

# Tracing a Terrestrial Vision in the Early Work of P.K. Page

By Diana M.A. Relke

---

Categorizing the poetry of P.K. Page has never been an easy critical task.<sup>1</sup> The scant attention paid her during the first three decades of her career was perhaps a reflection of the discomfort of critics, who could not pigeonhole her work as belonging to a particular literary school or influenced by a particular mode of philosophical thought. As John Orange has observed, "Initially she was aligned with the leftist poets of social protest and the modernists; then she was seen as part of a cosmopolitan-metaphysical group.

Gradually her connections to the Symbolists were emphasized until, in the late 1970s, her work began to be assessed on its own terms, and its recurring images and metaphors came to be seen as an enclosed poetic world, or myth, which emphasized ways of seeing, the nature of the real, and mystical vision, in an increasingly transparent language.

(Orange, 1989, 10)

Orange is quite accurate; one can almost hear the collective sigh of relief that runs through the criticism of the 'seventies, when it was finally agreed that Page lived in her own private clutter of images, a transcendent realm at several removes from the incessant flux and process of nature. Critics such as the postmodernist Frank Davey, for example, writing in 1974, could now project back on to the young modernist Page "a severe distrust of the physical universe" and dismiss her as one of "the various 'anti-life' poets of twentieth-century Canadian poetry" (Davey 233-34).

While it is true that the exquisite visionary precision latent in Page's early poetry did emerge as one of the central features of her work during the 1970s, it is also true that the heavy critical emphasis on the recurring metaphor of eyes and seeing as a poetic device that distances her from material reality helped to obscure the way she sometimes incorporated other bodily senses to keep her connected to the natural world and underscore her identification with it. Fortunately — or perhaps not so, given the severity of the ecological crisis — we have an urgent reason for re-visioning what poets like P.K. Page may have been trying to tell us about nature and their relationship to it.

In the eyes of literary critics during the 1970s, there were only two responses to nature a Canadian poet could have: s/he either recoiled from it in deep terror, the view of Northrop Frye's disciples, or she could revel in its Heraclitean clash of opposites, à la Davey and other postmodernists. Either way, opposition and conflict were central. Now, however, critics such as D.M.R. Bentley are urgently investigating how literary criticism can "confirm or assist the reintegration of humanity and nature," how "critics of Canadian poetry [can]

participate in undoing the erosion of people's sense of their integrity and interconnectedness with nature . . . " (Bentley i). Feminist critique can offer at least one answer in keeping with what Bentley calls "ecological poetics," for a feminist perspective encourages us to examine the way in which women have internalized the assumption that women are to men as nature is to culture.<sup>2</sup> While twenty-five years of feminist scholarship, coupled with our increasing environmental awareness, have made it ludicrous to insist that one sex is somehow "closer" to nature than the other, the age-old belief that men can transcend nature while women are hopelessly embedded in it is in part responsible for some significant differences between male and female conceptualizations of nature. To be sure, any critic — feminist or otherwise — who pursues this difference risks being labelled a gender essentialist. Yet given that both sexes are equally and inextricably embedded in nature, and that traditionally the most influential male thinkers have denied this for men, while women have had to embrace it for themselves, it makes sense to examine women's poetry for possible ways of coming to terms with that human embeddedness. Nothing less than the survival of the planet is at stake.

In this paper, I apply an ecological perspective to a handful of P.K. Page's poems written before feminist scholarship and environmental crisis raised into general consciousness the ecological folly of buying into notions of male transcendence and female immanence.<sup>3</sup> Unlike her more highly sophisticated later poetry, in which she confidently plays with and delights in the notion of transcendence, a few of her early poems, along with her novel *The Sun and the Moon*, retain much of the naiveté of girlhood and emerging womanhood; hence they can be seen as possessing clues not only to the way in which women grew into their culturally assigned place vis-à-vis nature. More important, these early works suggest a more terrestrially-grounded side of Page's sensibility which, despite the images of summer green and winter white that have dominated her work since the beginning, is largely overlooked by most critics and even denied by some.

Two early poems provide a key to a more ecologically centred appreciation of Page. One of these, a poem originally entitled "Landscape of Love," is a favourite of Page's and was chosen by her for reprinting in two of her early volumes:

Where the bog ends, there, where the ground lips, lovely  
is love, not lonely.

Land is

love, round with it, where the hand is;  
wide with love, cleared scrubland, grain  
on a coin.

Oh, the wheatfield, the rock-bound rubble;  
the untouched hills

as a thigh smooth;

the meadow.

Not only the poor soil lovely, the outworn prairie,  
but the green upspringing,  
the lark-land,

the promontory.

A lung-born land, this,  
a breath spilling,  
scanned by the valvular heart's  
field glasses.

(*As Ten as Twenty 1*)

An exclusively visionary and metaphysical interpretation of Page would focus on the image of field glasses with its implication of distance and the sense of sight. Such a reading might also interpret this alleged remoteness as undermining the effort at intimacy with both landscape and lover, seizing on the words "there" in the opening line and "untouched" in the eighth as evidence of this unfulfilled intimacy. Yet even if we accept these fragments as distancing effects, this poem nevertheless stands in startling contrast to similar kinds of landscape poems written by Page's male contemporaries. Take, for example, F.R. Scott's "Trans Canada," in which the remote landscape is seen from an aircraft that springs "upward into a wider prairie," high above the material prairie around Regina (Scott 34-35) — or, more significantly, Scott's "Flying to Fort Smith," imaging another landscape peered at "through panes of glass," a landscape remote from the "long lanes of space" where the airborne poet dreams of future cities sleeping "Underground / In the coins of rock" (Scott 31). By contrast, Page gives us the other side of those hidden coins, as it were — the more visually immediate "Grain / on a coin," an image at once organic and inorganic. Page's poem may even be seen as a corrective to the male landscape poetry of early Canadian modernism in that it directly contradicts A.J.M. Smith's "The Lonely Land," which is often cited as the most representative landscape poem of the period. Page's landscape is by contrast "not lonely" because, unlike Smith's, it is an intensely "Personal Landscape," for this was how she retitled the poem when she chose it as the opening piece for her 1946 volume, *As Ten As Twenty*. Contrary to the widely held opinion of her work as almost exclusively visual, this poem is so replete with evocations of the sense of touch that even the word "untouched" evokes its opposite. The female body, round, wide, smooth to the hand's touch, shares an intersubjective space with the "cleared scrubland," "the wheatfield," "the rock-bound rubble," and "the outworn prairie." I will return to this concept of intersubjective space, as it is central to the ecological poetic operative in much Canadian poetry by women. First, however, I would like to examine a poem which may be seen as a kind of companion piece to "Personal Landscape."

The image of "untouched hills" in a poem of such tactile intimacy as "Personal Landscape" is a paradox which "Virgin," another frequently republished poem, helps to unravel:

By the sun, by the sudden flurry  
of birds in a flock, oh, by love's ghost  
and the imagined guest —  
all these  
shattering, shaking the girl  
in her maidenhood,  
she knows him and his green song smooth as a stone

and the word  
quick with the sap and the bud and the moving bird.  
(*The Metal and the Flower* 30)

As Ellen Moers has written, "Common sense . . . taught us, long ago, that Portnoy's complaint is hardly of an exclusive masculine nature; and that virgin girls are no more shut out from sexual experience than their male counterparts" (Moers 256). But what differentiates "Virgin" from male masturbation literature is that this orgasmic experience brings not only knowledge of one's own sexuality, but of nature as well. The Virgin's "imagined guest" is indistinguishable from nature: in knowing "him and his green song smooth as a stone," she comes to know nature, "quick with the sap and the bud and the moving bird." This poem of female desire and self-discovery not only images the deep interconnectedness of humankind and nature; along with "Personal Landscape," it also helps to refute the view that for Page "terrestrial life is an amalgam of deceit, pain, overpowering speed, and sin" (Davey 231). Indeed, as "Virgin" demonstrates, nature is not merely "the environment" — a humanistic construct defining man as the measure and the centre of all that surrounds him — but rather, something which is also as intimately internal to us as a male lover enclosed within a woman's sexual embrace. In other words, our relationship to nature is paradoxical: nature is our "holding environment" which we in turn hold within ourselves.

The paradox that characterizes our relationship to nature is also characteristic of what feminist psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin calls the intersubjective mode of spatial representation: the "intersubjective mode assumes the possibility of a context with others in which desire is constituted for the self. It thus assumes the paradox that in being with the other, I may experience the most profound sense of self" (Benjamin 92). The intersubjective mode is associated with the "interior of the body and the space between bodies [which] form an elusive pattern, a plane whose edge is ever-shifting" in that it "both forms a boundary and opens up into endless possibility" (94). This intersubjective space is a place where all objects are subjects, where self and other meet in a flow of mutual recognition, where relationship is akin to *process* rather than *structure*. Intersubjective space is often likened to the psychoanalytic "holding environment," a transitional space in which "experience can be transformed in the process of self-discovery" (96). Benjamin has observed that an "important component of women's fantasy life centers around the wish for a holding other whose presence does not violate one's space but permits the experience of one's own desire, who recognizes it when it emerges of itself. This experience of inner space is in turn associated with the space between self and other: the holding environment and transitional space" (96). The intersubjective mode of representation clearly accounts for the female desire and self-discovery of "Virgin," and the more subtle auto-eroticism implicit in "Personal Landscape," where the poet is alone in nature but "not lonely."

The intersubjective mode is distinct from the intrapsychic mode of symbolic representation, in which the phallus is the organizer of desire: "The phallus as emblem of desire [represents] the one-sided individuality of subject meeting object, a complementarity that idealizes one side and devalues the

other" (Benjamin 98). This mode is unlike the intersubjective mode in several ways. First, it preserves the dualistic, hierarchical, oppositional distinction between subject and object. Second, eschewing the interdependence and fluid ego boundaries of the intersubjective mode, it idealizes autonomy, individualism, separation, and distance from the other; it obeys the laws of structure rather than process. And finally, it is the mode which has traditionally governed gender relations (and, by extension, Western humanism's attitude to devalued, "feminine" nature). Significantly, despite the evidence that what is experientially female is the association of desire with intersubjective space, "women who present such images of spatial containment and inner space also have masochistic fantasies in which surrender is called forth by the other's power to penetrate, to know, and to control their desire" (97). These masochistic fantasies are the dark underside of women's propensity toward ideal love: the internalization of the father qua phallus as a representation of agency and desire accounts for women's traditional readiness to idealize men, who heroically struggle for transcendence, and who represent and give women vicarious access to that transcendence (Benjamin 79).

Benjamin concludes that the self which develops and accumulates through intersubjective experiences of self-recognition "is a different modality that sometimes works with, but sometimes is at cross-purposes to, the symbolized ego of phallic structuring. It is essential to retain this sense of the complementary, as well as the contrasting, relationship of these modes. Otherwise, one falls into the trap of choosing between them, grasping one side of a contradiction that must remain suspended to be clarifying" (94). In other words, we need to suspend our binary habits of thought if we are to grasp what is meant here by complementarity. This sense of complementarity and contrast is important to an examination of Page's initial attempt at an ecological poetic. In addition to the characteristics already outlined, the intersubjective mode has also been associated with empathy, an interpersonal relatedness during which one experiences temporary identification with the other's emotional state yet remains aware that the source of the emotion is in the other.<sup>4</sup> This has obvious implications for Page's romance, *The Sun and the Moon*, written when she was just twenty-one years old.<sup>5</sup> This novel, as Jean Mallinson has noted, is "important to the student or serious reader of Page's poems" (Mallinson 8). Indeed, it may be read as one of Page's earliest attempts to work out her ecological poetic. A narrative of female power and desire, the novel may also be read as a tragic commentary on how that power and desire are thwarted by the failure to understand and value them. The failed interrelationship between the novel's two central characters echoes the failure of humankind's relationship to nature.

John Orange's sustained reading of the novel leaves little to add, except perhaps an extension of the psychological allusions. Orange focuses on the Jungian allusions which, when seen to provide the structure of the work, divide its symbols and images neatly into masculine and feminine:

The symbolic design is complex and consistently used to make statements about male versus female, art versus nature, intellectual and civil order versus intuitive spontaneity and empathy with the

particularity of things as they exist in nature. The masculine realm of intellectual ordering, the spirit divorced from matter, and artistic patterning is associated with symbols of the sun and various forms of light, jewellery, the wind, hunting, the colour brown, and music. The feminine realm of earth and dream is symbolized by the moon, the sea and its plants and fish, rocks, trees, the colour white, a white panther, various flowers and vegetation, and doves — all images consistent with the rites of the Great Goddess of earliest mythology . . . .

(Orange, 1989, 17-18)

Orange's analysis makes sense of the way the novel is constructed on the principle of binary opposition. From the perspective of the postmodernist era, this structure may seem conventional, but during the 1930s, the mapping of the psyche by Freud and Jung into pairs of opposing drives or archetypes was still finding its way into Canadian fiction. Freud's concept of *Einfühlung*, coined as "empathy" from the Greek *empathēia* by Freud's translator James Strachey, emerges in the novel as a potential force for reconciling these oppositions.

The novel, as succinctly described by Orange, "follows the love affair between eighteen-year-old Kristin Fender, who was born during a lunar eclipse and possesses the power to 'become' objects in her environment through concentration and empathy, and Carl Bridges, a thirty-seven-year-old successful artist who, significantly, wants to paint Kristin the moment he meets her" (Orange, 1989, 17). Page's choice of the names Fender and Bridges is intriguing. On one level the names are appropriate: through marriage, Carl wishes to create a permanent bridge between himself and Kristin, but in the end she fends him off, choosing instead to merge with nature. However, on a less obvious level the names take on an ironic reversal, for it is Kristin who possesses the potential for creating interpersonal bridges: her empathic power is both cause and consequence of her ability to relate intersubjectively. Orange is correct in attributing significance to Carl's desire to paint Kristin, for the only way he can "fend 'er" off is to objectify her — quite literally — by turning her into an art "object," a representation of ideal womanhood, contained, controlled, and disempowered.

The tragedy of the story is that neither Carl nor Kristin can fully appreciate the positive power of Kristin's gift:

"Sometimes," he said, "you almost take the words out of my mouth. It's as if you know me from the inside — an empathetic knowledge of me."

"What is empathetic?" She sat up straight.

"Well," he hesitated. "It's a psychic term really. An inner knowledge resulting from the projection of the mind of the observer into the thing observed."

"Oh!" Why are we talking like this, why already are we on the subject I dread? She raised her hand to her mouth to hold it steady. "Is there any cure for it?" she asked.

"Cure?" said Carl. "No, I don't think so, darling. It's a sort of extra sense that leads to a fuller understanding. I don't think it's a thing people try to cure."

(*The Sun and the Moon* . . .

107)

Carl has an intellectual understanding of Kristin's empathetic facility, yet he experiences her empathy as an assault on his identity. He has accurately analysed her propensity for a fuller — and perhaps too revealing — understanding of *him*. Not surprisingly, it cripples his creativity, and he finds himself unable to paint. Carl embodies what psychoanalyst and novelist Stephen Bergman has identified as "the difficulty men have in perceiving, understanding, and being in the *process* of relationship. While it is easy for men to envision self, and even self and other, it seems less easy to envision the *relationship* between self and other, with a life of its own, in movement, as a process, arising from and reflecting upon all participants, its realness defined by the qualities inherent in mutual empathic connections" (Bergman 2). Rather than a relationship of intersubjective *process*, Carl's ego demands a relationship of subject-object *structure* in keeping with the intrapsychic mode of symbolic representation.

Conversely, to Kristin, who has virtually no intellectual grasp of the empathetic, Carl's creative paralysis is more evidence in support of her superstitious belief in a coincidence, a belief in her power to annihilate the other — to eclipse the other as the moon had eclipsed the sun at her birth. Their relationship founders on her conventionally phallic idealization of him, coupled with his conventionally masculine inability to relax his rigid ego boundaries and enter in to the intersubjective space she creates for them. Although each sincerely desires the other, each is operating in a different relational modality. His art is dependent upon his ability to remain autonomous and "objective"; she idealizes his autonomy and objectivity. Hence she responds with a traditionally feminine gesture of self-sacrifice and withdraws from him. After observing Carl at his pastime chopping down trees, she fulfils the desire she had experienced on the eve of her wedding: to become a tree rooted in the earth, battling the wind, sheltering the birds, and "knowing the re-creation of self in the united forgetfulness of self" (*The Sun and the Moon* 97). This loss of self is consistent with Benjamin's observation that the two modalities of psychic representation can sometimes work at cross-purposes: "The fantasy of submission in ideal love is that of being released into abandon by another who remains in control. . . . [T]he freedom and abandon called forth by this powerful, controlling other represent an alienated version of the safe space that permits self-discovery, aloneness in the presence of the other" (Benjamin 97). Kristin's surrender of her power to nature creates an ironic turn of events: it transforms the tree into a phallic symbol with the power to eclipse Kristin's individuality, even as she feared eclipsing Carl's.

Not surprisingly, Kristin as subject is absent in the closing image of the novel:

The sun and a small wind broke the surface of the lake to glinting sword blades. On the far side, where the trees marched, unchecked,

right down to the water's edge, there the lake was a shifting pattern of scarlet, vermilion and burnt orange.

(137)

Diction suggesting breaking, slashing, and burning subvert this tranquil image and echo the destruction of the marital bond. Denied the fulfilment of her desire for intersubjective connection with Carl, Kristin abandons that desire and passes clear through intersubjective space and onto "the far side" of it, merging with and disappearing into the landscape. Small wonder that Page came to conclude that her "subconscious evidently knew something about the tyranny of subjectivity years ago when it desired to go 'through to the area behind the eyes / where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies' " ("Questions and Images" 21). Benjamin argues that "individuality is properly, ideally, a balance of separation and connectedness, of the capacities for agency and relatedness" (82). However, if individuality and desire "remain unchallenged male domain," it leaves women "to be righteous and deerotized, intimate, caring, and self sacrificing" (85). Indeed, unreciprocated desire for the balance of interconnectedness leaves only two alternatives: withdrawal into the loneliness of independence and autonomy, as suggested by Kristin's withdrawal from her marriage, or the self-erasure of sustained merger with the powerful phallic other. Page's ability to illustrate these two opposing alternatives in one tragic gesture is a significant literary feat. It demonstrates her ability not only to embrace paradox but to see beyond it to the interconnectedness of all phenomena. Paradox is only a *seeming* contradiction, and when we invoke it we are admitting our tragic inability to conceptualize in anything but binary terms. It is this dualistic habit of mind which has wreaked havoc in our relationships with each other and, by extension, the rest of the natural world.

Just as there is a point of balance between separation and connectedness, so too is there a fine line between intersubjective connection and the erasure of identity through sustained merger. Sustained merger, as the novel suggests, is (to paraphrase Page's comment quoted above) a tyrannical form of subjectivity — a "subjectivism" as extreme as objectivism, its polarized opposite. But if we reconceive our relationship with nature as a process rather than a structure — a flow back and forth along a continuum rather than an opposition governed by subject/object dualism — the distance between the polarized extremes might be construed in terms of intersubjective experiences of varying degrees of intensity. That Page was intent upon exploring her relationship to nature within the context of this kind of fluid process is suggested in "Reflection," a poem written while she was at work on *The Sun and the Moon*. Not surprisingly, in this poem, which combines visual and tactile imagery, self and nature are both represented by a tree:

In the noon of yesterday I saw a tree  
pretending it was a woman,  
bending over a stream, dipping its arms in the water as pale  
women on still nights dip theirs,  
its thick hair falling forward  
over its face, missing its own reflection.  
And I bent over the water beside it,  
dipping my hands in the stream



and my hair fell forward  
and I was a tree.  
In the reflection I saw  
a tree and a woman bending,  
merged in the water and  
knew not whether I was the woman or tree.

("Reflection" 23)

There is nothing quite like pathetic fallacy for exposing the egocentricity of Western humanism — especially when it comes to divining the true nature of Nature. Indeed, this tree, which pretends it is a woman and misses seeing its own reflection, has much in common with Wordsworth's lonely cloud. It is, of course, humankind who pretends that nature is a woman, just as in this poem it is really the woman who pretends she is a tree. What the projection of femininity onto nature has meant in a phallically oriented culture is that we treat nature the way we treat women; as an ironic consequence, in its currently desecrated state, "Mother Nature" is giving us back an astonishingly accurate reflection of ourselves. In other words, like the persona in the first seven lines of this poem, we have recreated nature in our own image.

Perhaps it is the time dislocation between the tree at noon and the "women on still nights" that prompts the poet actively to test this projection instead of passively accepting appearance as reality. In the act of bending over and disturbing the reflective surface of the water she takes back her projection and, instead, *introjects* the implicitly blurry image of self and tree merged, and for an instant in time — the magical moment of noon — she experiences herself as indistinguishable from nature. This movement from projection to introjection illustrates the process of self-"Reflection" which brings her into empathetic intersubjective relationship with the other. Unlike Kristin's sustained merger with nature which erases her from the text, this moment of merger at "noon of yesterday" is at one end of the relational continuum; at the other is the present "Reflection" upon it which returns the poet to herself while simultaneously revealing her deep interconnectedness with nature.

This interconnectedness is consistent with Page's own evaluation of the poetic operative in her work. In "A Conversation with P.K. Page," interviewer John Orange questions the extreme dualism often imposed on her work: "it seems to me you're not trying to leave the world behind the way some critics see you — life-denying Manichean, Gnostic, anti-life and so on. Do you feel in any way that there are two planes of existence unrelated to each other except in the most tenuous ways?" Page's response is emphatic: "No! No! Of course not. I think everything is immensely integrated. I think, as far as I'm capable of understanding at all, that things are intermeshed. They're . . . all part of the same thing . . ." (Orange, 1988, 73-74). The unique way in which Page conceptualizes and uses metaphor allows her to compensate for its conventional dualism. For Page, metaphor " 'gives two for one' — gives two *in* one. Two or more separate ideas, objects, images fuse. In doing so generate energy. Illuminate" ("The Sense of Angels" 18-19). This notion of two *in* one, rather than one superior to and illuminating the other, transforms metaphor into a useful device for conveying a vision of the world *prior* to Western culture's conception of it as two unrelated planes of existence. It also makes it

impossible to distinguish a primary (or so-called "literal") from a metaphorical level in her work; hence the critical view of Page as a "difficult" poet. The difficulty is, in fact, not in Page, but rather, in our critical methodology. If some of her poems have been ignored it is almost certainly because they do not yield to conventional critical tools.

Take, for example, the habit of quoting fragments, a habit which constitutes an assault on the integrity of a poem, and which obscures as readily as it illuminates. The failure of this critical tool is especially true in the case of "Summer," a poem whose processural flow overpowers its tidy division into three verses, in turn divided into conventionally capitalized and punctuated sentences. "Summer" is also a perfect illustration of the indistinguishability of primary and metaphorical levels:

I grazed the green as I fell  
and in my blood  
the pigments flowed like sap.  
All through my veins the green  
made a lacey tree.  
Green in my eye grew big as a bell  
that gonged and struck  
and in a whorl of green in my ear  
it spun like a ball.

Orphaned at once that summer  
having sprung  
full grown and firm with green,  
chorussed with fern  
Oh, how the lazy moths were soft upon  
my feminine fingers,  
how flowers foamed at my knees  
all those green months.

Near reeds and rushes where the water lay  
fat and lusted by the sun  
I sang the green that was in my groin  
the green  
of lily and maidenhair and fritillary  
from the damp wood  
of cedar and cypress from the slow hill,  
and the song, stained with the stain of chlorophyll  
was sharp as a whistle of grass  
in my green blood.

*(The Metal and the Flower 40)*

This poem may be interpreted as investing nature with subjectivity, giving it a voice with which to articulate its celebration of self. This is a way of suggesting that nature is not the inarticulate and hence inferior other, but rather, that humankind does not understand any of nature's multiple languages.

Positing an interiority to nature in this way also effectively characterizes it as a holding environment. Anthropocentrism aside, the act of endowing nature with

human consciousness can be seen as consistent with the intersubjective mode of representation which incorporates the process of self-reflection as a way of entering into the experience of the other. Conversely, the poem may be read as the internalization of nature by the poet as subject, suggesting the fluidity of boundaries characteristic of intersubjectivity. Either way, the poem itself becomes a linguistic space, a place where self and other meet in a complex web of intersubjective connection. Auditory and tactile imagery combine with the visual, and alliteration makes the language move in time with the falling, flowing, growing, springing, foaming, and rushing of nature's processes explicit in the diction. Language as a mediator between humankind and nature has both a connective and a disruptive aspect. Yet when this poem is read as a linguistic space, rather than a symbolic structure, an emphasis on the connective emerges.

An almost exclusive critical emphasis on the symbolic in Page's poetry can obscure those places where a reading on the relative literal level might allow for an alternative, less metaphysically driven interpretation. For example, while the cold and aged male figure imaged in "Spring" may be read as Old Man Winter, this turns the poem into an allegory of the seasons, obscuring the fact that men are as embedded in nature as are women, and that Page has perhaps intuited this. The poem images the old man kneeling in his flower garden surrounded by spring blossoms and "sharp green shoots emerging from the beds." His "creaking joints" thaw like ice in the warm spring sun until finally he can "bend with a dancer's ease,"

and all that he had clutched, held tightly locked  
behind the fossil frame  
dissolves, flows free  
in saffron covering the willow tree  
and coloured rivers of the rockery.

(*As Ten as Twenty* 23)

This image of relaxing, opening out onto nature, becoming continuous with it is congruent with Page's poetic as I am construing it here. So too is the image of the old man's breath, implicitly visible in the early spring air, which takes on the "yellow and white and purple" of the flowers around him, while his hands become "curved and cool for cupping petals." The fossil image, which looks backward in time, finds its complement in the closing section of the poem which looks forward to a time when

. . . he is the garden — heart, the sun  
and all his body soil;  
glistening jonquils blossom from his skull,  
the bright expanse of lawn his stretching thighs  
and something rare and perfect, yet unknown,  
stirs like a foetus just behind his eyes.

This is hardly an image of heroically transcendent man. When the old man is finally laid in earth he will be quite literally merged with the landscape. But this allusion to death is overturned by the more powerful language of birth, as if death were controlled and contained in birth like a foetus in the womb. Conventional as this notion of process might be, it takes on a new dimension

when the implicit womb imagery is seen in the context of intersubjective space and the paradox of nature as a holding environment at once external and internal to us. The cultivated garden is itself an intermediate or transitional space between uncultivated nature and overcultivated culture, as it were. A garden is a place where both nature and gardener undergo a transformation in which each responds directly to the other by mutually mirroring the growth process common to both. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides notwithstanding, the interaction that occurs in a successful garden is a model of cooperation between humankind and nature. Western culture's enduring love of gardens is a small beacon of hope in an otherwise gloomy ecological crisis.

Page, the self-identified "city person" who has "lived in the country a good deal — felt close to nature" (Wachtel 60), is an enthusiastic gardener. This is worth bearing in mind when we are tempted to interpret the image of the garden in her work exclusively as a symbol of some greater and more permanent reality remote from terrestrial nature. Indeed, Page has used garden imagery to convey her sense of the folly in opting for isolation in a realm of self-generated images. Here, for example, are the opening lines of a 1950s poem, "After Rain":

The snails have made a garden of green lace:  
broderie anglaise from the cabbages,  
chantilly from the choux-fleurs, tiny veils —  
I see already that I lift the blind  
upon a woman's wardrobe of the mind.

(*Cry Ararat!* 18)

Despite their reminder of how easily we feminize nature, these lines nevertheless demonstrate that the metaphysical imagination sometimes has its advantages: it can momentarily heal the world of fragmentation, find beauty in a world in which destruction is regularly visited upon human endeavour. Indeed, the female mind has its own unique metaphysic of order and beauty which is capable of transforming a ruined garden into a poem, a

garden abstracted, geometry awash —  
an unknown theorem argued in green ink,  
dropped in the bath.  
Euclid in glorious chlorophyll, half drunk.

The theorem, with its suggestion of a transcendent realm of ideal forms, is a mathematically logical structure transformed here by "female whimsy" into a linguistic structure of fantastic beauty. However, this whimsy, which floats about the poet like "a kind of tulle, a flimsy mesh," is a self-enclosed world, absolutely inaccessible to Giovanni, for whom a garden is a garden and not a poem. It is for his sake, as he squelches dolefully through his soggy ruin of a garden, that the poet "suffer[s] shame in all these images," for their seductive beauty distances her from his distress: "I find his ache exists beyond my rim / and almost weep to see a broken man / made subject to my whim." Her fanciful response to what distresses him trivializes his pain; her impulse to tears is as much a response to her self-imposed isolation, which limits her ability to empathize with him, as it is to his inability to see the beauty in the ruin. Hence,

the poem closes with an expression of her desire for interconnection — her wish that he might "come to rest within this beauty as one rests in love" and, reciprocally, that she be able to "keep [her] heart a size / larger than seeing, unsexed by each / bright glimpse of beauty" that threatens to keep her isolated in her private world of abstractions.

Nature, like anyone else with whom we may find ourselves in relationship, can sometimes be difficult to live with — especially when we want to do something silly, such as go to sea in submarines, for example; situations like this are survived largely by construing nature as the enemy. But even when we make seemingly reasonable demands on nature, as in "After Rain," nature often reminds us that "reasonable" is a relative term. Like all relationships, humankind and nature's demands compromises we do not always want to make, as the poet hopes Giovanni will learn. In exchange for those grudging compromises, nature might ignite the imagination, making possible a delightfully whimsical poem.

Western's culture's propensity for fleeing messy, demanding nature and opting for the tidy and harmonious realm of pure abstraction is also the subject of "Arras," a poem which has fascinated many critics. Its elaborately stylized images of nature have strengthened some of the most persuasive arguments in support of Page as an escapist from nature in the raw. However, like "After Rain," it may be read as a caution not to be seduced by the formal realm of classical simplicity, stasis, and permanence depicted in the arras. For the poet is not comfortable with this static realm: "I fear / the future on this arras." One may indeed fear for the future in a realm of timelessness where "future" can have no meaning. Yet the scene depicted in the arras is as seductive as eternity must be to a Christian, or the realm of eternal forms to a Platonist.

The ancient world, from which we have inherited our dualistic habits of mind, is suggested in the opening lines by the allusions to ancient dress: the "habit — classical" and "sandalled feet" of Plato's era. If it really were possible to separate mind from body and transcend into the platonic realm beyond life's change and stir, we might miss the hot imperfections of life and the stimuli of ever new and strange phenomena:

I ask, what did they deal me in this pack?  
The cards, all suits, are royal when I look.  
My fingers slipping on a monarch's face  
twitch and grow slack.  
I want a hand to clutch, a heart to crack.  
(*Cry Ararat!* 100)

To opt for the realm of perfection and stasis is to be dealt the elitist hand: the royal face-cards in the deck are all perfection, all blank reflection, all unseeing eyes — four to a card — like the eyes in the tail of a peacock. This royal flush, like the peacock's tail, is beautiful but the poet wants more: she wants hands and a heart that respond in passion, but passion cannot exist in that fleshless realm. The flow of desire and empathy when an anxious hand reaches out to clutch a caring hand is an experience unique to the world as we know it, with its physical intimacy and its multiplicity of human emotions. It is perhaps

preferable to take one's chances with a breakable heart, rather than live eternally in world of cold indifference, where the poet's question "Does no one care?" is academic. Much as the poet wants to "make a break . . . / take to [her] springy heels," she remains poised on the threshold between the material world and the world of the arras. She hopes that "hands might hold me if I spoke"; she dreams of "the bite of fingers in my flesh." But such hopes and dreams are in vain, for none of this bodily contact can happen in the world beyond material nature where eyes, like the eyes in the tail of the peacock, are sightless and close "on nothing." In the end, as in "After Rain," it is the poet who must take responsibility for this flat, two-dimensional world of images: "I confess: / It was my eye."

When viewed in the context of poems like "After Rain" and "Arras," Page's poetry of so-called "mystical vision" becomes a terrestrial vision that moves us closer to, not farther from, the world of the body and its multiple senses. Indeed, as I have attempted to suggest in the context of the works examined here, a sustained response to the tactile and spatial allusions in Page's poetry is called for. Such a response can reward us with a vision of what Page has called "another realm — interrelated," the realm of intersubjective space, a place where it is possible to learn, as Page has, that we "have been upside down in life — like a tree on its head, roots exposed in the air" ("Questions and Images" 21). But this reward requires an act of critical will. Only by abandoning our idealization of autonomy, individualism, and distance — the phallic ideals of literary criticism as well as Western culture as a whole — can we get ourselves right-side up, reroot ourselves, and help to undo the erosion of humankind's sense of integrity and interconnectedness with nature.

Few critics have taken the time to set Page's work in the context of the various female traditions in Canadian poetry. Among women, she has always impressed us as unusually unique. But in addition to this remarkable uniqueness, Page's poetry has much in common with that of Margaret Avison in that both poets seek an enhanced vision of reality through empathy. In terms of the ecological poetic that governs a substantial stream within the Canadian female tradition, Page's early work reaches back to Isabella Valancy Crawford, whose *Malcolm's Katie*, written against the backdrop of the first wave of political feminism, inscribes one of the most sustained nineteenth-century enquiries into the complex relationship between humankind and nature.<sup>6</sup> Some of Page's early work has even more in common with the healing feminism of Dorothy Livesay's first phase of poetic development in that the self-reflective approach toward a deeper appreciation of nature's processes is common to both, as is the fascination with the tree as a personal symbol.<sup>7</sup> In its subtle corrective to the work of her male contemporaries, Page resembles the young Phyllis Webb, whose philosophical enquiry into woman's place in a dualistic universe exposes the inadequacy of dualism as a tool for apprehending reality. And, finally, Page's early work has something in common with Margaret Atwood: both writers have created personae whose female identity is intimately caught up in their relationship to nature.<sup>8</sup> In view of her illuminating contribution to a female ecological tradition in Canadian poetry, an ongoing investigation into the terrestrial vision of P.K. Page is a critical task whose time has finally come.

---

## Notes

1. The author acknowledges the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support. She also dedicates this study to Jungian analyst Josephine Evetts-Secker, who taught the author to tolerate the creative chaos out of which the paper emerged. [\[back\]](#)
2. The allusion is to Sherry Ortner's classic of feminist scholarship, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" An anthropologist, Ortner was the first feminist theorist to investigate why "culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) recognizes that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with nature" (69). [\[back\]](#)
3. The terms "male transcendence" and "female imminence" are borrowed from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Recovery of this text for feminism in the late 1960s was largely responsible for initiating the discourse in which the present study is set. [\[back\]](#)
4. See, for example, Judith V. Jordan, "Empathy and Self Boundaries" (83-84) and Janet L. Surrey, "Relationship and Empowerment" (167), in Jordan, et. al. and Relke (105). [\[back\]](#)
5. Although not published until 1946, the novel was written ca. 1937. Quotations are taken from the 1973 reprint, *The Sun and the Moon and Other Fictions*. [\[back\]](#)
6. See Relke, 1991, 51-71. [\[back\]](#)
7. See Relke, 1986, 17-36. [\[back\]](#)
8. See Relke, 1983, 35-48. [\[back\]](#)

---

## Works Cited

- Benjamin, Jessica. "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space." *Feminist Studies and Critical Studies*. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis. Bloomington, ID: Indiana U P, 1986: 78-101.
- Bentley, D.M.R. "'Along the Line of Smoky Hills': Further Steps Towards an Ecological Poetics." *Canadian Poetry* 26 (Fall/Winter, 1990): i-xv.
- Bergman, Stephen J. *Men's Psychological Development: A Relational Perspective*. Wellesley, MS: The Stone Center, 1991.
- Davey, Frank. *From There to Here*. Erin, ON: Porcepic, 1974.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952.

Jordan, Judith V., et al. *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center*. New York and London: Guilford P, 1991.

Mallinson, Jean. "Retrospect and Prospect." *West Coast Review* 13:3 (1979): 8-9.

Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976.

Orange, John. "A Conversation with P.K. Page." *Canadian Poetry* 22 (1988): 73-74.

———. *P.K. Page and Her Works*. Toronto: ECW P, 1989.

Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Woman, Culture and Society*, Ed. M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere. Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 1974: 67-87.

Page, P.K. *As Ten as Twenty*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1946.

———. *Cry Ararat! Poems New and Selected*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967.

———. *The Metal and the Flower*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1954.

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

———. "Reflection." *Canadian Poetry Magazine* 4:1 (1939): 23.

———. "The Sense of Angels." *Dialogue* (Passover 1973): 18-19.

———. *The Sun and the Moon and Other Fictions*. Toronto: Anansi, 1973.

Relke, Diana M.A. "The Ecological Vision of Isabella Valancy Crawford: A Reading of Malcolm's Katie." *Ariel* 22:3 (1991): 51-71.

———. "Double Voice, Single Vision: a Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*." *Atlantis* 9:1 (1983): 35-48.

———. "The Task of Poetic Mediation: Dorothy Livesay's Early Poetry." *Ariel* 13:4 (1986): 17-36.

———. "Foremothers Who Cared: Paula Heimann, Margaret Little and the



Female

Tradition in Psychoanalysis." *Feminism and Psychology* 3:1 (1993): 89-109.

Scott, F.R. *Selected Poems*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1966.

Wachtel, Eleanor. " 'That's Me, Firing Salvador': An Interview with P.K. Page." *West*

*Coast Review* 22:2 (1987): 42-64.