

“The Battle Done”: Reading the Military Father in the Poems of P.K. Page

by Tanis MacDonald

*The darkness hid
a general toying with a broken water pistol.*

*Hid from his daughter, frail organza issue
of his now failing loin
the battle done:
so much militia routed in the man.
—P.K. Page, “War Lord in the Early Evening”*

The central father and daughter figures of P.K. Page’s “War Lord in the Early Evening” stand together in a formal garden, a poetic space that will be familiar to readers of Page’s work. Both Suniti Namjoshi and Rosemary Sullivan have discussed Page’s motif of the formal garden as a location for painful physical realizations that presage transformation (Namjoshi 26, Sullivan 36). But in “War Lord in the Early Evening,” the general’s transformation is disturbed by an observer in the form of his daughter, whose gaze is impaired by the darkness that hides the general’s “broken water pistol,” a metaphor for his “now failing loin” (*Hidden Room* 2 84-85).¹ This poem, with others that work with the figures of the officer-father and his observant daughter, enacts a familial drama that questions the place of militarized masculinity within the cultural paradigm of father-daughter kinship. Showcasing the relationship between paternal vulnerability and the daughterly gaze, Page’s officer-fathers represent patriarchy on parade; the daughter has a front-row seat from which she can observe this performance of commanding masculinity. These poems show the aging officers estranged from civilian domesticity and thwarted by their own investment in military exigency. Stripped of command by age and debilitation, the officer figure is bereft of the status granted by his uniform, but still reliant upon the authority granted by such status. When Page writes “the battle done / so much militia routed in the man,” does she mean that the military ethos has defeated him, or that the military ethos is routed through him, that he is its conduit? This officer-father may be read as a figure through

which Page criticizes agonistic culture, but perhaps more importantly for Canadian criticism, the officer represents a changing paradigm of masculinity and paternity filtered through the abjection of his aging body. Enacting the disturbance of modernism and belligerent culture upon normative masculinity, Page's daughter figure gazes at the father in an attempt to see beyond the cultural darkness that surrounds him. This essay will read father-daughter kinship in Page's work through the cultural narratives of the returning soldier, the apprehension of the female gaze upon the military body, and the female modernist writer's "affiliation complex," as defined by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Officer-fathers appear in multiple manifestations throughout Page's poetic corpus; they are varied in personality and circumstance, but united by their struggle to balance kinship and command. In her early poetry, Page locates a traumatized but transforming body of an elderly man in "This Cold Man," and a migraine-inducing ship's captain in "Portrait of Marina." Later, she offers a melancholic phallic satire in "War Lord in the Early Evening" and a negotiated truce between the commander father and dutiful daughter of "Father," from her poem cycle "Melanie's Nitebook." In more recent work, an elegiac exploration of the father as the lost beloved figure in "Voyager" leads Page to offer a glimpse of a daughter's legacy of logocentric knowledge as her father's gift in "Alphabetical."

As early as 1954, in his response to Page's first full collection, *As Ten As Twenty*, Desmond Pacey makes special note of her "sensitive woman's response to the world of want, war and fascism" (167). Despite this early identification of Page's concern with the dynamics of power in a bellicose world, critics have not focused upon her militarized male figures, though several have noted the presence of difficult men in her poetry. In 1971, A.J.M. Smith noted Page's propensity to feature "selfish, isolated, lonely men" (19). Twenty-five years later, Nancy Paul cites Page's concern with the "mineral-hard resistance of men, who shut themselves up in their egotism" (122), referring to these figures as "fisted male[s]" to which Page responds as an "Apollonian shaping artist" (130). As Page's career passes the fifty-year mark, we can note the early appearance of these "fisted males" as aging men who struggle against transformation, rendered initially with ironic distance by Page. However, her more recent and more admittedly autobiographical work frequently situates this struggle within a military and paternal ethos. Contemplating the triangulation of power, gender and duty filtered through ideals of military authority, Page's background as the daughter of a decorated military officer suggests that she has

an insider's perspective on what military honour might mean within a family, and what mourning the militarized body may entail.

In an interview with Sandra Djwa in 1996, Page emphasizes her tendency to “stay out of domestic politics,” a strategy she learned during her childhood “as an army brat” (42). Page juxtaposes domestic politics to “international politics” in her next sentence, discussing her interest in socialist issues in the 1940s. But domestic politics of another kind slip into Page's figuration of the officer as father, a politics that does not depend solely upon Page's “impersonal” distanced stance or her relatively recent willingness to use autobiographical material in her poetry, but jointly upon both poetic devices as they may be used to question military convention as a marker of masculinity. The autobiographical figure of Major-General Lionel Page acts as a palimpsest, rather than a model; it provides a lens through which we may read Page's negotiation of masculine power, familial authority and literary daughterhood in the years following the Second World War. Major-General Page was a command veteran of both World Wars who was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for meritorious service in combat. It was in his service in the Great War that we can locate Lionel Page's early influence upon his daughter's writing life. While stationed in France during the First World War, Page's father, then a lieutenant colonel with Lord Strathcona's Horse, composed a series of didactic children's poems that he mailed home. By 1918, Rose Page had illustrated the instructional verses and bound them together in a rag-paper book for the amusement and edification of their daughter, Patricia Kathleen, who was two years old at the time. Porcépic Press published the poems in 1991 as *Wisdom from Nonsense Land*, and Page wrote an Afterword in which she constructs her father as a soldier-poet:

I imagine my father, in the trenches, scribbling the cautionary verses in a notebook for his new daughter, whom he barely knew; and to amuse his young wife whose three married years had been years of acute anxiety. He would have written them quickly, as he wrote verses all his life, when the fancy took him. And he would have known as well as I do that some of the rhymes were less than perfect and that he was reaching for the meter now and again. (*Wisdom* n.p.)

While the cautionary rhymes in *Wisdom from Nonsense Land* do not suggest that Lionel Page was a trench poet in the tradition of Owen or Sassoon, his talents are of less concern than his actions. His decision to write and send such poems home from the French trenches could hardly have dissuaded his daughter from associating her father with both writing and war.

Any attempt to consider autobiographical material in Page's poetry is, of course, to engage with contradiction, for Page emphasizes that a dependence on autobiographical material can be limiting: "until you can reach beyond the self, you haven't got a great deal to say" ("Entranced" 115). However, we should remember that autobiographical material provides an emotive basis for the poems, and Page has been clear about identifying the autobiographical basis for several of her later poems, "Father," "Alphabetical," and "Voyager" in particular ("Biographical" 35, "Entranced" 126, "That's me" 63). Her statements are not so much contradictory as constitutive of an aesthetic maze that readers will recognize from her poems: a process that depends upon slippage as much as situation. Page's discussion of "the tyranny of subjectivity" in her 1969 essay "Questions and Answers" (*Glass* 191) suggests Douglas Freake's notion of Page's "multiple self" as "a source of fragmentation and loss" that is also "a blessing" (94). Freake goes on to contextualize Page's multiple selves as a function of ironic distance that eventually, and progressively, emphasizes "the discovery of a self that is related to the universe on levels that are discoverable through the heightened and intensified consciousness that poetry itself makes possible" (98). Freake's formulation reminds readers that to assume that Page's "impersonality" is the diametric and aesthetic opposite of autobiography would mean dismissing the multivalent challenge of her work with its shifts of perspective and its hyperbolically enlarged or enfeebled characters.

Autobiographical material like Page's military daughterhood, far from being tyrannical or limiting, is as subject to poetic device as any distancing trope. In a 1999 interview, she emphasizes how the Second World War influenced her development as a poet:

I had been flung from the protected world in which I grew up to Montreal in wartime—a culture of two languages and sophisticated people. On my own. I was twenty-two. I was seeing many things I'd never seen before: stenographers, typists and the effect of the war on all these people. I was fascinated, utterly fascinated by it. And so, inevitably, I wanted to write about it. Even more than I wanted to write about what was going on inside me and plenty was, I can tell you. ("Entranced" 121)

Page makes it clear that her early fascination with the complexities of the observed world overrode any impulse to write the internal, and yet such fascination can hardly be separated from the internal; the "effect of the war" is as much an interpretation as an observance. Namjoshi points to the clash of internal and external worlds as Page's great poetic project, noting

that much of her work concerns “the individual’s attempt to bring the microcosm into alignment with the macrocosm,” and that “the outcome might be either frustration or despair” (25-26). This frustration or despair, subject to the tension of balancing multiple personas and perspectives as well as negotiating between the impersonal and the autobiographical, is a hallmark of Page’s poetry. Poet and critic Travis Lane provides a thread to guide readers through Page’s aesthetic maze when she notes that Page’s “descriptions of people are stylized, mythologized, almost impersonal...her ‘people’ become, all of them, figures on an arras” (104-105). As a mythologized figure, the military father becomes a symbol of protection from and integration with the bellicose modern world, a man caught between authority and doubt, between cultural subjectivity and corporeal fragility. The officer-father’s struggle between his public service and his private life, between command and kinship, is paralleled by the daughter’s struggle between the desire for familial love and the desire to fulfill societal ideas of duty. Page examines the paternal archetype to suggest that the “command” of the officer-father issues a warning to the daughter about the price of subjectivity and the humility of corporeal existence.

The cultural figure of the twentieth-century warrior has rarely been interpreted as unambiguously heroic, but has certainly been profoundly mythologized. In *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Eric Leed discusses how veterans of the First World War were perceived in their home communities as “liminal” figures, men who existed “between the boundaries of settled societies, the figures that practice transformations upon themselves, roles, morals, values, spiritual and physical states” (195). Identifying veterans as men who were “defined and refined by war, stripped of every social superfluity,” Leed emphasizes how the returning soldier can represent civilians’ fears of “disorder” and “petrification” (195). Even as the veteran “embodies the anxieties, acts out the guilts [sic], and attenuates the boredom native to domesticity,” the returning soldier must live forever with “an experienced knowledge of the fragility of his own substance and humanity” (Leed 194-5). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar gloss the trope of male fragility in women’s writing as a reflection of the struggle to redefine masculinity during and after the Great War. In *The War of the Words*, the authors suggest that the modernist possibility of the literary daughterhood forced a new subjectivity onto the father: “as soon as even the most daughterly woman writer might become a plausible writer, male artists as well as their female contemporaries perceived for the first time the father’s potential fragility along with his compensatory ferocity” (Gilbert and Gubar 179-80). In the clash of the

putatively autobiographical with the impersonal, Page positions the military father in much the same manner as Leed's fragile and ferocious liminal being who traverses the boundary between the inner and outer world.

This liminal father figure is kept at a considerable ironic distance in Page's early work, and it is worth considering "Portrait of Marina" and "This Cold Man" for the ways that these poems develop semi-paternal, quasi-military protagonists who are caught in painful or problematic transformation. The "fearful salty man" who commanded a "four-master" in "Portrait of Marina" (*HRI* 72-73) emerged from Page's memories of Maritime fisherman who "looked so splendid in their oilskins covered with scales of fish—like gods," but instead of performing heroic deeds, they "got drunk on lemon extract" in the local store. Page finishes, "[i]t had been a disillusioning period in my life. And it was World War II, remember" ("Biographical" 43). This disillusioned view of the fishermen becomes mythologized in the aged skipper of "Portrait of Marina," trapped between the idea of honour and the reality of pain, those of the father and of his beleaguered daughter. It comes as no surprise then to find the skipper both a pitiable man and a family tyrant, "a parent who imposes on the child his own favoured version of reality" (Rooke 182). The skipper finds that his command is still intact, though his sphere of power is private rather than public; he can give orders only to his daughter, not to an entire crew. He who was once splendid in his oilskin, like the Prospero-figure to which Page compares him, now "sew[s] the ocean of his memory" with a "furious needle" that he cannot thread himself, and "his stitches, interspersed with oaths / had made his one pale spinster daughter grow / transparent with migraines." Those oaths and his frequent calling of her name "fretted her more than the waves." The "dimity / young inland housewife" will romanticize the embroidered picture and her "great-great-grandpappa" grown "docile as a child again," but his daughter Marina, "the sole survivor of his last shipwreck," grows "warped / without a smack of salt." Constance Rooke has noted Page's tendency to create poetic characters who struggle against "a frightening dissolution which means that the individual is unable to place himself in the surrounding world" (180-181), and this poem offers two characters threatened by dissolution, the aging father and his spinster daughter. The mythologized father figure, though only quasi-militarized as a captain of a fishing vessel, struggles between his need for kinship and his need to command, between his private vulnerabilities and his public persona.

The old man in the garden of "This Cold Man" (*HRI* 59) is also caught in a painful dissolution, though Page renders the dissolution through met-

aphor rather than narrative. However much the old man appears to be a personification of pastoral renewal as winter turns to spring, the metaphor of the man sinking into the ground, as many soldiers met their deaths by sinking beneath the mud in the trenches of World War I, cannot help but be fraught with anxiety. Rosemary Sullivan identifies Page's tendency to layer "incipient terror under the smooth, urbane surface of the early poems" (35-36). Such terror may be read in Page's double-edged diction, which implies the old man's frightening dissolution even as it suggests transformation. The word choice is both fragile and ferocious. The old man's "stiff eyes slip," suggesting fear and doubt; he "kneel[s] in welters of narcissus," signaling the turmoil of "welter" and the self-delusion of Narcissus. His body is a "fossil frame" that is "held tightly locked"; does this connote a fearful paralysis? When "sharp green shoots...whistle for him," do they evoke bayonets and bombs? A. J. M. Smith points out that this poem is driven by Page's "concentrated angry wit" (25), and this wit paints a nightmare that parallels the pastoral dream. These disturbing associations undermine the fantasy of regeneration, though they do not annihilate it. In "This Cold Man," as in "Portrait of Marina," the mythologized father, a spirited but debilitated old man, struggles to maintain his ego boundaries and his vision, though both are compromised by the inevitable transformation of death.

The presence of such compromised, quasi-militarized male bodies in Page's work becomes more explicit as her work matures, with the male body in question becoming more specifically paternal, as well as more militarized. The officer-father appears most noticeably in "War Lord in the Early Evening," a poem from Page's mid-career that raises questions about authority, gender, and specularly. The sight of the father's demobilized but resolutely militarized body becomes compromised by the multiplied gaze of his daughter, the narrator, and eventually the reader. In *The World Wars Through the Female Gaze*, Jean Gallagher discusses the intersections of ideologies of war and gender, and notes that "acts of seeing and attempting to understand war—particularly in relation to the gendered subject—necessarily usher in a species of unease that can never be exorcised from sight in a belligerent culture" (160). Linking military trauma with modernist aesthetics may be nothing new, but identifying that "species of unease that can never be exorcised from sight" remains a vital project. By exploring the "unease" between officer and civilian, father and daughter, age and youth in a "belligerent culture," Page's series of paternal figures interrogates not only familial memory, but also the Western cultural expectation of daughterly duty. As Page's poems about the father figure explore the

degree to which the father's military rectitude makes him visible or invisible to the daughter, the poems also acknowledge how much the female gaze remains an uneasy social and literary privilege, even (or especially) within a familial structure. Such a species of unease accompanies, and perhaps defines, the gaze of the female poet upon the militarized male body, especially since such a gaze cannot always discover a complete or unified image. Gallagher examines the ways in which "an emerging alternative model of fragmented or indirect visual apprehension" makes the body available to the gaze only through "failures, gaps or blocks in vision" (6). In an analysis of the limits and the possible revelations of this visual apprehension, Gallagher notes that the female non-combatant's gaze most often reveals "two figures that resist representation in wartime propaganda: the wounded or destroyed body of the soldier and the body of the female observer who looks in directions other than those authorized by the closed circuit of soldiers' vision" (158). The female modernist tradition of resistance to belligerent action, blossoming throughout the years of the First World War, questions the rhetoric of the military machine and its concomitant cultural constructions, particularly codes of gendered behaviour. In keeping with this tradition, Page examines and questions the tropes of cultural heroism as modeled by the military ethos, but she focuses upon the aging military commander as the locus of the daughter's visual apprehension. Gallagher's concept of fragmented vision mirrors the struggle for kinship between Page's officer-fathers and observing daughters, between the men who invest in a culture of virility and restraint and the daughters who observe the dissolution of that investment. The "unauthorized direction" in which the female observer looks is towards her estranged father; these poems emphasize the father's psychic wounds as corporeal affect. While Nancy Paul asserts that Page's "sympathies tend to come back to the lonely men" (122), Paul's assumption of such sympathy supports rather than challenges that "closed circuit" of militarized vision against which Gallagher warns. If we accept, as Gallagher does, that the daughter's gaze on the military father is "continually subject to the various forces that constitute wartime visibility and subjectivity and that attempt to direct or constrain the act of looking and the interpretation of visual experience" (7-8), we cannot ignore that duty, as it satisfies or frustrates daughterly devotion, is as important as sympathy within these poems.

To read the daughter's gaze on the debilitated father's body as sympathetic or dutiful is an audacious project from the outset, and one largely ignored by major movements in psychoanalytic theory. In *Aging and Its Discontents*, Kathleen Woodward submits that old age is less like a tragedy

and more “like a postmodern drama of interminable postponement,” and goes on to note that both Freud and Lacan ignore the aging process in their haste to theorize the death drive (43). In order to maintain his authority, the father must remain unavailable to his daughter’s gaze or, at the very least, remain subject to Gallagher’s “failures, gaps or blocks in vision.” As Page’s officer figures struggle with the loss of authority, their corporeal frustrations suggest Woodward’s assertion that “the body at the limit of its life is the bedrock of the real” (19). To inscribe such bedrock seems to assert subjectivity at the same time as it places subjectivity in the most profound doubt, and this seeming contradiction produces some excruciating poetic tension in Page’s work. The symbolic paternal body struggles towards transformation in a motion that seems as ephemeral and enticing as alchemy, and may begin to free the father-daughter paradigm from its dutiful history.

Sometimes the daughter’s gaze begins with duty but moves in Gallagher’s “unauthorized direction.” Returning to “War Lord in the Early Evening” (*HR2* 84-85), the general’s wish to impress his daughter with his “gentle and disarming” aesthetic sense is destroyed by his expectation that he can exert control over nature. The general orders a hose with which he may water the roses in a demonstration of his Romantic sensibility, but what ensues is more like an outrageous phallic farce than a sublime reverie. The garden hose arrives in six sections of “assorted sizes” with no connecting fixtures. The general’s frustrated orders recall Kaja Silverman’s warning about the vulnerability of constructed sexuality: “Even under the most auspicious circumstances...the fiction of a phallic masculinity generally remains intact only for the duration of the war” (63). The sectioned hose functions as a metaphor for dismantled masculinity, a construct that struggles to survive outside the symbolism of conflict. Determined to demonstrate his sensitivity while refusing the limits of reality, the warlord commands his servants to hold the hose sections together with their hands. This father’s call is as ridiculously ineffective as the ancient skipper’s call is painfully powerful. The slapstick overdetermination of the five fountains of water that spume into the servants’ faces as they bind the hose parts together with their fists is undeniably comic, even as it offers up a grim reference to an uncontrollable aging body. Considering Woodward’s caveat that aging is castration, the recalcitrant hose, as well as Page’s sly reference to the general’s “broken water pistol,” and this “trickle” from his “failing loin,” all echo Silverman’s comment that military trauma manifests as a “psychic disintegration...of a bound and armored ego, predicated upon the illusion of coherence and control” (62).

If the hose is a phallic symbol, it also operates as a metaphor for command and obedience. The failure to water the roses is couched in bellicose terms; it is a “battle done” with “so much militia routed.” By proposing the general’s impotent command as a case of “*Sic transit gloria mundi*,” Page glosses the ignominy of his defeat with the irony of the mock epic, suggesting that “War Lord in the Early Evening” is a satire on phallic tropes.

But Page is not yet finished with this disassembled officer or his daughter. Sullivan warns us that the “recurring image of stasis in a metaphoric garden...is Page’s private image of hell” (36), and the warlord’s struggle to define himself through his own command moves beyond satire and demonstrates a more elegiac sensibility in the final stanza. Immediately after “*Sic transit gloria mundi*,” Page writes “I would rather / a different finish. / It was devilish / that the devil denied him that one innocent wish.” Is this first-person speaker the voice of the daughter who has remained silent throughout the poem, or is Page projecting an omniscient narrative voice? If the “different finish” is the daughter’s wish for the preservation of her father’s dignity, does the wish to maintain his command constitute an innocent wish? “His now failing loin” certainly indicates a “different finish” from the ideology of phallic mastery. But what of the devil who denies the warlord that one innocent wish? Has the devil granted his every other wish, innocent or not? How “innocent” is such a construction of innocence? Page’s introduction of a devil’s discourse suggests that the warlord is simultaneously complicit with evil and abjected by that partnership, caught in a Faustian bargain. Whether we choose to interpret this as a Freudian failure or not, the penultimate stanza repeats that the general is “hid[den]” from his daughter by the darkness. He cannot provide succor; he is not a regenerative vegetation god. The light and roses fade in the “early evening” of his life. His call is obeyed, but to no effect; innocent or not, his glory has passed away from the earth.

In more recent work, Page’s paternal poems have taken on, by her own admission, a more autobiographical cast:

I’ve never claimed to write autobiography. Yet there is a fair amount of autobiographical material in my work—more so in the later than in the early. Usually people start writing about themselves and then grow up and extend their range of interests. I seem to have done the opposite. I started writing about other people and other things—all that early stuff about typists and stenographers and children. Now I find myself writing more about myself.

(“That’s Me” 62)

In “The First Part” from 1985’s *The Glass Air*, Page admits to a “[g]reat desire to write it all. / Is it age, death’s heavy breath / making absolute autobiography / urgent?” (148). The urgency of this autobiography, “absolute” or heavily mythologized, recalls Gilbert and Gubar’s discussions of the freedoms and concomitant pressures of modernist literary daughterhood, a series of pressures that some critics have suggested that Page has found a number of ways to refuse, or at least forestall.² In conjunction with locating paternal fragility as a subject of modernist literary daughterhood, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the female modernist writer struggles with an “affiliation complex...a desirous (even if agonistic) interaction” with the privilege of literary tradition represented by the father, a tradition that is inevitably bound up with questions of inheritance (169). Suggesting that such affiliations are often deeply ambivalent, Gilbert and Gubar warn that the father-daughter paradigm “is so haunted by history” that it cannot provide an “entirely satisfactory motive for female creativity” (171-172). Whether or not a modernist affiliation complex is part of Page’s “great desire to write it all,” perhaps this very lack of satisfaction describes the tensions of dutiful daughterhood as a rendering of filial piety, and may well motivate the daughter’s gaze to write history by haunting the father’s body.

A more recent example of these father-daughter poems, “Voyager” is also one of Page’s most autobiographical works; she tells Wachtel the poem is “80% true perhaps” (63). Originally published in 1981’s *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies*, the poem describes a classic mourner’s dream in which the lost beloved returns but cannot communicate with the mourner. In “Voyager” (HRI 183-84), the long-dead father haunts his family with his refusal to look at them, until “reluctant to return / bored to be home,” he sets off again into his alternate dimension, as though death were the ultimate military tour of duty. In a painful irony, the brusque commanding officer leaves in order to seek his family, those who he cannot see right in front of him: “he / sought us in other places / studied maps, / set out in search.” Page writes with a wry anxiety about age and the persistence of memory, an anxiety that is only heightened by the speaker’s inability to sustain the father’s attention even in her own dream. If the daughter’s duty is to worship his memory, the father’s refusal to see his daughter even within the bounds of her own subconscious is dispiriting. Interestingly, this poem contains no overt reference to the father as a military man, though the father’s return may be read as a soldier’s return. The father’s disregard of the family displays the anxious attenuated boredom of Leed’s returning veteran, and the family reacts as though he has in fact come home from

war: "And we were always so eager, / welcoming each time, pleased / at his safe return / glad at the sight of / his face." Eric Leed reminds us that the veteran's idealization of home was "an inevitable process in the trenches" and that this image of the ideal home environment was so powerful that many veterans found their return home profoundly disillusioning (188-189). The father's familial blind spot parallels the awful irony of the returning soldier; he served in order to protect his family, who seem like strangers to him when the conflict ends. The father's inability to see in "Voyager" is contrasted against the ability of his retinue (fellow officers? men under his command?) to observe the family, and the family's ability to see and recognize the father.

Even as "Voyager" reflects dissatisfaction with the dynamic of father-daughter kinship, the poem refuses to blame the father, but rather acknowledges his estrangement from his family in a world where he has the power of command but is denied the quotidian pleasures of a private citizen. "Voyager" confirms that the return of the elegiac figure of the lost beloved is forever desired, and forever deferred, by both elegist and beloved. Traditional consolation is denied to the daughter-elegist even in her own dream. Her gaze identifies the father's blind spot; she dwells in "a blank space in the air," and so deprived of even a "glance of recognition," she cannot make herself visible to him. As he "set out in search" of the family that he remembers but cannot see, the daughter acknowledges, with chagrin or grief, that this is intimacy as dictated by war and by death: "the closest we have come / to meeting / during thirty years of dreams." This consolation is indefinitely postponed. The contemporary female-written elegy has grown out of the advances of literary modernism, though Jahan Ramazani points out that the elegy was a dangerous choice for modernist female writers of the 1920s and 1930s. The risk of appearing sentimental in a literary atmosphere of austerity was great and could be critically devastating (21). However, Ramazani observes that a later generation of female poets, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, took on the family elegy as a feminist project, examining the daughter's role in the family romance and appropriating the elegiac tradition in order to "scrutinize paternal power in its absence" (22). Additionally, Melissa F. Zeiger notes a trend in recent female-authored elegies towards a "refusal of consolation" that suggests a productive melancholia growing from the tradition of female lament (63). Page's father-poems align with Zeiger's principal subversion of the elegiac mode in twentieth-century women's writing, specifically Zeiger's assertion of the elegy's representation of "the crucial and constitutive place of the living person's ongoing affectionate relations with the

dead” (63). Such ongoing relations have their attendant frustrations, especially if they attempt to renegotiate the father-daughter paradigm. The female affiliation complex haunts the elegy with its desire to delineate, and perhaps dismantle, the fidelity demanded by the father’s death, and to investigate the unsolved question of the daughter’s legacy.

Page comes close to a negotiated consolation in “Father” from her sequence “Melanie’s Nitebook” (*HRI* 146-148). In a 1996 interview, Page declares that while many of the poems in the series were fictional, the poem “Father” is very autobiographical: “The emotional feeling towards my father [in the poem] was true...I loved my father very much, and I always felt we belonged to each other. But we were never fully reconciled before he died” (“Biographical” 35-36). What such reconciliation might entail is an enduring tension in father-daughter kinship as well as in the paternal elegy. In “Father,” the officer-father appears impeccably aloof in his uniform, and the daughter (first-person speaker of the poem) beseeches his attention. Page offers a half rhyme with “father” and “farther” that underscores the distance between the two figures, and there is an echo of the daughter of Jephthah’s “My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord...” (Judges 11:36) in Page’s use of seventeenth-century Biblical syntax: “Father, o farther / in what heaven circlest thou? / Daily and dearly / ask I for thy succor.” The daughter is “awaiting...benediction” from the father, even as the father begins to “crave [the daughter’s] grace.” He “tremble[s]...with dread / of [her] grey gaze / the twin of [his] grey gaze.” He craves forgiveness as she craves praise until she at last suggests a truce, predicated on a bargain that underlies the elegiac contract: “Let me your spokesman / and your axeman be.” In order to strike this bargain, the daughter calls up the power of “that one word / which severs as it heals.” Given the syntax of the poem, that word appears to be “truce,” but could just as easily be “love” or “death”; both words are conspicuous by their absence in this poem. Page’s conflation of the word and the weapon suggests that the spoken sign is also the severing tool, and points to the compromise of the ultimate truce. The speaker of the poem changes from the good military daughter who is “obedient, house-trained / heel-trained, at [her father’s] call” into an opponent formidable enough to require a truce. Dispensing with dog-like obedience, the daughter reinscribes herself as the father’s “spokesman” and “axeman” in the poem’s final lines. The returning father in “Voyager” is completely cut off from familial care, no matter what kind of warm welcome he receives. The general of “War Lord in the Early Evening” calls for “beneficent care” but receives only humiliation, and his daughter’s silence and beauty cannot succor him. But in “Father,”

the daughter forges a truce, reconciling Gallagher's unease of the female gaze in a belligerent culture with a militarized father-daughter homosocial pact.³ At last, the daughter becomes her father's comrade-in-arms. She is spokesman and axeman, his wordsmith and his executioner: in short, his elegist. Now it is she who stands between her father and the abyss, she who supplies the father with the opportunity to recognize himself in her words.

Page's most recent foray with autobiographical material may be found in her poem sequence "Alphabetical," published in 1998 as a chapbook by Reference West, and republished in her 2002 collection, *Planet Earth: Poems Selected and New*. Page notes this sequence contains a good deal of personal reference: "My background is in it, my family" ("Entranced" 126). "Alphabetical" references each letter of the alphabet as a tile in a personal literary mosaic, and the military father resurfaces in the sections that explore the letters "q" and "r," represented by the words "question" and "reference." The father appears as an instructor figure, a man with an educated mind who admonishes his daughter that her "questions are often laziness" and teaches his daughter intellectual "independence" by encouraging her use of reference books (*Planet* 130). John Orange's 1988 interview with Page records her characterization of Lionel Page as a "free thinker" who was "great on mind over matter" (76). In "Alphabetical," the father inspires the daughter to "push / towards objectivity" (significantly, not towards subjectivity), and the "r" section recommends that such objectivity ought to be sought in "reference books in general, those / faceless authority figures in disguise" (*Planet* 131). Is it too much to read the military references in these lines, the "general" as a "faceless authority figure...disguise[d]" in words? Is this a reiteration of the "war lord" and his broken water pistol, hiding from his daughter even as he offers her an epistemological inheritance, the ability to assert her "mind over matter"?

The officer-father poems testify not only to the tensions of father-daughter kinship, but also to the presence of the debilitated male body within the trope of the paternal hero. The abjection of this body is not necessarily a failure of the body, or of masculinity, though it can and must represent a failure of the heroic concept of masculinity. Ideological alignment with mastery can be a kind of stasis from which the gaze of the daughter-elegist can rescue the father, by dismantling the authority of power and the privilege of rank. Page renders fragments of the father visible by observing the limitations of public duty and the vicissitudes of daughterly devotion. This battle is done; the negotiation of a truce means that the daughter must no longer choose between the officer-father's ferocity or fragility, but dares to see that which has been routed from and through the man. The

father's body, be it hidden from his daughter or trembling with dread in her gaze, offers itself up to transformation, and submits to the words which sever even as they heal.

Notes

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- 1 All quotations of Page's poetry, except when noted otherwise, are from *The Hidden Room*, henceforth abbreviated to *HR*.
- 2 In her study of Page's inclusion in, and resistance to a kind of gendered modernism, Nancy Paul analyzes the ways that men's "moral agency" victimizes her female characters (122), and concludes that Page herself may be "self-consciously following in a male tradition, while simultaneously purporting a feminine modesty in her public statements" (130). For further discussion of Page's poetics in the context of female modernism, please see Paul's "Redressing the Balance: Female and Male in the Early Poetry of P.K. Page" and Laura Killian's "Poetry and the Modern Woman: P.K. Page and the Gender of Impersonality."
- 3 Both Jane Gallop and Jessica Benjamin suggest that the fervent wish for an impossible homosocial relationship is the primary force of a daughter's identificatory love for the father. For more discussion of this alternative to the female Oedipus complex, see Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction* (75-81) and Benjamin's *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (120-131).

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