

## The Non-Linear Life of P.K. Page: A “Vision of Love in its Largest Sense”

Sandra Djwa. *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012. xiv + 418 pp.

Sandra Djwa's thoroughly researched and deeply engaging biography of Canadian poet and visual artist P.K. Page is a profoundly moving love story, which speaks of the intensity of Page's passion for individual people, art forms, places, social causes and spiritual beliefs throughout her remarkably full, privileged and complex life. Born in 1916, Page lived through the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, one of her most productive periods. Djwa deftly conveys the sweep of public and private movements of Page's life, organizing her fifteen chapters, save for the introductory background chapter entitled "Beginnings: 1884-1927," according to place, from Calgary to Victoria, and chronology, from 1928 to 2012. She marks the development of the artist, lover and seeker in the concise but descriptive portions of the chapter titles that fall between place and time, indicating the condition of that particular period. In the fourteenth chapter, "Victoria: Acclaim, 1990-1999," for example, Djwa writes of "P.K.'s vision of love in its largest sense" in reference to "the mandalas with Sufi undertones" in the "black-and-white octagonal drawings" in *Hologram*, her highly successful 1995 collection of glosas (275). The "acclaim" accorded to the celebrated poet and visual artist in the 1990s invited a confidence that encouraged the merging of the intimately spiritual, generally kept private by Page, with the artistic, produced for and shared with the public. The biography, as well as the life, expands from a concentration on specific recipients of Page's love, such as lawyer and poet F.R. Scott, with whom Page had a long and complicated love affair, and Arthur Irwin, her beloved husband, friend and life partner, to the much more general and encompassing "love in its largest sense" (275), most significantly the spiritual love found in Sufism, which Page embraced after her time in Mexico and which sustained her throughout the second half of her life.

As the author of *The Politics of the Imagination: A Life of F.R. Scott*, Djwa, not surprisingly, places the passionate relationship of Page and Scott at the centre of Page's life and biography, meticulously documenting with Page's words, thoughts and actions the centrality of Scott, but in doing so downplays to some extent the stable marriage of Page and Irwin, which

was based on respect, contentment and a deep devotion and loyalty. Djwa identifies Scott and Irwin, along with Page's father, Lionel, as fitting "the pattern of the dominant men in Pat's life" (129). She emphasizes the less supportive role of the dominant University of Victoria professor and poet, Robin Skelton, who, as an oppressive and resentful adversary, kept Page out of the inner circle of writers in the city in which she eventually settled. Djwa notes that "[i]ronically, it was Robin Skelton who provided P.K. with the poetic form, the glosa, for which she became known in the nineties" (273) and in this comment shows herself to be attuned to the types of patterns of which Page herself was so aware. In her account of a chance meeting of three Montreal friends in London, viewed by Page as an astonishing coincidence, Djwa is careful to draw attention to and respect "Page's sense of the necessity of being awake to the larger significance of such patterning" (217), the significance usually consisting of an intimation of abstract but powerful forces at work in her world. The result of the biographer's attention to such patterning and, more importantly, to the importance Page placed on such patterning is a biography that offers the depth and richness of the interior life—the emotions, intellect and "soul" (246)—in relationship to the tremendously varied, demanding and full exterior life.

There is no doubt that Djwa had an extraordinary subject with whom to work, as well as invaluable resources of autobiographical writing (*Brazilian Journal*, *Hand Luggage* and *Cullen*, as well as the manuscripts of the unpublished Australian, Mexican and Canadian journals), letters and interviews, but the project was not without its challenges. She relates that in March 2000 a series of e-mails from Page detailed "the differences between her perspective on her life (non-linear and symbolic) and her biographer's, which she saw as linear and literal" (297). Djwa understandably felt the need to adhere to the linear and literal, but abandoned the chronological approach in the final chapter of *Journey with No Maps*, once the "main events had been charted," in order "to speculate on the curve of the artist's creative life" (298). But Djwa respects and is very sensitive to the "non-linear and symbolic" throughout the biography, often highlighting patterns rather than straightforward lines and drawing attention to experiences that Page interpreted as symbolic based on her keen receptivity to profound connections. Within the chronological account, for example, Djwa successfully conveys the connections between a dream following Page's coincidental 1960 meeting with Ottawa friend, Kushwant Singh, in New York and the eventual composition of the poem, "Another Space" (188; 191-92). Djwa also draws her own connections, pointing out, for

example, that Page's attraction in 1935 to "the hand of Fatima" on the doors in Morocco "prefigure[ed] her later interest in Sufism" (45).

Patterns based on gender definitely emerge in the study of Page's life. If the dominant men in Page's life—military father, activist lover and diplomatic husband—modelled and guided her into social, political and professional responsibility, the women in her life, beginning with her mother, led her into the spiritual. Djwa highlights an early experience in Saint John involving Gertrude Tomalin Ross, whose relationship with Page, according to Djwa, was "somewhat like that of star and ingénue," but "turned into a close friendship" in which "Tommy expanded Pat's vision" (50). An intense and fleeting visionary experience following Tommy's sudden death apparently changed Pat, who told Djwa in a 1999 interview that after the episode she felt that "the impossible was possible; that the boundaries were not what I'd always thought they were, that there was a great deal more going on than I was capable of seeing. And that we were immortal" (60). Throughout the chapters of the biography Djwa returns to and studies Page's interactions with such women, the most notable example being her relationship with Leonora Carrington in Mexico. In Djwa's view, "[l]ike Pat, Leonora was a seeker" (182), who powerfully demonstrated to a receptive Page that which could not be seen.

Djwa accurately identifies a compelling quality that attracts both herself and others to Page's life when she observes that "Pat was caught between the old order and the new" (180). Being thus caught results in fascinating contrasts, contradictions and paradoxes, another pattern written by Page into her own life, as seen, for example, in her repeated references to the light of Brazil and the darkness of Mexico—"if Brazil was the day / then night followed next" (*Hand Luggage* 81)—and written by Djwa into the biography. Djwa notes that Page was a suffragette, but not a feminist "as we would understand the term today" (56) and points out that she was highly educated but had no university degrees (35); she was immersed in the psychology of Jung but also attracted to the occult; she was a Canadian with a British accent, which Irwin did not like (129); she performed a colonial role in Brazil and Mexico, but was sensitive to the potential oppression and condescension of such a performance; she was a Canadian poet, who was both central and marginalized. Djwa contextualizes and explores such contradictions in terms of the lengthy time span of Page's life, the diversity of her interests and accomplishments and her exacting and introspective temperament that refused to gloss over and simplify, but instead was committed to noticing and confronting incongruity, from the disappearance of

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Fonteyn's "tautness" when dancing *Giselle* (175) to her retrospective assessment of Brazil as both "golden" and "shallow" (175).

The shaping of the life in *Journey with No Maps* situates Victoria in 1964 as the homecoming after the voyage (England, Calgary, England, Saint John, Montreal, Halifax, Victoria, Ottawa, Australia, Brazil and Mexico), which provided the conditions, as the chapter title claims, for "Finding Oneself." The overwhelming lists of accomplishments and recognitions in the penultimate chapter, "Victoria: Acclaim, 1990-1999," suggest the delayed but enthusiastic inclusion of P.K. Page in the world of Canadian letters. The trajectory is one that highlights the wonder and complexity of an overdue arrival following a "journey with no maps," and values the intense struggle involved in such an uncharted voyage. Djwa suggests that there is deep loss and sadness involved in the lengthy wandering and genuine success in the eventual achievement of the belated arrival. The paradox of the successful but disappointed life is another contradiction acknowledged by Djwa's treatment.

*Journey with No Maps* has been eagerly anticipated by the many readers, friends, admirers and scholars whose interests are invested in Page's life. The vaguely known but still mysterious and private aspects of Page's life, namely her relationship with Scott and her devotion to Sufism, are dealt with sensitively, responsibly and thoroughly by Djwa. In her preface Djwa points out that since 1986, when she published Scott's biography, "expectations for biographical writing have deepened, and there has been a new understanding of the woman's quest" (xiii). Page's life shapes itself into the arc of the personal, artistic and spiritual quest and thus invites with some ease the sustained interest of a contemporary audience. Djwa's attention to the "woman's quest" as one unencumbered by maps allows the journey to be marked by astonishing connections rather than linear and literal directions. At one point Djwa quotes from a letter "commenting on the shallowness of Canadian critics" (116) sent by Page to Jori Smith in January 1947, in which Page laments that critics "'use words much as they would shovel snow'" and "'praise too much and damn too much'" in their failure to "'approach the work with any *real sympathy*'" (116). Sandra Djwa does not shovel snow. Her approach is careful and balanced. She approaches Page's life with impressively detailed knowledge and the degree of empathy that allows her to write an objective and accurate biography offering a full and rich account of both the private and public person. *Journey with No Maps* is a highly accomplished and compelling account of an extraordinary life.

Works Cited

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

Margaret Steffler