

## **The Visual Arts and the Conflict of Modernist Aesthetics in P.K. Page's "Ecce Homo" and *The Sun and the Moon***

**by Michèle Rackham Hall**

Following P.K. Page's poetic crisis of the 1950s, she fell "silent" for over a decade (Trehearne), shifted her focus to the visual arts, and began a successful career as the artist P.K. Irwin. Although painting and drawing became central to her creative vision only at this late point in her life—she was in her forties—Page had demonstrated a keen interest in modernist visual art much earlier. Her poem "Ecce Homo," published in 1941, and her novella, *The Sun and the Moon*, published in 1944, bear testament to a young Page's fascination with contemporary art and aesthetics. "Ecce Homo" is an ekphrastic poem about Jacob Epstein's sculpture of the same title that she saw in the Leicester Galleries when she visited London in 1935, while *The Sun and the Moon*, which she started writing as early as 1939, is a waning romance about the relationship between a young heroine with supernatural abilities, Kristin Lothrop, and a talented and famous painter, Carl Bridges. In this paper, I begin by examining the historical differences between modernist abstraction in the visual arts and in the realm of Canadian poetry, and Page's own exposure to and understanding/misunderstanding of these differences, to delineate the gendered context in which she wrote and published "Ecce Homo" and *The Sun and the Moon*. I then compare the poem and novella to develop an understanding of the introspective role the visual arts play in Page's early writing. Attending first to the poem and then to the novella, I argue that both stage a gendered clash of modernist aesthetics via the visual arts betraying Page's contemporaneous creative struggle within a masculine modernist milieu. These early writings either establish or allegorize a conflict between a masculine, impersonal, geometric aesthetic and a feminine, personal, biomorphic aesthetic. By reading these works through the aesthetic tensions central to modernist visual art, I reveal that the aesthetic discord exhibited in Page's early poetry and prose of the 1930s and 1940s foreshadows her poetic crisis of the 1950s.<sup>1</sup>

Page's move to London, England in 1934 likely galvanized her enthusiasm for modernist art. While there for approximately a year, she frequented art galleries, such as the Tate and the Wertheim, where she first encountered the modernist paintings and sculptures of the London Group: Jacob Epstein, Paul and John Nash, Ben Nicholson, and Stanley Spencer (Djwa, "P.K. Page" 80).<sup>2</sup> Some of her earliest poems and prose demonstrate a profound consideration of the sculptures, paintings, and radically modernist aesthetics she observed in the galleries of Leicester Square during this year abroad. A consideration of the art historical context out of which these early poems and prose works emerged—a time when art historians, art critics, and visual artists were expanding their understanding of modernist aesthetics and abstraction—can reveal Page's struggle to develop her signature modernist style, as well as provide insight into her poetic crisis and eventual turn to the visual arts.

Although Page only began to practice visual arts formally much later in life, following her London visit, she began to experiment with sketching, and some of her manuscripts of the 1940s reveal "complex doodling exhibit[ing] the spiraling and geometric forms she would later perfect" in her paintings and drawings as P.K. Irwin (Godard 7). These early doodles and sketches also reveal her contemplation, whether conscious or unconscious, of the modernist aesthetics she observed in the work of, and critical debates surrounding, the London Group. In January 1935, while she was still in London, an important discussion about the nature of abstract art was launched in reaction to the work of the London Group in a new magazine called *Axis*. In the first editorial entitled "Dead or Alive", the editor, Myfanwy Evans, attempted to open up the definition of abstract art, which she claimed had been "confused with many things," including "simplification," "generalisation," mechanisation, and "progress" (4). Following Evans's lead, Geoffrey Grigson argued in the same issue that the traditional idea of abstraction as simplification and geometricisation reduces everything to an "intellective type" (8). He suggested, "[a]bstractions are of two kinds, geometric [...] and biomorphic," the latter being capable of including "affective and intellective content" (8), as seen in the art of Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and, one of Page's favourites, Paul Nash. Grigson was implicitly borrowing Wilhelm Worringer's earlier dichotomy of modern aesthetics, which includes both "abstraction"—art that is "life-denying," "inorganic," "crystalline" (Worringer 4) and displays a tendency towards "geometricisation" (Worringer 97)—and "empathy"—art that "inclines toward the truths of organic life" and that strives for "the reproduction of organically beautiful vitality" (Worringer 14). Worringer saw the two poles of his dichotomy as

incompatible; the moment the art of “empathy abandons the sphere of the organic [...] and takes possession of abstract forms,” he argued, those forms “are thereby, of course, robbed of their abstract value” (48). Grigson, conversely, argued that abstraction was not limited to geometric form and acknowledged that the art of empathy could also be abstract, what he called “biomorphic.” In making this statement, Grigson attests that biomorphism is not simply a modern aesthetic or idiom, but one that is modernist.

Biomorphism is abstract art “represent[ing] vital forces and natural processes” (Botar 54). With its aesthetic roots in Art Nouveau, biomorphism is an idiom that combines biological (sometimes microscopic) and organic forms and natural imagery with the underlying themes of genesis, metamorphosis, and flux. Irregular form and the concept of “formlessness,” a spatial analogue to temporal flux, are essential to the biomorphic aesthetic (Botar 8-9). Grigson’s concept of biomorphic abstraction was still tentative, however, when a year later, in 1936, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Alfred Barr, borrowed the term and Grigson’s binary of abstraction for his famous catalogue, *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Barr affirmed Grigson’s assertion that there are two streams of modernist abstraction: geometric abstract art and non-geometric abstract art (19). He similarly described the latter as “biomorphic” (19). “Often,” Barr suggested, “these two currents intermingle and they may both appear in one man” (19). According to Marcia Brennan, Barr’s catalogue acknowledged a “dialogical theorization of gendered subjectivity embedded within the[se] aesthetic structures of canonical modernism” (180). He “actively dislodged associations that had previously been ascribed to the feminine subject position in order to recuperate these qualities within a revised, and powerfully paradoxical, conception of modern masculine subjectivity” (Brennan 194). Barr reclaimed the organic qualities of the art of empathy for male artists and placed the modernist stamp of approval on an organic or biomorphic abstraction that had previously been labeled too effeminate to be modernist.

While this biomorphic idiom was celebrated as a rising form of modernism within the realm of the visual arts in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it was not acknowledged as such within the realm of modernist poetry. Page’s artistic milieu, in particular, favoured the implicitly masculine, impersonalist, geometric idiom of British and Anglo-American poets, such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain that Eliot’s doctrine of impersonality “constructs an implicitly masculine aesthetic of hard, abstract, learned verse that is opposed to the aesthetic of soft, effusive, personal verse supposedly written by women and Romantics” (154). They argue that the “discourse” of Eliot’s doctrine and others like it—e.g. Cleanth

Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) or Ezra Pound's *The ABC of Reading* (1934)—is largely based on the lectures of T.E. Hulme, who, drawing on Worringer's binary of geometrical abstraction and empathy, established "a binary opposition between the 'geometrical' and the 'vital'" in poetry (Hickman 15). Miranda Hickman has further discussed Vorticists' adoption of the geometric idiom as a way of countering "the 'effeminacy' it takes as its enemy," an effeminacy generally associated with the "femininity of women" (85), homosexuality (19), turn-of-the-century aestheticism (19), and the organic. "[G]eometry," writes Hickman, "indicated the realm of the man-made, the artificial rather than the organic" (44). In modernist poetry, unlike the realm of modernist visual art, the biomorphic idiom was considered antithetical to the impersonal, masculine, geometric idiom and its visual aesthetic of angularity, precision, and rigidity.

Poets of the *Preview* group, to which Page belonged, typically advocated an impersonal, geometric, masculine modernist aesthetic. D.M.R. Bentley discusses this aesthetic in an essay on the "architexts" of A.M. Klein and F.R. Scott,<sup>3</sup> and describes it as a kind of modernism famously endorsed by A.J.M. Smith in his introduction to *The Book of Canadian Poetry* as "cosmopolitan" (28). Building on the earlier "simplification of technique" and "sharper, more objective imagery" of the "native poets," cosmopolitan poets sought a "poetry of ideas, of social criticism, of wit and satire" (29) and a "metaphysical" poetry of "classical richness" (30) that was, according to Smith, "neither untraditional nor formless" (29). Smith emphasizes the "classical" qualities of cosmopolitan poetry; Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz indicates that the classical aesthetic has a "rational and objective quality that likens it to antiquity" and is "based on calculations, and operating with numerical proportions and geometrical models" (114). That Smith cites Anderson's "Capital Square," with its title suggestive of its urban and angular imagery, and Page's "The Stenographers" from *Preview* as exemplary cosmopolitan poems is unsurprising. The final arresting image of Page's poem—"the pin-men of madness in marathon trim / race round the track of the stadium pupil" (n. pag.)—certainly evokes geometric precision through the implication of a concentric relationship between the round racetrack and the human eye. Although Smith found "The Stenographers" illustrative of the cosmopolitan strain, her poems of the period do not adhere consistently to a geometric idiom; rather, they display, as Dean Irvine has argued, an "oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity, between interiority and exteriority, between self-reflexivity and self-effacement, between a poetics of personality and impersonality" ("Two Giovannis" 25). Adding to these

binary pairs, I suggest that Page's poetry also exemplifies an intensifying conflict between the geometric and biomorphic.

If she was familiar with the criticism surrounding these two modernist aesthetics, Page never wrote explicitly about it in her journals or elsewhere;<sup>4</sup> nevertheless, following her exposure to modernist painting and sculpture of the 1930s, she clearly perceived a similar dichotomy in modernist abstraction, which she articulates via the visual arts in her early poems and prose. Unlike Barr, however, whose dichotomy was exclusively masculine, Page presents a gendered dichotomy of female (biomorphic) and male (geometric) abstraction. Her treatment of this binary, moreover, implies both her desire and inability to synthesize the two idioms. This gendered antinomy of modernist abstraction is nowhere more apparent than in her poem "Ecce Homo." The poet-persona recalls her conversation with an older woman in the spring of 1935, when the two went to the Leicester Galleries to view Jacob Epstein's sculpture *Ecce Homo* (Fig. 1). Djwa explains that "[t]he sculpture was a *cause célèbre* in London [. . .]" that spring "because many critics condemned Epstein's rendering of Christ—an eleven-foot, squared, roughly chiselled sculpture—as primitive and savage" ("P.K. Page" 80). In addition to its male subject, the sculpture exemplifies the aesthetic values of a masculine geometric idiom: the simplified figure of Christ is embodied in the large, rectangular, stone block out of which it is carved. Nose, chin, and arms are sharp and angular, and Epstein juxtaposes the horizontal lines formed at the chin and arms against the vertical thrust of the piece. *Ecce Homo's* geometric aesthetic is quite striking, even if the speaker of Page's poem does not explicitly comment on its angularity.

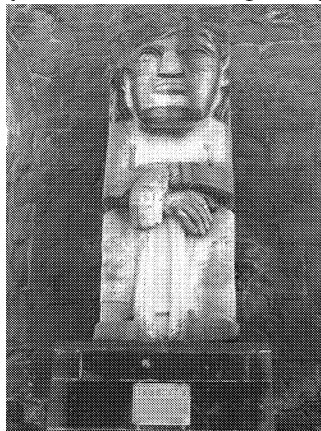


Fig. 1. Jacob Epstein's *Ecce Homo*. 1934-35. Subiaco Marble. Coventry Cathedral, Coventry, U.K. © Tate, London 2012. Image Copyright David Dixon. Licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic Licence.

The persona's description of the sculpture is telling: her reaction to its aesthetic is one of terror and rejection. When she walks into the gallery where *Ecce Homo* is displayed, she finds the room to be

[...] filled with might,  
with the might of fear in stone,  
immense and shackled.  
The flesh that covered the bone  
seemed bone itself...  
terrible, holy... you could not take a breath...  
the Man, deformed, thick-hipped,  
the God of Death,  
in a little room in a gallery in Leicester Square,  
silently standing there.

(6)

The speaker emphasizes the hard material of the sculpture, the "stone," end-rhymed with the sculpture's "bone," that overtakes the figure's flesh. This bone is skeletal, the bone of "the God of Death" that is neither generative nor transformative, but rather stifling, asphyxiating, as it takes one's breath away. While the geometrical form of the sculpture is understated, the speaker's closing remarks highlight, via rhyming couplet, its position in "Leicester Square." The geographical "Square" contains *Ecce Homo* just as the rectangular stone of the work contains the figure of Christ. Because the speaker finds this sculpture and its "deformed" aesthetic "terrible" and fearful, we can infer a gendered aversion to its masculinist geometric aesthetic.

The speaker removes herself from the threatening sculpture and the enclosed space of the Square when she asserts, she "was away with Rima." Also by Epstein, *Rima* (Fig. 2) is a sculpture located in Hyde Park as a memorial to W.H. Hudson, the author of the romantic novel *Green Mansions* (1904). The title refers to the heroine of Hudson's novel. Kay W. Hitchcock once described her as "neither woman nor bird," and "more like a nymph or young nature goddess than a girl" (48). Both woman and bird, Rima exemplifies the boundary-blurring and metamorphic potential of the organic world that biomorphic artists typically explored. Epstein's cenotaph for Hudson depicts Rima in the nude and it stirred great controversy at its unveiling; later, the sculpture was tarred and feathered, a defacement referred to by the speaker's friend in the poem. Epstein softens much of the rectilinearity seen in the figure of *Ecce Homo* to celebrate instead the graceful curves of the female figure. Although *Rima* is not entirely devoid

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of angles—her breasts and elbows are pointed, for example (though even these points are noticeably rounded)—the sculptor also highlights the natural forms of the body juxtaposed against such angles, and not, as is the case with *Ecce Homo*, the overt geometricization of the body. Epstein’s *Rima* aligns itself with biomorphic modernism as it explores the vital forces of the female body through a subject aligned with nature who herself has mystical, transformative capabilities.

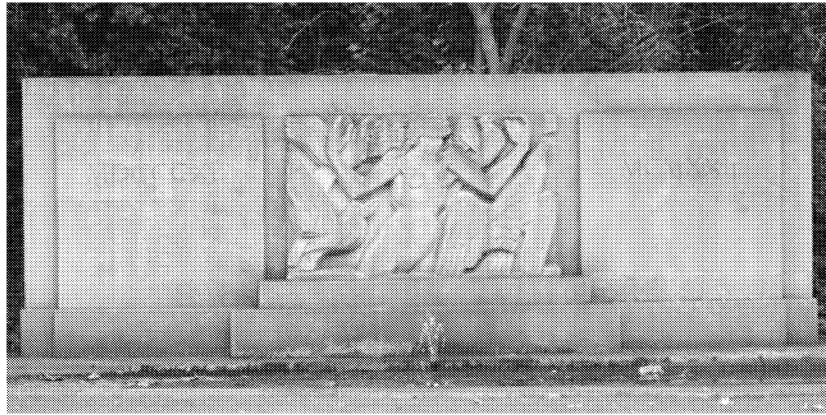


Fig. 2. Jacob Epstein’s *Rima*. 1925. Hyde Park, London, U.K. Stone bas-relief. © Tate, London 2012. Image Copyright David Smith. Licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic Licence.

Epstein depicts Hudson’s *Rima* in what Stephen Hutchings calls “reverse ekphrasis”: “visual renditions of verbal texts” (9). I argue, in turn, that Page cites Epstein’s *Rima* meta-ekphrastically: her poem alludes to a sculpture alluding to a novel as a way of comparing the modernisms Epstein explores in his sculptures and the poet considers in her poem. The poem is about the sculpture *Ecce Homo*, embodying a masculine, geometric modernism, but the female persona says she is “away with Rima”—she aligns herself with a female and organic modernism, a figurative biomorphic modernism. A male artist, however, created both sculptures, a fact that implicitly subverts a gendered binary of abstract aesthetics, and suggests that one artist can successfully transition between them. The speaker eventually does give adequate attention to *Ecce Homo* in the poem, but when she contemplates both of Epstein’s sculptures, her final reaction is metaphorically biomorphic: she “like a young tree . . . put out a timid shoot / and prayed for the day, the wonderful day / when it bore its fruit” (6). The speaker’s reaction is anthropomorphic with distinctly generative aspirations for her thoughts, which she prays will grow into “fruit.” Her thoughts on “Man, Rima, poly-

amy!," however, aspire to more than just the biomorphic aesthetic of *Rima*: they envision a possible coexistence, a "polygam[ous]" marriage—along the lines Barr had suggested and that Epstein achieved—of masculine and feminine aesthetics, of both the biomorphic and geometric in the single artist. Thus, throughout "Ecce Homo," Page's speaker illustrates an unfulfilled desire, and the propagative potential, of merging these two aesthetics by carefully studying Epstein's divergent sculptures.

In many ways, Page explores an analogous "marriage" of masculine and feminine aesthetics in *The Sun and the Moon* through Carl and Kristin. Page allegorizes an internal creative conflict between a masculine, impersonal, geometric aesthetic and a feminine, personal, biomorphic aesthetic via these two characters and the art they create. Sandra Djwa has suggested that the novella is "a kind of *Künstlerroman* in which Page's protagonist is now a young woman artist rather than a young man" ("P.K. Page" 87); I would clarify, however, that *The Sun and the Moon* is a modernist *Künstlerroman* featuring two artist protagonists, one female and one male, representing the author's fragmented consciousness. While Kristin, who has the supernatural ability to become one with other objects and people, is perhaps the most obvious protagonist of the novella, John Orange has pointed out that "[t]he third-person narrative point of view shifts from Kristin's consciousness [...] in part I to Carl as centre of awareness in Part II" (17), which is aptly entitled "Carl." Given these marked divisions, *The Sun and the Moon* is as much about Carl's actions and reactions as it is about Kristin's. Carl's status as protagonist is perhaps most evident in the "Epilogue," when Kristin becomes passive, "indifferent" (123), and distant, and the narrator focuses primarily on Carl's passionate vulnerability and violent response to her transformation. The novel's dual protagonists, moreover, literally share a creative talent as painters when Kristin becomes "one" with Carl (60). Evy Varsamopoulou asserts that when the *Künstlerroman* features a writer or poet as a protagonist, it "discloses a critical awareness of the *métier* of literary art blurring the boundaries between fiction and criticism, as the novelist becomes critic of his/her own creative process" (xii–xiii). *The Sun and the Moon* clearly reveals Page's "critical awareness" of her work via the protagonist-artists, an awareness compounded by the novelist's dual talents in both the literary and visual arts. Page's critical engagement with the creative process in the novella responds to both art forms simultaneously.

Kristin, with her pale skin and affinity for rocks, resembles the sculpture of *Rima* and represents the biomorphic idiom. The novel's narrator and characters continually associate her physical appearance with both nature



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and the metamorphic potential of the natural world. Her eyes, for example, are “green like buds unfolding” (35), in the process of transforming from one organic form to another; her infant hands are “curled like shells” (2-3) that later metamorphose into “two stars” (2-3). As stated earlier, she has an “empathetic” knowledge of people and objects (107), an adjective that links her gift of “inner knowledge resulting from the projection of the mind of the observer onto the thing observed” to Worringer’s art of empathy (107), on which Grigson’s and Barr’s biomorphic abstraction is based. Kristin is also able to transmute into natural materials and she experiences the world on a microscopic level. According to the narrator, Kristin’s empathetic connection with a chair, an experience she wrote about in a story for school, enabled her to know “the pressure of the molecules in the wood, the massing together of atoms” (8). Further, in the novel’s climactic scene, Kristin transforms into a tree. She experiences “the wind tearing at her branches and the strain on her roots” (120). This description of metamorphosis mirrors the anthropomorphic transformation of the speaker of “Ecce Homo.” Both the poet-persona and Kristin experience what Diana Relke identifies as an “intersubjective connection” with objects and people (245): a relationship in which self and other are “interconnected” but “not merged,” and therefore subjects “remain subjects in their own right” (Relke 186).<sup>5</sup> It is this connection that enables Kristin to experience “the re-creation of the self in the united forgetfulness of self” that we see in the tree scene (121). Kristin’s biomorphism is grounded in nature, and also in a shared empathetic relationship with the component parts that make up the world.

Page, evidently, calls on the visual arts to allegorize a gendered aesthetic conflict between the biomorphic, represented by Kristin, and the geometric, represented by Carl. Though Kristin yearns to experience an empathetic connection with Carl, she cannot because he is her antithesis. Carl is “black” to Kristin’s “white,” and whereas he is “an angular shy lad” (42), she is an “unselfconscious” and “pale child who [...] was like quicksilver” (34), a liquid metal without a fixed shape. Carl represents geometric form, and Kristin, conversely, represents biomorphic “formlessness.” The narrator points out the way the “square line of his shoulder jutted against the light” (71), which is later foiled by “the curve of Kristin’s shoulder and the long, lean line of her arm” (125).<sup>6</sup> Carl’s comments about his ex-lover, Egbert, whom he nicknames “the Egg”—a fundamental biomorphic icon—make his opposition to formlessness clear: he notes that she carried her “bad shape,” including her curvilinear “half-moon lids,” “courageously” (43). Meanwhile, Egbert’s moon-like eyelids link her to Kristin. Whereas “the Egg” represents fertility and generation, much like Kristin, Carl (when

he is not happily united with Kristin) is anti-generative. By the end of the novella, he is menacingly so when he suggests they cut down the trees on the other side of the lake and “scrap the cedar that grows as fast as the mushroom” (123). Later, he “slash[es] at young willows” with an axe (133). Although Carl is attracted to the biomorphic, given his relationships with “the Egg” and Kristin, he ultimately, and rather unconsciously, opposes its generative powers. His violent and destructive behaviour is suggestive of Grigson’s conception of geometric abstraction, which he argued “lead[s] to inevitable death” (8). Carl represents a masculine, rigid, geometric aesthetics of destruction, while Kristin, his opposite, embodies a female, transformative, biomorphic aesthetics of generation.

Carl’s more abstract paintings, moreover, exhibit qualities of an impersonalist geometric idiom; however, as Kristin “takes over” his painting, his art becomes increasingly subjective, abstract, and biomorphic. When Carl first meets Kristin, he mainly paints fairly realistic portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. Following a lunar eclipse (54-7), Kristin manages to intercept his painting and Carl begins to feel as though “someone [were] using [his] faculties, or [he was] using someone else’s” (58). After painting Kristin’s portrait, the result turns out to be a self-portrait that frightens Carl. The narrator reveals little about the painting’s aesthetic or composition, but Carl sees it as a “thick mess of paint” out of which “[h]is own eyes mocked him” (59). As we later learn, the painting terrified him because “he could no longer see her objectively; when he looked he seemed only to be seeing a part of himself” (135). He is primarily critical of the subjective nature of the piece and its personal, self-reflective qualities.

Carl’s reaction to his abstract painting serves to reinforce his rigid, masculine aesthetic ideals and counteract Kristin’s biomorphic, feminine influence. “The first thing [he] did” after leaving their portrait-painting session was paint *The Boy*: a piece featuring “A red-headed young man against a background of brick buildings, crude and powerful” (65). This painting represents a “reassertion of his masculinity” (65), as Kristin points out, and its content is typical of the geometric idiom: a male figure positioned in front of urban architectural forms. Hickman has noted Pound’s “longstanding concern with the line in architecture, and, specifically, a celebration of buildings with clean lines,” which he praised in his essay “The City,” a piece that “recall[s]” Le Corbusier’s studies *Vers une Architecture* and *Urbanism* (116). These authors were part of an avant-garde promoting the geometric idiom in the visual arts and poetry via architecture, and Bentley has noted their writings influenced some of Page’s contemporaries, such as A.M. Klein (19). Carl’s painting, in content at least, draws on the simplified

forms and hard materials of architecture to buttress the masculinity of its subject. Hanging on Kristin's wall, "The Boy," with its forceful red hues, appears "strong and virile and masculine against the pale femininity of her bedroom," a very personal space, with its "apple-green curtain" symbolizing Kristin's organic associations (82). The painting and its placement in the room, a kind of intrusion since Kristin is not certain how it got there ("Her mother must have brought him up for her" [82]), visually encapsulate the novel's aesthetic dichotomy and its implications. Although the painting and curtain appear to complement one another, as their respective red and green hues suggest, one ultimately eclipses the other. Carl's painting and the geometric aesthetic initially "predominate" (82), but Kristin's curtain with its organic-biomorphic associations ultimately overshadow it when it "billow[s]" out over the picture with the gust of wind. The two aesthetics do not enjoy a harmonious existence, but are in conflict here and throughout the novel.

In addition to the contrast between Kristin's room and Carl's painting, Kristin's "painting" (or rather her invasion of Carl's painting) conflicts with both the realism of Carl's earlier works and the masculine, architectural aesthetic of "The Boy." When Carl sets out to create a watercolour of "the river," he begins by finger-painting, moving "cleanly, economically; brown and certain from paint to paper" (97). When Kristin sees him sketch a tree on the river's edge, however, she begins to take over his painting as "her mind moved with his hands—back and forth, back and forth, caught in the rhythm, carried by the rhythm, until thought dissolved in motion and swam like a fish in the current of a stream" (97). As Carl / Kristin paint(s) "quickly, unconsciously" (98), the realistic, classic, and intellectual aesthetic of Carl's work gives way to something more organic: the invader marched in, stormed his defenses, hoisted the invading flag, took possession smoothly and entirely. The city that was Carl knew foreign leadership; foreign colours waved from the ramparts; foreign primitive workmanship ousted the easy-running talent. (98)

Kristin's invasion ousts the leadership of "the city that was Carl" (note the urban and architectural metaphors) and ushers in a more modern, organic, and "primitive" kind of painting, something close to Surrealist automatism, where "thought dissolve[s]" and the unconscious is transferred onto the canvas in loose, rhythmical brushwork.<sup>7</sup> Carl perceives this aesthetic to be talentless and naïve, but it was, by the time Page wrote the novella, a popular modernist idiom in the visual arts.

This automatist-biomorphic idiom, represented by Kristin, is in constant conflict with the geometric idiom, represented by Carl; the two can coexist,

but cannot be synthesized or united, for that would “mean the obliteration of two personalities” (119), a consequence allegorized by their marriage. In the end, they must part ways, as their union has turned Kristin into a distant, “phlegmatic, disinterested woman” (137). Page’s choice of words here is precise: “disinterest” does not mean “lack of interest,” but rather “rid of self-interest.” Richard Schusterman explains that “disinterestedness” is an “aesthetic perception,” first advocated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*, that “examines and appreciates its object [...] for the intrinsic value or pleasure of the [...] experience itself” (241). Loris Mirella suggests it is “through the value of disinterest or detachment that [T.S.] Eliot sees the possibility of re-uniting the increasingly factional and fractious state of vying European ‘interests’” (98). Through her marriage to Carl, Kristin has acquired the impersonality and detachment associated with Eliot, Carl, and the geometric idiom. She has also lost her “empathetic” and subjective perspective (107), and consequently, her capacity for intersubjective experience with objects and people. In the Epilogue, she remains in the “glassed-in veranda” painting her nails, detached from the natural world that surrounds her and detached from Carl. Before Carl leaves her, he destroys the canvas he’d been working on, what Carl earlier calls, a “remote” painting, “as if [it] were paint[ed] in a dream [...] a product of the imagination,” painted by Carl but evidently bearing the marks of Kristin’s biomorphic-automatist hand (132). The destruction of the painting symbolizes the disunity of the two lovers and unsuccessful synthesis of their respective modernist aesthetics.

Carl’s creative dilemma throughout this modernist *Künstlerroman*, his increasing inability to paint, ironically predates and mirrors Page’s own poetic lapse of the 1950s, when she essentially abandoned poetry for painting. The separation of Kristin and Carl, moreover, foreshadows Page’s inability, or rather her own perceived inability, to unite the geometric and the biomorphic in her poetry. It is an aesthetic conflict that persists throughout the forties and early fifties via the visual arts in not only “Ecce Homo,” but also in other poems, such as “Piece for a Formal Garden,” “Draughtsman,” and “Children,” and that climaxes in her well-known poem “After Rain”—one of the last poems she published before her poetic “silence.”<sup>8</sup>

Page articulates in “After Rain” her desire, struggle, and inability to unite the two modernist aesthetics in her poetry. Brian Trehearne has already observed among “the central dialectics” of “After Rain” a dichotomy “between the fluidity of delicate fabric and the rigidity of geometry” (43). The poet’s images of fluidity, however, extend beyond textiles to the organic world. Furthermore, the poem’s central conflict between the

organic and the geometric is implicitly gendered. The poet begins by exploring the fluid, “primeval,” and “abstracted” organicism of the garden with reckless abandon and turns its formal “geometry awash” by writing in a biomorphic idiom. From the opening image of “snails” that “have made a garden of green lace” to the “clothes line” that becomes a “rangey skeleton” with a spider web hanging off its “rib,” “its skeletal infant, similar in shape, / now sagged with sequins, pulled ellipsoid,” “After Rain” is replete with the fluidity, formlessness, and osseous imagery of biomorphic modernism. It is precisely this idiom, however, that “shame[s]” the poet-persona, as she associates it with an undesirable “female whimsy” that, mimicking the biomorphic aesthetic of fluidity and irregular form, “floats about [her] like / a kind of tulle, a flimsy mesh.” She stages a resistance to the biomorphic aesthetic by “pac[ing] the rectangles” of the formal garden created by the male gardener, Giovanni.<sup>9</sup> The speaker’s resistance, however, is hardly successful, and the intermingling of geometric and biomorphic aesthetics that results is inharmonious and disorienting. She describes herself as “Euclid in glorious chlorophyll, half drunk” and struggles, “slipping in the mud,” to maintain a geometric impersonality represented by Giovanni, who shakes his “diamond head” and, “broken,” “squelches [...] / [...] over his ruin.” In the final stanza, the speaker prays that Giovanni might eventually “come to rest within this beauty [...]” and accept her biomorphic imagery: the “pears upon the bough / encrusted with / small snails as pale as pearls.” She sees her attempt at integration or communion of the biomorphic and the geometric in the poem, however, as an aesthetic failure at the time.<sup>10</sup>

As Brian Trehearne remarks, Page’s “creative crisis” (42), developed in part, because she was unable to ignore or resist critical pressure from her forties contemporaries for an impersonalist poetics and “found it impossible to accept th[e] new subjectivist *integritas*” of the 1950s. Her “creative crisis,” however, was both poetic and aesthetic. Impersonality and the geometric idiom were critically connected, as were personality and the biomorphic idiom. To overcome the “constitutive contradiction” of “her age’s aesthetics” (Trehearne 101), fictionally and allegorically foreshadowed as early as 1939 in *The Sun and the Moon*, Page needed to turn her attention away from writing and poetry and grapple with the modernist dichotomy more directly: in a visual form and realm in which both the biomorphic and the geometric were embraced. With her felt pen, paintbrush, and stylus, she resumed the challenge by drawing, painting, and etching as the artist P.K. Irwin.

## Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Cynthia Messenger for inspiring these ideas in her essay “‘Their Small-Toothed Interlock’: Biomorphism and Mystical Quest in the Visual Art of P.K. Page and John Vanderpant,” in which she compares the biomorphic modernism observable in Page’s post-war paintings and poetry and the 1930s photographs of John Vanderpant. For a discussion of the biomorphic/geometric conflict in Page’s early poetics, see my PhD dissertation “Between the Lines: Interartistic Modernism in Canada, 1930-1960” (Rackham).
- 2 Djwa notes that “The paintings that appear to have interested [Page] most were either visionary or very modern—sometimes a combination of both. She particularly liked Paul Nash’s surrealist landscape paintings, which were influenced by Blake, and Spencer’s elongated, El Greco-like *Saint Francis*” (*Journey* 40).
- 3 Bentley argues that Klein and Scott “frequently turned to architectural structures and semiotics in their meditations on the present condition and potential future of Canadian Society” (17). Klein’s “Grain Elevator” “mimics as well as a traditional poem can the ‘box...’ and rectangles’ of the architectural structure that they describe” (Bentley 21). The geometric aesthetic of Scott’s “Fort Smith,” which Bentley also discusses, is more subtle, but the poet similarly describes the town’s infrastructure in geometric terms: “We drove on sandy streets. / No names yet, except ‘Axe-handle Road.’ There was the ‘native quarter,’ / Shacks at every angle [...]” (227). In addition to the lodgings arranged at “angle[s],” the street names imply mathematical logic: “quarter,” designating a particular area of the town, is a term that originally implied the town was divided into quarters, and the name “Axe-handle,” which refers to the tomahawk used by some North American native populations, implies sharpness and may vaguely evoke the words “axis” or “axes,” common to both cartography and geometry.
- 4 She did, however, meet Alfred Barr at a later date, when she was living in Brazil and he was there to judge the 1957 São Paulo Bienal (Page, *Brazilian Journal* 120).
- 5 Relke discusses the term “intersubjective” here in relation to the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin who writes of “intersubjective space” as “a place between self and other where both meet in a web of intersubjective connection” (Relke 186).
- 6 Djwa suggests that when Page revised *The Sun and the Moon* for publication, she “added some characteristics [...] that are suggestive of F.R. Scott” to Carl. “Like Scott,” she writes, “Carl is described as ‘tall and thin’ and is also given one of Scott’s typical walking movements: ‘His shoulder up-pointing, the tenseness of his whole body concentrated in that shoulder’” (*Journey* 101). While Carl, as a painter, is explicitly representative of the visual arts in the novella, Page also suggestively associates him with Canadian poetry by connecting him with one of Canada’s best-known modernist poets and a member of the *Preview* group. Carl, evidently, represents a geometric aesthetic straddling artistic and literary disciplines.
- 7 Lawrence Alloway notes that Surrealist art is typically biomorphic in aesthetic (18).
- 8 The poem was first published in *Poetry (Chicago)* in 1956 along with “Giovanni and the Indians.” These were the last poems she published until the release of *Cry Ararat!* in 1967. Although numerous versions of “After Rain” exist, it is the 1956 version, published on the brink of poetic crisis, which is primarily of interest here.
- 9 The initial geometric design of this garden suggests it is a formal garden, which traditionally stands as a metaphor for patriarchy in Western literature and culture. See Chandra Mukerji’s “The Political Mobilization of Nature in Seventeenth-Century French Formal Gardens” and Jennifer Munroe’s *Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature* for discussion of the gendered status of formal gardens.
- 10 Irvine remarks that Page excised the final stanza of “After Rain” for publication in *Po-*

etry. He suggests the revision “eliminates the attempt at a closing rapprochement between her poet-persona’s impersonalist poetics and Giovanni’s sentimentality [...]” (*Editing* 174). Irvine’s statement somewhat oversimplifies the poet-persona’s position, which is not simply impersonalist but rather represents a struggle to maintain impersonality while suppressing a natural impulse towards sentimentality (note that she “almost weep[s] to see a broken man / had satisfied my whim” [my italics]). Irvine is absolutely correct, though, that “[a]s it appears in *Poetry*, the poem closes without the final stanza’s self-reflexive statement of a new poetics [...]” (*Editing* 174). The final stanza, in which the poet-persona prays that the birds will “choir me too to keep my heart a size / larger than seeing, unsexed by each / bright glimpse of beauty striking like a bell [...],” was revised and included in her post-crisis publication *Cry Ararat!* Its excision from the *Poetry* (Chicago) version in 1956 heightens the suggestion of a creative impasse.

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