Canadian Poetry 42

P.K. Page's Poetic Silence

by Laura Cameron

"I wish I could stop starting poems," P.K. Page started a poem, titled "A wish," in 1957: "2 lines sharp as a factory whistle which stop as steeply."[1] Page was living in Brazil when she wrote this, and her poetic powers were eluding her. She *wanted* to write poetry and she *tried* to write poetry, but for some reason that she did not understand, she could not follow her labours through to satisfactory conclusions: the poems stopped "steeply" as she kept "com[ing] bang up against [...] [her] own stone wall limits" (27 March 1957, "Brazilian Journal" 23). The late 1950s were in fact, as Sandra Djwa points out, an "extraordinarily creative" period for Page (171-2): she had begun to draw and paint seriously—"as if my life depended on it" (Page, "Questions" 18): and indeed, her creative life *did* depend on it, in a way, for she could not write. Page channelled her frustration about what she called "my poetic silence" into her journal.[2] "What to do about writing?" she implored on 8 April 1957: "Is it all dead?" (*BJ* 62). She was convinced that her poetic efforts were failures: a series of "unrelated images on paper," she wrote in "A wish," as lifeless as "400 dead whales in Tasmania" (PKP 1.8.3). By July 1958, it seemed as though her "talent"[3] for writing had dried up completely. In the title of one last poetic attempt, she wondered, "Could I Write a Poem Now?" That question would linger for almost a decade. With just a handful of exceptions, it was the last poem Page would complete until 1966.[4]

As this essay illustrates, in the mid-1950s P.K. Page experienced a crisis of poetic authority: a crisis that, I argue, could only possibly be followed by an interval of silence. The poems born of this crisis—some complete, some incomplete, written between approximately 1955 and 1958—clearly express Page's faltering confidence in her ability to order the world around her into meaningful poetic art. They fixate on images of excess (and indeed on an excess of images) as Page endeavoured to represent and work through her feeling of overwhelming creative impotence. The fact that she initially explored this anxiety in exemplary poems such as "After Rain" suggests that her sense of failure was a *feeling* more than it was a reality; and yet it was a feeling that would ultimately consume her: by 1957-58, as some of the examples I discuss below reveal, Page was really only producing abortive, fragmentary poetic efforts that eventually dwindled away to nothing. When she wrote "Could I Write a Poem Now?" in 1958, she was

also overcome by "guilt" at the thought that by not writing she was simply "let[ting] / [her] talent lie about unused" (*K* 99). In order to revitalize both her "talent" and her confidence, Page needed not only to develop a new model of poetic authority—one free of the inherited modernist duty to produce "unity" within "the shattered order of modern reality" (Eysteinsson 9)—but also to release the feelings of "guilt" and inadequacy that had accumulated as she found herself unable to meet that old standard.

I contend that Page achieved this transition by accepting "silence" as an integral part of her creative process: indeed, I believe that the only way for her to move forward as a poet was to reject any sense that the absence of tangible, satisfactory, complete poems meant that she was leaving her "talent [...] unused," and to embrace instead the possibility that silences could be fertile and generative. By changing her attitude about silence itself—by transforming the frustrating silence of poems that "stop [...] steeply" (PKP 1.8.3) into the attentive silence that she idealizes in "Cry Ararat!" as the "stillness to receive" creative insight (*K* 106)—Page was able to develop a much more sustainable approach to her poetic art. On the way to such mature wisdom, Page's long mid-career hiatus from poetry-writing simply but very importantly permitted temporal distance. It permitted time away from the active anguish of creative crisis, time to clear out—or, as Page imagines it in "Knitter's Prayer," to "unknit" (*K* 115)—the excessive, burdensome presence of old obligations, and time, finally, to open up "a new space" (Page, "Questions" 20) where a new kind of poetic creativity, fuelled by faith and humility, could flourish.

Page's "period of silence" (Irvine, "Two Giovannis" 45), her "ten-year silence" (Killian 100), her "prolonged middle silence" (Trehearne 41), her "long mid-career silence" (Pollock 8), her "silence as a poet" (Swann 196), her "13-year gap in [...] book publishing" (Rose 156) between *The Metal and the Flower* in 1954 and *Cry Ararat!: Poems New and Selected* in 1967, has been a topic of substantial scholarly attention over the last two decades. Page herself has encouraged this critical curiosity by referring repeatedly in her own remarks to a period when, although she "wanted to write very badly," she "couldn't write at all" ("Fried Eggs" 148, 156).[5] Whether her struggles were related to her immersion in the Portuguese language in Brazil, as Page surmises in her 1969 essay "Questions and Images," or to the limits of her modernist aesthetic practice, as Brian Trehearne argues in *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*, or to the changing dynamics of Canadian little-magazine publishing, as Dean Irvine proposes in *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956*, or to something else entirely, Page's "period

of silence" is always drawn as "the pivot around which [her] career turns," as Zailig Pollock puts it in the Introduction to *Kaleidoscope: Selected Poems* (9). Critics have been captivated by the mystery of this "pivot"—why it was necessary and what it entailed—and "silence," a wide-open space in the poet's published *oeuvre*, has proven an alluringly blank page on which to tell their stories.

Some critics have viewed Page's silence as an ending, some have imagined it as a new beginning, and others have been hesitant to use the term "silence" at all. Sandra Djwa, in *A Journey with No Maps*, her 2012 biography of Page, falls into the third of these categories. She maintains that throughout Page's time in Brazil (1957-59) and Mexico (1960-64), the poet's "creative energy was applied to visual art, which stands for strong communication, not silence" (172). Djwa is right that Page's drawing and painting did allow her to "communicate" a great deal while she could not write poetry, but the fact remains that as she confronted "blank page after blank page" of writing paper and feared that "this time I never *would* write again" ("Questions" 18), Page *felt* silenced. And if we are interested in the rhythms of the poet's creative process, as I am, then how she *felt* as she tried to write, and how she expresses this feeling in her poetry, is of paramount importance. In *The Montreal Forties*, although he is clear in defining Page's hiatus from poetry-writing as a "middle silence" (41), for the purposes of his own study (of "modernist poetry in transition") Trehearne is primarily interested in the inevitable *end* of her early stylistic approach. He asserts that the "impersonal poetics" Page had cultivated and idealized in the first part of her career "obscured" the "sympathy" that she believed poetry should convey and inspire (Trehearne 100).[6] The "difficult transition" to a new poetic approach, Trehearne writes, would prove "to be so challenging that a prolonged period of […] silence was necessary to its undertaking" (100). Those who have viewed "silence" as a new beginning have focused on what Page was actually doing during that "prolonged period." Indeed, while she was not writing poetry Page pursued a number of other artistic and intellectual interests: she painted and she drew, and she also read widely in psychology, philosophy, and religion, particularly Sufism.[7] Michèle Rackham has revealed significant continuities between Page's painterly and poetic activities throughout 1950s and 60s. Page's visual artistic practices, Rackham illustrates, facilitated her development of a new "synthesized aesthetic" which she "subsequently incorporated into her poetry" (426).[8] Margaret Steffler, for her part, compellingly demonstrates that Page developed, through her reading and "spiritual searching" in Mexico, a "'religious' identity" that would eventually liberate her

to begin writing poetry again (40).[9] Taken together, the numerous critical accounts of Page's career highlight the magic of "*middle* silence" (Trehearne 41; emphasis added): it must be both a terminus, as Trehearne has seen it—the end of the line in a particular aesthetic mode—and also a point of origin, as Steffler has seen it—the gestation of a new "identity" and perspective (40).

Images of Excess and Page's Crisis of Poetic Authority

The creative crisis that led to silence for P.K. Page was, I argue, a crisis of poetic authority. As a young poet, Page would have been surrounded by the modernist belief that the artist should distill meaning from the world around her and sculpt it into art. "Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism," Astradur Eysteinsson writes, "which in the face of the chaos of the modern world [...] sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind. The unity of art is supposedly a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality" (9).[10] Modernists, Trehearne elaborates, felt that their art must grant "sufficient coherence and force to be of value in a war-driven world without reducing modernism's [...] embodiment of that world's fragmentation, dissonance, and violence of style" (317). Even as they 'raged for order,' Trehearne's comment suggests, modernists could not impose unity where it did not exist. Their art had to convey "wholeness" of meaning while still accounting for the dissonant parts that compose the modern world. And walking the line between coherence and chaos, between the "unity of art" and the "shattered order of modern reality" (Eysteinsson 9), was a balancing act that some writers—including Page—could not sustain. Instead, twenty years into her career as a poet, Page found herself mired in self-doubt, feeling powerless to shape the "world's fragmentation" into anything unified or meaningful at all (Trehearne 317). This feeling of powerlessness dominates the poetry that Page wrote or attempted to write in the mid-1950s.

Page's poems and fragments from this period are troubled, crucially, not by the distance or meekness that "silence" might at first imply, but by *excess*. Excess evokes lack of authority: images and possibilities crowd the poems, often in repetitive lists that feel uncontained and out-of-control. In Brazil, the place Page associates most closely with her struggles to write poetry, the excessive "all-surroundingness" of the tropical heat and the energy of the "jungle straining its leashes" serve as metaphors for the excess that was already overtaking her work by the mid-1950s, if not earlier (Page, *BJ* 37; PKP 27.5.23). In "Questions and Images," Page muses,

"I wonder now if 'brazil' would have happened to me wherever I was" (18). Indeed, although the specific images and language might have been different, I think that the creative crisis that Page experienced in Brazil *would* have happened to her "wherever [she] was." Page's "brazil," with a lower-case "b," is a stage in a poetic career. The physical excess of "Brazil," the country—the aggressive lushness of the vegetation, "green crowding green & being more than green" (PKP 27.5.2), for instance—evokes the mental and creative chaos of "brazil," Page's period of creative crisis.

Vegetative excess dominates Page's well-known "After Rain" (*K* 90-1), which she wrote in 1956 as her "brazil" period of crisis began to intensify (although she was still living in Australia). "After Rain" is, as Laura Killian has put it, "universally recognized by [the poet's] critics as a pivotal Page poem" (97).[11] It is "pivotal" perhaps most obviously because along with "Giovanni and the Indians" it was, in the November 1956 issue of *Poetry*, Page's last poetic publication before her period of silence. The poem is also fertile and attractive critical territory because it "lends itself to dramatic readings of the Page career as a whole" (Trehearne 44). More specifically, in its conception of a speaker whose fluid vision—the vision that allows her to produce an "impersonal consciousness awash in imagery" (Killian 94)—prevents her from any identification with her companion in the poem, it "provides us with a powerful dramatization of the tensions between the opposing impulses at the heart of Page's poetry of the forties and fifties" (Pollock 10).

Page described "After Rain" as a statement of "self-chastisement." "Everything I do seems so slight," she wrote to Floris McLaren in the spring of 1956; "After Rain" was "self-chastisement for just this" (PKP 8.16).[12] Each of the five times the first-person "I" enters the poem, she voices self-criticism. Her poetic vision, she suggests, is flawed by too much whimsy and lack of control, too much impersonality and lack of sympathy, too many images and lack of coherence, and these things cause her to "suffer shame." She is concerned that aesthetic appeal will always trump personal connection for her—that the gardener Giovanni's beautiful hands will always attract her eye more than his sadness will affect her heart—and that her poems will thus remain fragmented (by "bright glimpses of beauty") and "slight" (PKP 8.16): all dazzle and no substance. As the speaker's prayer to the birds in the final stanza suggests, Page *knew* the direction that she would like her poetry to take: she wanted her "heart" to determine the poem's structure and boundaries (its "rim") rather than her impersonal, whimsical eyes. But "After Rain" ends with an expression of distress and weakness: "myriad images," the speaker observes, "still—

/ do what I will—encumber [the] pure line" of meaning in the poem. The speaker hands over authority to the "birds" because, do what *she* will, she feels powerless to effect the change that she so desires. Page conveys this feeling of powerlessness in the poem's various excesses: the clothes-reel "sagged with sequins" of rain, the pears "encrusted with / small snails," and the speaker, "none too sober," "slipping in the mud" of the washed-out garden. The garden in "After Rain" is a space of creative crisis not because it is arid but rather because it is *too lush*; the speaker's poetic authority is in question not because her vision is barren but rather because it is *too fertile*.

"After Rain" is not the only poem from the mid-1950s in which Page expresses and laments her feelings of poetic impotence through scenes of watery excess. In one untitled and incomplete draft, the poetic speaker is in a state of "high unease" regarding a "crazy" vision that she cannot undo.[13] Her situation is extreme: more than simply squelching through a muddy garden, this speaker is caught up in a full-on flood of images:

> Out of a high unease these verses flow
> like hilly seas that splinter on a prow
> knot after watery knot
> to toss and shake and shudder in the wood:
> these images, unceasing now
> break chilly in my blood.
>
> (PKP 3.97.34)

Page refers explicitly to poetry here: to the "flow" of "verses." Images and verses "toss" and "shake" and "shudder" both into her—"splinter[ing] on [her] prow"—and "out of" her. The "myriad images" that obscured integrity of meaning in "After Rain" are more than just an encumbrance now (*K* 91): violent and out-of-control, they "break chilly in [the speaker's] blood" and pour out of her at rapid speed, in "watery knot[s]." Later in the poem, Page summarizes the problem. "One vision is not enough," she repeats at the beginning of the third and fourth stanzas: "a second one […] must follow hot foot on that first in a blinding / and see the crazy first undone." The speaker suggests that the original "vision" of her "youth" was a "pool"; but "now," in the present tense, that pool has turned into a "waterfall" of "arctic waters." Unable to change her aesthetic, the original vision seems to have usurped her poetic powers and the "images" come at her of their own accord, "unceasing now." In this early but deepening stage of her crisis of poetic authority, Page was not at a loss for *what* to say—images were

everywhere—but for *how* to say it, how to contain it and make it into something meaningful.

Page's "unease" about her perceived inability to order the "unceasing" flow of "images" into art only escalated in her poetic efforts from 1957-58, after she had moved to Brazil. One of her speakers fears that if she cannot unite her images or find coherence among them, then maybe they cannot be a poem at all. Maybe, she speculates, a writer who has no authority to coax art out of the world around her can only write lists, not poems. The lush rainforest offers a richly poetic scene in the following lines, but the speaker struggles to capture that poetry in her words:

> Write, & imagine a poem than list of trees [*sic*]
> if you will, if you want; / the list is still a list
> & is not dissimilar to the laundry slip
> what if these leaves <u>are</u> as large as the ear
> of the Indian elephant?
> & those like a woven fan
> & those & those
> spiked, plumed, feathered
> hand-blocked, carved, embossed.
>
> Together though—en scene—entier […]
> (PKP 27.5.10)

The draft breaks off there as the call for coherence chokes the poem. The last line gestures hesitantly towards wholeness—"together though," the speaker begins to suggest, *in a single scene, the leaves make a whole* ("entier")—but the awkwardly repeated dashes indicate that this is a proposition made entirely without conviction; a proposition which, as the poem's incompleteness confirms, she cannot follow up.

Page opens this fragment by gesturing towards authority with a command: "Write." But the condition for "writing" poetry is that she must be able to "imagine" that a "list of trees" can be a "poem"—or indeed that "together" they can form an "entier." The speaker has difficulty making what Umberto Eco calls "an important distinction […] between practical or 'pragmatic' and 'poetic' lists" (113). The difference, frustratingly, is often established "only [by] the intention with which we contemplate" the list (Eco 371). If Page does not feel that her poetic vision is working properly, then she cannot "contemplate" her "list" as anything more "poetic" than "the laundry slip." To the poet struggling to believe in her own poetic authority, a "list is still a list." As her confidence abandons her, the speaker

downgrades from the opening imperative ("Write") to a request ("if you will") and finally to a tentative suggestion ("if you want"). She determines, in the end, that "those & those" leaves, however "large" and strikingly "plumed" or "feathered" they might be, do not "together" make a poem simply because they are placed "together" in a "list." "It is not enough to describe it," Page concludes another fragment: "who wants a list […] beside myself" (PKP 27.5.4).

Of course, the aesthetic excess of lists is not the only way for a poet to evoke self-doubt and a sense of powerlessness. The unformed blankness of *silence*—of the white, wide-open page—can be just as chaotic as an unformed flood of words. Among Page's Brazilian fragments is a piece of paper with "On looking out of My Bedroom Window" handwritten across the top, and underlined. The poem that she began to write below stops after just one line: "15 greens within a frame" (PKP 27.5.21).[14] It is only five words long, but this line conveys the poet's painful confrontation of excess and her inability to write about it—to "imagine" it as a "poem"—just as powerfully as her list of "those & those" leaves. Page sees "15 greens"—which is quite a lot of greens—"within a frame"—her bedroom window—but she does not know what to do with them. Silence can be a response to excess; and sometimes it is the only response that feels possible. "There should be more to say," Page's speaker in yet another fragment remarks, "but I become / when confronted—/ dumb—// Like a bird in a cage, can't sing on request" (PKP 27.5.4).[15] When "confronted" by all of the many things that there are to write about—the "15 greens," the "myriad images," the "list of trees"—she becomes "dumb": unable to say anything at all. Page "slip[ped] in the mud" of poetic excess, both on full pages (as in "After Rain") and eventually on very empty ones (as in the one-line fragment), in response to the crushing feeling that, "do what [she would]" (*K* 91), she could not make the world around her into meaningful verbal art.

"I seem to have mislaid whatever small talent I had," Page wrote in the mid-1950s; "I really need some dynamite to blast down the brick wall that seems to have arisen between me and what I want to write" (qtd in Djwa 143). The chaos of unmade art—of un-orderable excess—feels to the faltering poet as impenetrable as a "brick wall." Page's creative crisis was a crisis of poetic authority, as I have shown, but to her, this *felt* like total paralysis. She felt imprisoned—*silenced*—by the limitations of her skill. For the poet-speaker who "can't sing on request," songlessness is as constrictive as a "cage." Page imagines muteness as motionlessness: "I just couldn't move on paper," she recalls ("Fried Eggs" 156). Crucially, though, the character of Page's depictions of motionlessness would change

markedly in her post-silence poetry. In "Cry Ararat!", for instance, "stillness" permits perfect poetic vision: it permits the "focus of the total I" that is necessary to glimpse the promised land in the distance (Page, *K* 106, 108). The difference between imprisonment in a "cage" and attentive "stillness" is the difference between the enforced silence of creative crisis and the receptive silence in which new work germinates.

Sometime in the early 1960s, during the period when she had ceased writing poetry more or less completely, Page stopped fighting *against* silence and instead accepted it as an open position of creative potential. As a result, she no longer felt paralyzed *by* silence ("silenced"), but recognized *in* silence (the state of being) a "new / direction" for her poetry (Page, *K* 114). At the same time, as I will suggest in the next section of this essay, she stopped struggling to exert her *own* conscious authority over the poems and instead began to look towards a higher organizing principle. As she implies in "Questions and Images," after silence, she no longer conceived of herself as the "master" of her own poetry: "Why did you stop writing?" she asks in the voice of an imaginary questioner. "I didn't. It stopped," she responds. "'Nonsense, you're the master.' 'Am I?'" (Page, "Questions" 18). That last question led to a liberating, if precarious, perspective. Page emerged from silence with a new understanding of the poet as a humble discoverer rather than a masterful maker of meaning.

A "new space" of Humility and Faith: Page's Emergence from Silence

While Page was living in Mexico in the early 1960s, Steffler writes, she was engaged in a "slow and painful process of spiritual searching" (40)—a process prompted at least in part, I would add, by the unsettling experience of creative crisis. It was through this active and deliberate introspection that she developed the newly humble, newly faithful outlook on the creative process that would carry her forward into a new stage of her poetic career. In "Questions and Images," Page describes the early 1960s as a period of "initiation" (20). She was referring to the "initiation myth" that the Jungian psychoanalyst Joseph Henderson defines in "Ancient Myths and Modern Man," his section of Jung's *Man and his Symbols* (which, as Djwa notes (204), Page would have read in 1965 when it was published). At mid-life, says Henderson, the hero in the "initiation myth" realizes that his "task is […] to submit to a power greater than himself […] [H]e has learned a lesson in humility by experiencing a rite of death and rebirth that marks his passage from youth to maturity" (125). For Page, this "rite of death" was mid-career creative crisis: "the pivot around which [her] career

turns" (Pollock 9). Having faced the limits of her poetic powers—which would have seemed to her at the time a kind of creative death (a *poetic* death, of course, separate from her very lively visual artistic activities)—she began to contemplate poetic creativity's continuation with new wisdom and perspective.

Her new perspective was a "religious" one. After a moment of insight that she recorded in her journal on 21 October 1961, Page began to identify as a "religious non-Christian" ("Mexican Journal" 113.26.166). She felt "religious," in other words, in an essential rather than a specific ("Christian") way.[16] When she reflected, in a 1973 essay, on the etymology of the word "religion," she stressed its Latin root, *ligare*: "to bind."[17] Religion, Page asserted, is the binding together of "what is, in reality, bound; of what appears fragmented only when seen through the prismatic eye of unregenerate man" ("Sense" 68). A religious eye would be a kaleidoscopic one: an eye capable of holding all the parts together and yet keeping them separate at the same time, permitting a vision of coherent fragmentation. A religious or kaleidoscopic eye would thus allow the poet to glimpse a "whole" reality: the "list of trees" *and* the "poem"; the variety of leaves *and* the "entier" that they make up "together" (PKP 27.5.10). It was, as Page wrote later in "Kaleidoscope," "the perfect, all-inclusive metaphor" (*K* 176). Page's "religious" eye showed her that many layers of "reality" are already "bound" together ("Sense" 68): the poet is not responsible for *producing* the order among them, but merely for *perceiving* it.

"Another Space" (*K* 113-14), one of Page's most important post-silence poems, is a poetic account of her "religious non-Christian" awakening. She wrote the poem in 1969, at around the same time that she described her "initiation" in "Questions and Images."[18] A "new / direction opens" for the speaker when she feels bound to "another space": to "some dimension [she] can barely guess," or to what Rosemary Sullivan calls "an informing structure" (42). In the poem, Page's dreaming speaker catches sight of a group of dancers "spinning in a ring" on a beach as though they are revolving around an "axis [...] vertical / invisible / immeasurably tall" which "rotates a starry spool." The speaker is "reel[ed] [...] in" to their motion as though she is "on a string," "willingly pulled by their rotation," naturally and inevitably "as the moon pulls waters." Once she submits to the dance, to the system connecting beach to stars, individuals to universe, then "fixed parts / within [her]" are "set in motion / like a poem." Page responds explicitly here to her earlier feeling of creative paralysis: when she recognizes the existence of "another space" and joins those who are connected to it—when she "submit[s] to a power greater than [her]self" (Henderson

125)—the obtrusive "pane that halved [her] heart" "melts" away and she is free to move poetically again. "The poem's humility is moving," writes Sullivan: "only once [a higher] order is sensed […] does the heart melt" (42). Submission permits creative freedom. "Something in me was stilled," Page recalled many years later of her time in Mexico and her "first introduction" to Sufism (*Hand Luggage* 82): not paralyzed, but stabilized. Page's newly "religious" perspective allowed her to perceive, calmly, the individual parts moving—the "atoms" passing "to-fro"—within the still, whole centre of her "heart."

Significantly, although she did not write "Another Space" until early 1969, the poem concerns a dream that Page had in Mexico and recorded in her journal on 14 September 1960—almost exactly a year before she first referred to herself (on 21 October 1961) as a "religious non-Christian." She remained remarkably faithful to the journal version of her dream when she transformed it into the poem. As in "Another Space," in the journal Page observes people dancing in "dense circles" on the beach, holding "instruments which were a mixture between a violin, a kite and a bow and arrow." Eventually, as in the poem, a "bow? arrow? kite?" hits her "exactly on the crown of the head" with "delicacy" and "immense gentleness." The whole scene suggested "100 things" to her, she wrote, and she was not sure what to make of it ("Mexican Journal" 113.26.70).[19] She told John Orange in 1988 that she "carried the dream around in her head" for years before it "started to write itself as a poem" ("A Conversation" 74). Page's dream, and her recognition of a "religious non-Christian" identity, planted the seed of a new creative approach, but a lengthy gestation period would be necessary to nourish its growth into new poetic work.

Page needed time to unknot the tangled threads of her poetic gift before she could bind them to something new. The tangible evidence that we have of her creative work to dissolve those knots lies, as Rackham and Godard have shown, in her visual art, and also, as Steffler has shown, in her journal documentation of the "philosophical reading and thought" by which she "trained" her "mind" (42) to "open" in a "new / direction" (Page, *K* 114). But the *invisible* work of poetic silence—the simple space and time of that suspended creative state—also facilitated the necessary undoing of obstruction. Page reflects on this process in "Knitter's Prayer" (*K* 115), her "most direct statement of the basic desire to get rid of substance in order to go back to a blank beginning and start again" (Steffler 43). In this very short poem, the speaker expresses her dissatisfaction with both her art—her knitting—and her *self*—"Unknit *me*," she says. The whole creation must be unravelled so that she can make something new:

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.

Page's list of "strange small intricate stitches" in the third line recalls her similar list of "those & those" leaves in the fragment from Brazil (PKP 27.5.10). But whereas the earlier speaker felt overwhelmed by the variety and responsible for discerning the meaning of all the leaves taken "together"—and the poem breaks off sharply when she finally cannot fulfill this duty—here, instead, Page's speaker prays to *discard* the excess, to release everything except "the original simple knot." The difference between the two speakers' respective ambitions illustrates Page's transformed understanding of the poet's role and authority. Indeed, throughout her later *oeuvre* Page continued to delight in paring down—in going back to something "simple" and essential rather than trying to account for *everything*. In "Traveller's Palm," for instance, her speaker first considers several metaphors that might capture the essence of a palm tree in the rainforest—"a sailor's knot," perhaps, or "a growing fan" or "Quixote's windmill"—but she subsequently dismisses those comparisons as "what-you-will," in favour of the one image that gives the tree most meaning for her: "a well" (Page, *K* 116). The fact that Page mentions the extraneous images at all suggests the relief and even pleasure that she takes in releasing—or "unknitting"—them as the poem proceeds.

Page proposes collaboration in the final line of "Knitter's Prayer," a collaboration that will only be possible once the process of unravelling has occurred. "Unknit *me*," she begins; but when that is done, "[t]hen let *us* start again" (emphasis added). This is more than simply colloquial diction. When Page's speaker asks that "we"— "us"—might start again together, she includes the interlocutor of her prayer—the god or muse or higher power that she invokes to help with the unknitting—in her creative process. This is a very different kind of prayer from the supplication to the birds that concludes "After Rain." In "After Rain," the speaker's last hope is that the birds will bring about the revision of her poetics that she desires, for she feels utterly powerless to do so herself. In "Knitter's Prayer," by contrast, Page's speaker first submits to a higher authority and then hopes to "start again" in partnership with that guiding force. What she seeks, importantly, is not mas-

tery—not a "heart a size / larger than seeing" to control the poem—but humility: she wants to "start again" from a position of absolute simplicity.

When P.K. Page "started again" as a poet in the mid-1960s, she did so in a mood of faith. Recognizing, as she did in "Questions and Images," that she might not be the "master" (20) of her own work required her to accept the uncertainty inherent in that position. "Cry Ararat!" (*K* 105-08), "the first major poem of Page's return to her work" (Trehearne 103),[20] is a poem about faith—and also, importantly, about doubt. The first section of "Cry Ararat!" idealizes the unconscious attentiveness of the dream-state, because "when dreaming," the speaker explains, "you desire / and ask for nothing more / than stillness to receive." The image of Ararat will appear to the humble perceiver who remains as still and alert as a statue, who does not "reach" or "labour" in an effort to bring "the faraway, here," but simply "*is*" (emphasis in original). But the poem is agonisingly, acutely aware that such visionary attention cannot be sustained indefinitely. The second section of the poem evokes the dreamer's disappointed waking "to the unreality of bright day": her conscious mind returns to interfere, and the vision is disrupted. Just like the poet who has found herself stymied and has had to confront the possibility that "this time I never *would* write again" (Page, "Questions" 18), the speaker in "Cry Ararat!", "raw with the dream of flying"—with the memory of her perfect vision—must confront the possibility "that with the next tentative lift / of [her] indescribable wings / the ceiling [would loom] / heavy as a tomb." "Will the grey weather wake us," she asks; "toss us twice in the terrible night to tell us / the flight is cancelled / and the mountain lost?"

Perhaps it will. But the speaker's exclamation in the third and final section of the poem, "O, then cry Ararat!", is an affirmation of faith in the face of all that. It is a kind of mantra that the poet can repeat when she gets caught up in doubt, in fearing the future in the realm of her art. It is a prompt to emulate the "washed and easy innocence" of the "dove," who "believed" unquestioningly that "her sweet wings" would carry her where she needed to go. So too must the poet "believe" in the rotation of the "starry spool" (Page, *K* 113) that provides order to the universe, the benevolence of the "knitting" hands that guide her to creative insight. Accepting the grace given in moments of inspiration necessitates graceful acceptance of the moments when that vision is lost. It was with the cry of "Ararat"—not of joy or even of "triumph" (Swann 197), but of perseverance and faith—that Page definitively broke her "prolonged middle silence" (Trehearne 41) in 1967 and flew on, "new-washed" (Page, *K* 105), into the next stage of her poetic career.

Conclusion

There were many reasons—creative, biographical, psychological, environmental, and otherwise—for Page's mid-career poetic silence and for her emergence from it, and no one explanation can stand alone. In 1956, the poet noted in her journal that it was becoming "more and more difficult to write" as she grew older, because "*twaddling* on is not good enough" for a mature poet: "there must be a harder core to one's work" (27 March 1956, "Australian Journal" 113.7). Her self-consciousness and doubt, her great desire to change, her anxiety about living up to past successes, her ambition to write something with a "harder core," were all part of the accumulated clutter that only the temporal distance of a period of silence could clear away. Mid-career, Page needed time to undo the "blistering […] stitches" (*K* 115) of her poetic past. Continuing to "knit"—or attempt to write—would only have entangled her further, which is why a period of silence, rather than simply an ongoing revision of her poetics, was necessary to her development. Page's travels, her duties as an ambassador's wife, her initial discomfort with Portuguese, her distance from Canadian literary communities and publishing opportunities: all of these biographical realities were also related in some way to her experience of poetic silence. In the end, though, I believe that Page's *creative* struggles—her crisis of poetic authority first among them—are most significant because they would "have happened to [her]," as she says of "brazil," "wherever [she] was" (Page, "Questions" 18).

The end of Page's period of silence in the mid-1960s signified a resolution to the particular crisis that I have described in this essay, though such resolution should certainly not suggest that writing poetry would suddenly become *easy* for her. The "ceiling" that "looms / heavy as a tomb" above the dreamer in "Cry Ararat!" would continue to "loom" above Page throughout the remainder of her long career. But by recognizing that silences and gaps are a necessary and natural part of the creative process, by crying "Ararat!" in faith when they troubled her and then "start[ing] again" (*K* 115) with humility, Page could accept occasional lapses in visible productivity without feeling that she was letting her "talent lie about unused" (*K* 99). In her *glosa*, "Poor Bird" (*K* 194-5), Page reflects on the poet's "vocation" with the wisdom of one who has both *felt* silenced and emerged *from* silence. She compares poetic work to the focused activity of a sandpiper on the beach: both poet and bird are engaged in an "endless search" marked by many seemingly fruitless periods. But "just because [the bird] has not yet found / what he doesn't know he is searching for / is

not a sign he's off track," the speaker observes. Vocation is a lifelong commitment: "Although distracted / by nest-building, eggs, high winds, high tides / and too short a lifespan for him to plan / an intelligent search—still, on he goes," Page writes of the sandpiper. He spends most of his time in "the sedge […] the suck," the "unexceptional sand," simply for the occasional glimpse, "when he least expects it," of something extraordinary.

Notes

1 "A wish." P.K. Page *fonds*, Box 1, file 8, poem 3. This poem draft is undated, but it is included with a group of others in Page's archive in two folders (8-9, in Box 1) labelled "Poems for Unpublished Collection, c. 1957." Hereafter I will cite archival material parenthetically simply as "PKP" followed by the box and file numbers and, where appropriate, poem numbers, separated by periods, thus: PKP 1.8.3. (Though the poems have been numbered, the numbers do not indicate chronology.) "A wish" continues, somewhat ironically considering Page's claim that she could not get beyond "2 lines," with five further lines: "How many unrelated images on paper: / the beach with 400 dead whales in Tasmania // and the night's black drum the frogs beat in Brazil. // Morbid, for most, yet in truth my heart is like / that pink tissue paper kite wagging against the sky." As this poem indicates, Page *could* put pen to paper even during a period of intense creative struggle, but what she wrote did not please her.

2 *Brazilian Journal*, p. 235; hereafter cited parenthetically as "*BJ*." This reference to "poetic silence" is in the 3 January 1959 entries of both the typescript and published versions of the journal. See also the typescript of "Brazilian Journal," p. 189 (PKP 113.16).

3 Page, *Kaleidoscope*, p. 99 ("Could I Write a Poem Now?"); hereafter cited parenthetically as "*K*." All quotations from published poems in this article are from *Kaleidoscope*. There are at least two drafts of "Could I Write a Poem Now?" in Page's archive, and one of them is dated "July 58" (PKP 3.17.1).

4 This "handful of exceptions" mostly comprises drafts and fragments. Page did finish two short poems in Portuguese for a speech that she delivered in 1959 at the Brazilian Academy of Letters: "Gigantic Bird" and "Golden Spider Web." But, as she admitted to Eleanor Wachtel, these poems "were pretty juvenile" ("That's Me" 57). She wrote them, as she said in her speech, to "pay homage to the Academy" and to "thank [them] for the honour" that they did her by inviting her to speak (PKP 17.14). She also wrote one quite important poem during this period: "The Snowman" (Zailig Pollock dates this poem "1958-1967" in *Kaleidoscope*; it is the only poem in the volume to which he allows such a large date range). In her MA thesis, Emily Ballantyne writes about a file of poetic efforts from Brazil in Page's *fonds* at Library and Archives Canada (Box 27, file 5) "and several dozen contemporaneous poems from across the archive," which she and Pollock date "to the first half of Page's time in Brazil, from early 1957 to mid 1958" (34). See Ballantyne's "Editing Silence" in the "Documents" section of this issue for transcriptions of all of the variant versions of the poem drafts: an eminently useful resource for anyone interested in this period of Page's career. Although in her MA thesis Ballantyne draws on these poem drafts to "[call] into question the very idea of [Page's] silence" (34), to me, these incomplete fragments and abortive efforts demonstrate the poet's *desire* to write more than any actual poetic achievement.

5 See any of her interviews—Keeler 34, Pearce 148-9, 156, Wachtel 53-6, 57-8, 63, and

Orange 76-7, for example—as well as her comments throughout chapter 9 ("Brazil: Exotic Worlds, 1957-59") of Sandra Djwa's biography, *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page* (161-79). See also Page's 1969 essay, "Questions and Images," her *Brazilian Journal*, and her much later reflections in *Hand Luggage: A Memoir in Verse* on the period when her "pen wouldn't write. It didn't have words" (59).

6 Other critics have more or less been in agreement with this assessment. For more on Page's experience as a creative crisis related to the gendered and ethical implications of aesthetic impersonality, see also Killian, Irvine, Swann, and Rackham.

7 For many more details on Page's precise reading material while she was in Mexico, see Steffler 42, Djwa (chapter 10, "New Maps, 1960-1964," particularly pages 193 and 204), and Page, "Questions and Images" 20, and *Hand Luggage* 81-2.

8 For more on Page's visual art, see also Messenger, Godard, Renaux, and Ballantyne.

9 For more on Page's later poetry and her spiritual or mystical influences and perspective, see also Vavassis, Mitha, and Fisher.

10 Eysteinsson quotes several sources on this; most directly, the idea comes from T.S. Eliot, in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923). Eliot wrote that "myth" was "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177; also qtd in Eysteinsson 9). "The Rage for Order" is the first of Eysteinsson's "paradigms" in his chapter on "The Making of Modernist Paradigms" (8-49).

11 Indeed, many critics have treated this poem in detail: see for example Irvine 36-9, Jamieson 75-6, Killian 97-8, Pollock 9-10, Relke 51-2, Rooke 191-2, Sullivan 32-4, Swann 193-6, and Trehearne 41-6. Because this poem has already been discussed so attentively by others, I give it relatively little space in this essay; but I agree with Killian that it is an essential—"pivotal" (note Killian's shared language with Pollock, quoted above)—poem in any reading of Page's career, and particularly in any treatment of her creative crisis.

12 For more on this exchange between McLaren and Page and McLaren's influence on Page's poetics in this period, see Irvine, "Two Giovannis" 35-8. It is worth noting that following McLaren's advice, Page did not publish the final stanza of "After Rain" in the November 1956 issue of *Poetry*. She did not share that statement of anguish with the public until she could also respond to it adequately with a gesture towards new vision—an assurance that things had changed—in *Cry Ararat!*

13 The draft is undated, but it must have been composed in Australia, because it is written on a piece of legal paper with an "Office of the High Commissioner" header; Page's husband Arthur Irwin was Canadian High Commissioner to Australia between 1953 and 1956.

14 Page was persistent with this line, and with this view out of her bedroom window. She expanded it in another poem, beginning, "There are two things here: the giant leaves / the 15 greens within a frame" (PKP 27.5.2), and also in "This Whole Green World" (PKP 27.5.3, 4; published in *K* 103).

15 Page seems to have been uncertain just how much control she (or her speaker) had over her "singing." In the third line in this draft, "won't" is twice deleted and replaced with "can't": the line reads, "Like a bird in a cage, ~~won't~~ can't sing ~~won't sing at~~ on request."

16 Page referred to her "religious non-Christian" identity at least three times: in the journal entry in 1961, in "Questions and Images" in 1969, and in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in 1987 (around the time that her *Brazilian Journal* was published). First she described her recognition of this new identity as a "comforting conclusion" (21 October 1961, "Mexican Journal" 113.26.166), then as an "initiation" ("Questions" 20), and later as an "extraordinary insight" ("That's Me" 59). Her increasingly "extraordinary" language illustrates her growing awareness of the importance of her "religious" perspective in the progress of her life and career.

17 Both Steffler (42-3) and Vavassis (133-4) discuss Page's etymological definition of "religion" as well.

18 Steffler, citing Zailig Pollock, says that Page wrote "Another Space" "by February 17, 1969" (54, note 4); the poem was published in the August 1969 issue of *Poetry.* "Questions and Images" was published at exactly the same time, in the Summer 1969 issue of *Canadian Literature*. Essay and poem were clearly companions, and in the essay, Page alludes specifically to the "circular dance beside the sea" of "Another Space" ("Questions" 20) (although of course the essay's original audience would not have recognized the reference unless they were readers of both journals).

19 See also Steffler 50-1 and Djwa 191-2; both quote the entire, relevant journal passage.

20 "Cry Ararat!" is fascinatingly reliable as a conclusion in articles on Page's poetic struggles. Swann (197) and Killian (102) mention it in their final sentences, Namjoshi refers to the poem in his final paragraph (30), Irvine treats it in his penultimate paragraph ("Two Giovannis" 40), and Trehearne discusses it in his final three pages (103-5). To these critics, the poem represents "triumph" (Swann 197), "transformation" (Killian 102), and "resolution" (Irvine, "Two Giovannis" 40). I propose here a more cautious reading: rather than a triumphant announcement of new life, the "cry" of "Ararat!" is an expression of faith and determination.

Works Cited

Ballantyne, Emily. "Exile and Inhabitant: P.K. Page's Brazil." MA Thesis. Trent University, 2010. *Proquest*. Web.

Djwa, Sandra. *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2012.

Eco, Umberto. *The Infinity of Lists: From Homer to Joyce*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. London: MacLehose Press, 2009.

Eliot, T.S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. 177-8.

Eysteinsson, Astradur. *The Concept of Modernism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1990.

Fisher, Don. "Eastern Perspectives in the Work of P.K. Page." *The Malahat Review* 117 (1996): 129-33.

Godard, Barbara. "Kinds of Osmosis." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38.1 (Winter 2004): 65-75.

Henderson, Joseph L. "Ancient Myths and Modern Man." *Man and his Symbols*. 1964. Ed. Carl Jung. New York: Dell, 1968. 95-156.

Irvine, Dean. *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008. P

——. "The Two Giovannis: P.K. Page's Two Modernisms." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38.1 (Winter 2004): 23-45.

Killian, Laura. "Poetry and the Modern Woman: P.K. Page and the Gender of Impersonality." *Canadian Literature* 150 (1996): 86-105.

Messenger, Cynthia. "'But How Do You Write A Chagall?': Ekphrasis and the Brazilian Poetry of P.K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop." *Canadian Literature* 142-3 (Winter 1994): 102-17.

Mitha, Farouk. "Catching Fire: Allegories of Alchemical Transformation in the Art of P.K. Page." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38.1 (Winter 2004): 118-28.

Namjoshi, S. "Double Landscape." *Canadian Literature* 67 (Winter 1976): 21-30.

Page, P.K. "Australian Journal." P.K. Page Fonds. Library and Archives Canada. MG 30 D311 / R2411. Container 113, Files 7-9. Manuscript and typescript.

——. "Brazilian Journal." P.K. Page Fonds. Library and Archives Canada. MG 30 D311/ R2411. Container 113, Files 10-19. Typescript.

——. *Brazilian Journal*. 1987. Ed. Suzanne Bailey and Christopher Doody. Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2011.

——. "A Conversation with P.K. Page." Interviewed by John Orange. *Canadian Poetry* 22 (Spring-Summer 1988): 68-77.

——. "Fried Eggs and the Workings of the Right Lobe: P.K. Page." Interviewed by Jon Pearce. *Twelve Voices: Interviews with Canadian Poets*. Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1980. 146-57.

——. *Hand Luggage: A Memoir in Verse*. Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2006.

——. "An Interview with P.K. Page." Interviewed by Judy Keeler. *The Canadian Forum* (September 1975): 33-5.

——. *Kaleidoscope: Selected Poems*. Ed. Zailig Pollock. Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2010.

——. P.K. Page Fonds (PKP). Library and Archives Canada. MG 30 D 311 / R2411.

——. "Mexican Journal." P.K. Page Fonds. Library and Archives Canada. MG 30 D311/ R2411. Container 113, File 26; Container 114, File 3. Manuscript and Typescript.

——. "Questions and Images." *Canadian Literature* 41 (1969): 17-22.

——. "The Sense of Angels: Reflections on A.M. Klein." 1973. *The Filled Pen*. Ed. Zailig Pollock. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007. 62-8.

——. "'That's Me, Firing Salvador': An Interview with P.K. Page." Interviewed by Eleanor Wachtel. *West Coast Review* 22.2 (Spring 1987): 45-64.

Pollock, Zailig. "Introduction." *Kaleidoscope: Selected Poems*. Ed. Zailig Pollock. Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2010. 7-18.

Rackham, Michèle. "P.K. Page-Irwin's 'Geometry Awash': Negotiating Modernist Aesthetics Via the Visual Arts." In "Between the Lines: Interartistic Modernism in Canada, 1930-1960." Diss. McGill University, 2011. 332-429. *Proquest*. Web.

Relke, Diana M.A. "Tracing the Terrestrial in the Early Work of P.K. Page: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Ecoreading." *Greenwor(l)ds: Ecocritical Readings of Canadian Women's Poetry*. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 1999. 235-55.

Renaux, Sigrid. "P.K. Page's 'Conversation': A Dialogue between Painting and Poetry." *Revista de Letras* 48.1 (Jan.-Jul. 2008): 117-28.

Rooke, Constance. "P.K. Page: The Chameleon and the Centre." *The Malahat Review* 45 (1978): 169-95.

Rose, Marilyn J. "Anthologizing P.K. Page: The Case of a Protean Poet." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38.1 (Winter 2004): 154-65.

Steffler, Margaret. "P.K. Page's 'Religious' Homecoming: Writing Out of the Mexican Night." *Canadian Poetry* 67 (Fall-Winter 2010): 38-56.

Sulllivan, Rosemary. "'A Size Larger than Seeing': The Poetry of P.K. Page." *Canadian Literature* 79 (1978): 32-42.

Swann, Jane. "Mapping the Mind's 'I': Vision, Perception, and Complicity in the Early Poems of P.K. Page." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 30.1 (2005): 181-97.

Trehearne, Brian. *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999.

Vavassis, Vivian. "Establishing a Context for P.K. Page's Interest in Eastern Religions: When Papier-Mâché Angels Descend among the Metals and the Flowers." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38.1 (Winter 2004): 129-53.