced "eye." As a "religious non-Christian," she permits herself to see and pursue patterns through noticing and drawing metaphorical lines between fragments and larger meanings. She managed to achieve what she longs for: an apprehension of abstract meaning while sustaining an appreciation of the aesthetics of fragment and image. At the end of her stay in Mexico, Page records recent reading selections that advocate connectivity: "Look for the association or tie-up of things which are not normally connected.... The artificiality of our lives has tended to split our consciousness, so that things which are connected appear unconnected. Perceiving things as they really are is a necessity. In our work this comes about through our activity in the world and not out of it" (container 114, file 3; II, 142). It is through her "religious" eye that Page binds together the disparate elements of this world in order to gain entry into another space that is connected to rather than removed from, and dependent on rather than above, the seductive fragments of the world in which she lives.

Notes

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1 Page's unpublished Mexican journals are part of the "P.K. Page Fonds" at the National Library and Archives of Canada (MG 30 D 311, Finding Aid 1655) and are quoted here with the permission of Zailig Pollock, Page's literary executor. In this paper I refer to these manuscripts as the Mexican journal and cite them according to container and file number as well as volume and page number as they have been arranged in the two files (container 113, file 26; I, 15-243 and container 114, file 3; II, 1-153).

2 "After Rain" and "Cry Ararat!" were both published in *Cry Ararat! Poems New and Selected* in 1967. "After Rain," published in *Poetry* [Chicago], 89 (Nov. 1956), was the last major poem written before Page's poetic "silence" in Brazil. "Cry Ararat" is possibly the first poem emerging out of that silence after Mexico. The dates of the composition of P.K. Page's poems have been provided by Zailig Pollock and the original publication dates are taken from John Orange's annotated bibliography of Page in *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors*. Throughout this paper, I use the versions of the poems as they were initially published in one of Page's collections.

3 Through an examination of Page's correspondence with Floris McLaren, Dean Irvine explains that this final stanza of "After Rain," part of the first version of the poem written by 1955, was excised from its 1956 publication in *Poetry.* The stanza was then included in the publication of the poem in *Cry Ararat! Poems New and Selected* (173-74).

4 Pollock dates the composition of these poems as follows: "Brazilian Fazenda," "Cry Ararat" and "Dark Kingdom" by November 19, 1966; "Blowing" by August 21, 1967; "Backwards Journey" by January 10, 1969; "Another Space," "Fly: On Webs," "Knitter's Prayer" by February 17, 1969. John Orange notes that the latter four poems were published in *Poetry* [Chicago], 114 (Aug. 1969) and "Brazilian Fazenda" in *The Tamarack Review*, 44 (Summer 1967) (222).

5 Page's fascination with the kaleidoscope is apparent in "Another Space"—"What ka-

leidoscope / does air construct / that all their movements make a compass rose / surging and altering?" (*PSN*) and in the poem, "Kaleidoscope" (*HR*). The title of Pollock's recent edition of Page's poetry is *Kaleidoscope* (Porcupine's Quill, 2010).

6 Pollock pointed out in an e-mail to me that the first version of this poem, eight lines entitled "Teia de ouro," was written by Page for her speech at the Brazilian Academy in 1958 ("Poems").

7 According to Pollock, much of this material by Shah was found in Page's papers. For example, an essay by Shah from the Mexican period, entitled "Solo to Mecca" by Omar M. Burke (one of Shah's pseudonyms) and published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in December 1961, was among Page's papers, but the essay referred to in the interview with Djwa was not found.

8 In her interview with Orange, Page stresses that "'Believe' is a word I'm uneasy with" (75), while Rooke points out Page's frequent use of "almost" (194).

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