

# Mapping the Mind's "I": Vision, Perception, and Complicity in the Early Poems of P.K. Page

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FOR P.K. PAGE'S WORK as both an artist and a poet, vision and perspective function as a resource for the well of images her art relays. Depicting vision as at once limiting and enabling, her poems present an uneasy tension: a tension adumbrating the subject-object distance implicit in perspective that her speakers wish to close and the adaptation of perception through the filters of imagination, language, and the perceiver's own subjectivity. This discussion examines ways in which Page's early poems, published before her travel to Brazil in 1957, approach and explore this tension. Page published no poems after this time until *Cry Ararat!* in 1967, putting poetry aside to hone her skills as a visual artist. Rosemary Sullivan has remarked that for Page, "'Brazil' ... is a state of mind" (37). Page's progress to this state of mind, marked as a bridge by her turn away from poetic expression — perhaps in frustration at a sentiment her poems failed to capture — and towards artwork, changed the tone and focus of her eventual return to poetry, inspiring her to apply herself with new vigour to the removal of those limits behind which her early poetry struggles. At the same time as these poems grapple with the boundaries of conventional vision, they illustrate the difficulty of moving beyond the limits they identify. Vision thus functions in Page's poems to foreground her early concept of the limitations and subjectivity of perception, advancing her notion of an unmapped but intuited space of enhanced perspective.

Critical consensus supports the identification of two opposing styles in Page's early work, contrasting the objective portrait poems with those relating to more personal themes. Sullivan identifies a "deep split at the core of those early poems" (35), echoing the skepticism of John Sutherland, founding editor of Montreal's *First Statement* magazine in 1942,

who questioned “Miss Page’s ‘social consciousness’” (17). Both agree that her capacity for image-making eclipsed her capacity to generate sympathy for the subjects her portraits depict, suggesting that such sympathy was not this poetry’s primary objective. In reconciling these seemingly distinct themes in her early poems with the sight-related imagery that proliferates across both poles of her oeuvre, John Orange writes that “Page offers a glimpse of what is, at this stage, an intuited alternative” (248) to the conventional “seeing” by which many of her poetic subjects are trapped. Sullivan, too, asserts that “Page seems to have intuited her subject from the beginning” (35), making an examination of her early poems important to tracing this intuition’s formation. This augmented visual capacity Page intuitis is the common denominator of much of her poetry, and she presents it as an escape route from what she has called “the tyranny of subjectivity” (“Questions” 21), enabling her to engage in new ways with her surroundings instead of remaining locked in a pattern of static and passive viewing.

“Prediction Without Crystal” and “Landlady” examine the problems of complacent vision and perspective, while “Element” articulates Page’s concept of the wholeness of vision she desires by way of an elaborate metaphor. The creative space of an alternative method of vision inferred in these poems is approached in the garden of “Spring” and in the dreamscape of “Stories of Snow.” The existence of this space is further implied in “The Permanent Tourists,” culminating in the depiction of a speaker beginning consciously to negotiate the visionary power found in art and in nature from a subjective perspective in “Arras” and “After Rain.” In approaching the problems of perspective and perception in these early poems and interrogating their limits, Page attempts to transcend the rigid “tyranny of subjectivity.” By exploring and manipulating these failings, Page draws attention in her poetic form to the very tension her poetry examines in its content.

Published in the October 1942 issue of *First Statement*, “Prediction without Crystal” is saturated with the vocabulary of chance and the occult: “prediction,” “crystal,” “visions,” “fortune tellers,” “palms,” “electric,” “con-jures,” “gaming,” and “secret cauldron” all connote a mysterious visionary power accorded to another person. Because the speaker’s slightly embittered, condescending tone addresses directly the girls she describes, she is explicit about her position as an observer. “Awkward” (8) and uncertain, these girls look to some external, mysterious and omniscient force to map their life paths.

The speaker mocks frivolous fantasies about fortune tellers finding “marriage written surely” (4) on their palms. When they look with their “sad” (1) eyes into their futures, the only visions they see are “visions / of fortune tellers” (1-2). These visions of someone else’s visions impede their own ability to see, implies the speaker, who sneers at the “dirty cards” (6) of the “gypsied woman” (5). The speaker accuses the girls of “casting caution” (10) into the “secret cauldron” (9) of the mystic, so anxious are they to abdicate responsibility for their future decisions. The alliteration of the hard ‘c’ links the words describing this hopeful transfer of agency. The speaker inserts herself explicitly into the fourth stanza, the centre of the poem, stating flatly, “there is no private world, I tell you truly” (11). What the poem leaves ambiguous, however, is whether the speaker is making a universal statement that there is no “private world” for anyone, or whether this assertion applies only to those girls, giddy and flushed with fantasies, who unwittingly prepare themselves for lives of disappointment.

Instead, the girls’ faith in conjuring and augury only distracts them from their realities. They are relegated to what the speaker calls “the lonely / room of yourselves” (12-13), isolated from community and hope for escape. A “private world” and a “single room for you” (11) denote a privacy achieved by choice and one to which presumably the girls assume the fortune teller will have access in making her predictions, while a “lonely room” implies an absence of such choice; such a state is undesirable. The juxtaposition of “yourselves” with the speaker’s pronoun “I” at the caesura of line 13 sets up a contrast between the speaker and her isolated objects, and in this physical proximity nonetheless maintains an objective distance, perhaps emphasized by the punctuation preceding her “I.” This “I” can “predict your futures” (13) more accurately than the woman whose visionary power she mocks. Their only refuge in a chaotic and frightening public world, she tells the girls, is a retreat “into the room of ‘you’” (21). Here they will “die in mirrors” (19), replicated over and over again in the walls of this interior space, prisoners of their own subjectivities. The alliteration and rhyme of the final line further delineate the grim fate the speaker foresees for the girls she observes. The solipsistic and tyrannical trap of selfhood to which they are confined paradoxically offers them shelter while signifying danger and entrapment, for once they are inside the internal hall of mirrors, the barred doors to their cells and the windows of their eyes, their only mediators to the outside world, “click and close” (20). The blinking shutter (or lids, rather) of the “camera” of these eyes merely “covers lovers” (20), taking su-

perfidious portraits of them which remain blind to any more meaningful human connection. There is no projection of self into another, no dreamy romantic union, merely a photographer's distance and a false intimacy conducted from behind bars. "Submerged in fuzzy dreams of love," Constance Rooke remarks of the women in Page's early portraits, "they fail to exercise their own imaginative faculties; the dim hope of chivalric rescue contributes to their paralysis" ("Chameleon" 178). Their empty and disengaged dreams of lovers, then, keep them static and alone, and they grant to others the visionary power they deny themselves. It is, however, significant to consider why the "camera" of the *speaker's* eyes does not "cover" the girls she scolds in the same way their eyes blithely cover their lovers, their opportunities for human connection. Condemning her poetic subjects to isolation, the speaker fails to present a convincing case for her own escape of the same fate to justify her mockery. If her intention is less to mock than to warn the girls of their inescapable alienation, her situation is just as bleak. Fulfilment is elusive and isolation is elemental, a state from which no amount of linguistic conjuring can extricate her at the same time as it relegates her subjects to endure it. Her "intuited alternative" here is less evident than in other poems. Is Page's ideal of enhanced visionary capacity able to access the "private world" she denies her addressees and to push apart the walls in the "private room" that keep them confined to fruitless introspection with no chance at an emotional union with their surroundings?

First published in May 1944 in *Canadian Forum*, the portrait of the "Landlady" (*Planet* 108-109) is among Page's poetic tributes to the kind of inherent loneliness of the human condition she describes to the young female addressees in "Prediction Without Crystal." The poem employs an impersonal narrator to relate the impersonal traffic of boarders through, quite literally, the lonely rooms of the landlady's house. The air there is "sepia" (1), the dull brown colour of old photographs that covers over the colours of the original scene. Her physical hunger to take something from her tenants into herself is emphasized by the sibilant alliteration in "the craving silence swallowing her speech" (3). She craves silence so that she might better hear what her tenants are doing, "swallowing" her own words in favour of the consumption of theirs.

The vocabulary of photography again describes her "camera eye" (4) recording the activities of her constant influx of boarders. Her blinking "shutters" record selected elements of her tenants' lives into "exact" (5) mental snapshots, sepia-coloured in that their subject matter, these ten-

ants' various comings and goings, is generalized to contain few variations in tone. Her mind is an album for these shots through which she can pore when repelled, "stunned" (8), from any further access into the secrets of their lives. Her tenants react to her behaviour by keeping their actions deliberate, their expressions as blank as "zero" (11), and their phone calls "cryptic" (7). She can never find them "unprepared" (9) without the "walls / about them" (9-10), a state of vulnerability for which she longs, imagining a glimpse of honesty or scandal simmering beneath impassive faces.

The landlady "peers / stippled with curious flesh" (11-12), a description referring to a dotting technique in artwork, used here subtly to reiterate the landlady's status as a product of the poet's artistic creation, though sketched with words and not a paintbrush. The adjective also evokes her goosebumps of anticipation, making her "jump," "dream," and "tremble" (17, 18) to know what her boarders are doing.

The alliteration of the 'p' in line 13 strengthens the comparison of her padding in a steady repetitive beat "on the patient landing like a pulse" (13); like a cat burglar, consistent and noiseless, the landlady steals furtively through the tenants' living areas, rifling through their belongings as if to glean knowledge of their owners by osmosis through the "curious," fleshy membrane of her fingertips.

The poem construes sight as both a camera that locks her tenants into frames to keep them still and a "wire" (14) with which she can unlock their doors and try to unlock their minds. Because of her skill at employing this "wire," she "knows them better than their closest friends" (21), but despite this one-sided intimacy, she "is not content" (28). She, "like a lover, must know all, all, all" (29). This repetition mimics her dissatisfaction with the boundaries by which her knowledge of them is constrained. She wishes to overrun these constraints, wanting above all else to "catch them unprepared at last" (28). Her snapshots are insufficient, merely surface portraits. She obsesses over the thought of invading her tenants' heads, to bore past their expressionless faces until she can "palm the dreadful riddle of their skulls" (29) and experience them beyond the bodily limits of her senses and theirs. She intuits some treasure to be found by penetrating through their eyes, across their final, insurmountable boundaries, and thinks gleefully of the prospect of rooting for truth in the tangled enigma of their minds.

Exemplary of one of Page's frequent early themes, a fundamental

alienation that extends beyond the scope of her idiosyncratic behaviour, the landlady remains static and unchanged, a steady pulse in a world of erratic motion. She hopes to fill her gaping emptiness with her tenants' secrets, desiring a flash of something authentic or even compellingly horrific to break the repetitive monotony of her daily existence and to escape "the room of 'you'" ("Prediction" 21). The prison of selfhood to which she is confined similarly confines her to the role of observer, always at a distance from her objects. This distance is underscored through the poem's narration by an impersonal, objective voice through which the speaker can avoid admitting the same failure in human connection by keeping herself distinct from the landlady's ravenous loneliness.

First published in *Poetry Chicago* in August 1944, "Element" (*As Ten* 32) describes Page's vision of sensory unity via the vehicle of contrasts, illustrating also the poet's mastery of surreal imagery. The poem's sentiment is a "wishful" (9) one that inspires the speaker to align herself with the condition of a fish. "I am frightened held in the light that people make" (3), says the fish-narrator, ensnared by fishing rod and swinging under a light she deems unnatural, for it is in stark contrast with the darkness to which she longs to return. The speaker conveys herself as distinct from these "people," identifying instead with the terrified and dangling fish, whose scales have a "terrible shine" (1) like that of her face as it suffocates out of its watery habitat.

The fish achieves respite once more when at last it swims in the "darkness freed and whole again" (4), able to breathe and to merge with the water. The speaker emphasizes the degrees of human misperceptions regarding the character of this water, which though "ruffled to eye" (6), is "silken" (8) to fish, suggesting that the fish's experience of water consists of a perfection the human eye cannot perceive. "I am not wishful in this dream of immersion" (9) and of wholeness, the speaker clarifies in the opening line of the poem's middle stanza. Plunged into water, the gaping hunger of her wishfulness is satiated with the darkness she craves. The stanza is careful to elide direct references to either fish or speaker, merging them with the unity their underwater experience provides.

Here, in this realm of perfect connection, there are "winters that question nothing" (17), not even the retraction of the sun's warmth, because there are no deficiencies and no questions in wholeness. Similarly, here, "something can cry without discovery" (20). The speaker longs for this enveloping in the blanket of underwater darkness, wanting none of

her cries to be discovered, for such a “discovery,” by its very definition, implies a gulf between the discoverer and the discovered, and is thus evidence of a failure of the direct, unmediated perception she imagines here.

The final stanza refers back to the light of the opening stanza, making apparent that for the fish, “daylight” (21) is in fact construed as the “light that people make.” In contrast with the fish’s world, the light and “treble” (13) of the above-water world are “fake” (13) and jarring. In this light, the shine of the fish with whom the speaker identifies the shine of her face is “single” (21), one-dimensional and hence “terrible” (1), unable to glisten with the myriad-hued gleam of a fish’s slick scales. She sighs, “Ah” (21), in contemplating this contrast, echoing the “Oh” (6) of the second stanza, also composed of three lines, in which she describes, as though she were a fish, the reality of water to unknowing humans. She deploys a similar strategy in the last stanza, for, educated in the characteristics of the two contrasting worlds portrayed, she recognizes something false in the light to which humans are unwittingly accustomed. Though wrenched from its home, the fish of her final simile has a “mouth alive with metal” (23), imbued even out of water – via the hook in its mouth – with the wholeness of the earth’s life-sustaining elements. Like this floundering fish, the speaker’s escape back into the “silken” folds and fulfilment of the water can only be “by dream” (4), though the fish dreams of a past elemental wholeness the fragmented speaker, torn between the reality to which she is confined and another she intuits, can only imagine. “Again and again,” notes Rooke, “Page mourns the collapse of vision” (“Chameleon” 187), and “Element” chronicles just such a collapse, a rupture from a higher level of unity with her world which the poet seems skeptical that human power can achieve.

“Spring” (*As Ten* 23), first published in *Canadian Forum* in July 1945, preceded “Stories of Snow” by one month and likewise advances Page’s intuition of a greater capacity for vision. For the old man in the poem, it is the spring season and not a dream that enables him to achieve the kind of wholeness accomplished underwater across the scaly membrane of fish gills in “Element” and from which the landlady is barred by human and physical walls. Kay Stockholder remarks of the revised version, “Now this Cold Man,” in *Cry Ararat!*, that this type of “merger here seems beneficent, suggestive of renewal. But this sense of renewal is associated with individuals alone with nature” (64). Stockholder’s analysis of the man’s transformation in the garden is incisive, for the union he achieves with nature contrasts

with other poems by Page in which attempts at a similar union among humans are thwarted. His earlier state of frozen stasis melts in the spring sunshine, “and all that he had clutched, held tightly locked / behind the fossil frame / dissolves, flows free” (8-10), and bleeds past his bodily boundaries into his surroundings as *they* likewise infiltrate him across the permeable membrane of his skin. This harmony is accentuated through the enjambment and rhyme of this stanza. His breath is tinted the colour of crocuses, an externalization into nature of the colours already composed in the palette of his lungs. The final stanza depicts the culmination of his union with the garden, as his body becomes the soil that cultivates the growth of greenery sprouting from it. This cultivation is not restricted to the surface of the old man, however, for along with the blossoming of his skull, “something rare and perfect, yet unknown, / stirs like a foetus just behind his eyes” (21-22). This vivid simile articulates Page’s conception of what would fuel a human experience of wholeness, rather than resorting, as in “Element,” to the use of unusual comparisons to convey what she wants to describe. “Like a foetus,” the space has considerable potential for growth and development, a tiny microcosm of life that counters the bleak doubt of such human potential conveyed in “Element.” Though Laura Killian describes the garden space as “characterized by the flux or fluidity of images which I have characterized as ‘feminine’” (94), the man’s experience of it does not bar him from immersion, fish-like himself, in this fluidity.

This intuited area behind the eyes where “something rare” (“Spring” 21) lies in wait of discovery, and to which the landlady wants to project through her tenants, receives additional poetic development in “Stories of Snow” (*Planet* 161), first published in August 1945 in *Poetry Chicago*. The opening stanza tells of a space reserved behind the “sprouting eyes” (2) of those in temperate climates. This space holds “snowstorms circular, complete” (6) as though inside the glass of a souvenir snow globe, then further contained in teakwood cabinets (7). The snow is unreachable, high in this cabinet and enclosed in its globe, just as it is accessible only through imagination and dream in this special area somewhere beyond the normal capacity of the eyes to see. Sullivan notes that the snow globes, by encasing snowstorms and keeping them inaccessible to the senses, represent “the atrophied imagination,” cut off from its natural impulsion to transcend the real and “seek the fantasy, the ideal, impossible other” (37). It is the truth of this “impossibility” that Page probes in this poem.



The poet's ease with images blurs the boundaries of sense perceptions in this poem. White linen in tropical countries is dreamed into Dutch snow drifts, and in this mysterious land of snow, white feathers become frozen "plumes" (22) of breath in air. One image generates the next in rapid succession. Even a dead swan's "plummet" (34) becomes beautiful and the dead swan's down is "deep as a drift" (39), as sensory perception likewise transforms its body into a "warm metamorphosis of snow" (41), having fallen from the sky like snowflakes, an image which runs next into the woodsmen, who likewise "fall at last" (43) and "dream their way to death" (44).

The creative process of telling these "stories" involves a similar energy in fusing together images. This energy brings these dreamers in tropical climes closer to imagining the fantastic possibility of snow they will never see. As with "Element," the dreamscape achieved here augments mundane reality by supplying what it lacks — in this case, the vision of snow — through the vehicle of imagination. The speaker theorizes that it is "as if" (48) each time the stories are told, the distance that separates the "raconteurs" (48) from their object becomes smaller, allowing the storytellers eventually to "unlock / the colour with its complement" (48-49) and grant them imaginative access beyond the boundary delineated by the snow globe's glass. The imaginative space fuelling their storytelling is that "area behind the eyes / where silent unrefractive whiteness lies" (50-51). Like the "foetus" that rested in this space in "Spring," this space of whiteness is unarticulated but intuited, proffering a capacity for heightened vision and sensual merger. Because it is one and many colours at once, white signifies both absence and multiplicity. Page later returns to this idea in describing the "marriages" of arts in her 1970 essay, "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman." She writes, "one must come at length to pure colour. No form at all ... one must finally arrive at pure sound — no words at all" (38). The colours of the tropical landscape, then, are in fact not alien to the seemingly colourless world of winter. Raconteurs expand their imaginations as tropical colour is subsumed by its "complement" white, the key in which all colours are contained. Page suggests that if whiteness contains all the colours, the eyes, our instruments to perceive colour, then, contain behind them a similar multiplicity and creative, generative power, lying "silent" and waiting to be tapped.

Regarding these last two lines, Page has written, "My subconscious evidently knew something about the tyranny of subjectivity ... when it

desired to go ‘through to the area behind the eyes’ (“Questions” 21). This space behind the eyes is likely, then, also somehow beyond the filter of the ‘I’ of subjectivity.

Cameras and the incognizance of any opportunity for enhanced vision and imagination figure prominently in “The Permanent Tourists” (*Planet* 105), first published in *Contemporary Verse* in 1948, as in “Landlady.” The very structure of the poem, as D.M.R. Bentley has noted, underscores the snapshot-like approach the tourists take to travelling. The form of the poem thus makes a visual display of its critique in a series of verbal snapshots rather than their photographic ones, with each stanza presenting the tourists in a different scene, in effect mimicking their own efforts to “Lock themselves into snapshots” (11).

Page’s “almost anonymous” “terrible tourists” have “empty eyes” (4) and look to their surroundings to “fill” (5) them, allowing what they see to fill their vacuous gazes and define otherwise hollow characters. To retain this malleability, they “never enter the entire event” (8), an alliterative summary of the main fault the speaker sees in their “tourism.” They lock themselves into selected frames as a placebo for actual immersion in their environment, far from the fish in “Element.”

The individuality of the local “heroes” they seek is distilled for the tourists into an indistinguishable mass of history — these figures, like the tourists themselves, are all “minus names” (18). The statues of the “plunging war dead” (19) are viewed with similar dispassion, and the singsong quality of line 20 imitates the dismissive and reductive sentiments these bronzed soldiers elicit. Frozen in their statue-prisons, these men are “forever and ever going down to death” (20), enacting in art a sacrifice the tourists never sense in life. Their parasitic gazes and interests stop at the material of these monuments and desire to project no further into their meanings, to “palm” no “riddles,” dreadful or not.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker attempts to make the reader complicit in her objectification, commanding, “Look, you can see them” (21) and pointing at the tourists as they point at the sights. They are “nude” (21) because they are obvious, and as identity-less to the poem’s speaker as the figures in the previous stanza. They drink their tea like their eyes drink in monuments, their meanings doused in milk and sugar. A rhyming couplet emphasizes the poem’s criticism with its alliteration: “Philosophies like ferns bloom from the fable / that travel is broadening at the café table” (24-25). These “philosophies,” nourished with tea instead of wa-

ter, expound the tourists' theories of the benefits of travel, ironically considered most "broadening" from the security of cafés.

The final stanza shifts the critical filter of the poem with the transition "Yet" (26), exemplifying how easily the perception of a scene can change with the perspective of its reporter, who injects a decidedly more sympathetic tone. The change in tone admits that the tourists are "somehow" beautiful as they permanently "stamp" the plaza like the stamps they collect on their passports. The speaker observes them as she would a piece of artwork: they are "Classic in their anxiety" (27). Not knowing how to make connections with what they see, they "call / all the memorials of naked stone / into their passive eyes" (27-29), consuming passively rather than actively experiencing them. The likeness between their "passive eyes" and "placid rivers" (29) is underscored by matching assonance, as they both merely reflect what they see on their surfaces. What the tourists see reaches them only at the threshold of their reflective pools, just as calm rivers call "ruined columns" (30) to their reflective surfaces, creating the illusion of depth beneath what is actually merely a reflection of the original. They have no intuition of any visionary, creative "area" lying beneath the images floating on their glassy retinas or the lenses of their cameras, that area that could provide the creative impetus to make their "passive eyes" active.

The poem's title manages to resonate beyond the surfaces of the images it presents. The tourists are permanently on tour, for they are destined to be permanently elsewhere even inside themselves. There is an element of recursivity to the tourists' relationship to the monuments; they want to re-memorialize them with themselves in photographs. This recursive technique is further enhanced by the detachment of Page's poetic voice, which outlines a paradox — that she requires distance to observe them and to pass her judgements even as she criticizes *their* distance from what they observe. Kay Stockholder argues that despite the speaker's objective stance, "that distance isolates and disembodies her, putting her at risk of merging into a kind of abstract nothingness" (62). Page thus tries to justify her distance by reaching out for validation from the reader, something she does not do in "The Landlady," and this appeal suggests the anxiety that the threat of identification presents to this space. As Bentley aptly notes, "there still exist unbridgeable gaps between and among the things and the beings of the world" (73), gaps Page's speakers and subjects cannot close.

"Arras" (*Planet* 30-31) chronicles its speaker's attempts to analyze and manage the powers of new vision that surge behind her eyes. She seeks a

sensory union through the portal of creativity in artwork, a portal through which the projection of her own creativity complements that of the arras' creator. Rooke's description of the arras is useful to consider in light of the visionary space behind the eyes treated in Page's poetry. She calls it "a world which is always there for us and seldom known" ("Approaching" 65), like the space Page intuits that grows like a "foetus" but is seldom acknowledged. With a "shake" (7) of its tail to open it to its full many-eyed splendour, the peacock enters the still garden scene, a symbol of the escape from the reductive vision of a single perspective. The speaker is likewise absorbed into the world of the arras through a surface which, like that of the eye interrogated in "Spring" and "Stories of Snow," appears at first to be impenetrable but which she discovers is permeable. Here, she too unfurls herself, becoming as multiple and multifaceted as the "shine" for which the speaker longs in "Element," noting, "I am observer, other, Gemini" (11). Peppered with questions, "Arras" conveys the speaker's uncertainty regarding what behaviour is expected of her in the novelty of this transcendent experience. She hesitates as she is dealt "royal" (14) cards, and her fingers slip on their slick patina, unable to push past this barrier and find inside "a hand to clutch" (17). Thwarted human connections are presented as inherent obstacles frustrating her quest for universal vision, and both "those figures" (9) already on the arras and the "monarchs" (15) dealt to her as cards remain remote.

The speaker's confession that "It was my eye" (24) which introduced the peacock to the scene follows an accusatory silence and stillness on the arras which almost impels her to attempt escape. Killian believes that this admission "is to collapse deliberately the distinction ... between the tyrannous subjective eye and objective poetic vision" (99). Indeed, her admission of responsibility over the combined complicity of her "I" and "eye" in the scene conveys a readiness to accept her involvement in it, no longer anxious to distance herself from her poetic creations. One might consider the preceding stillness in the vein of "The Permanent Tourists," where the tourists willingly "lock" (11) themselves into a cycle of passive observation and achieve no communion beyond the marble and bronze of the monuments they observe; though the speaker in "Arras" has been absorbed into her own "monument," her union is still incomplete. She fears being trapped like the tourists in the stasis of their somnolent and consumptive sight, with no opportunity for advancement or escape. Sullivan confirms, "Stasis, solidification, has always described a hell state for Page" (41). To escape this sta-

sis, she must shirk her apprehensions and engage fully with her new environment rather than merely “calling” (“Permanent” 30) to the arras to fulfil her while giving nothing of herself, like the landlady or the tourists, in exchange. She has harnessed the creative potential of the storied space behind her eyes to release the peacock, an action Rooke confirms as “proof of her visionary capacity and of her right to a place in the garden” (“Chameleon” 192), as both participant and creator.

This proof remains unacknowledged, however, as indicated in the speaker’s frustrated cry, “Does no one care?” (31). Recalling her inability to grasp hold of the figures beyond their containers of cards, the speaker hopes instead that they might hold her, dreaming of “the bite of fingers in my flesh” (33), since hers has not hardened into an impermeable coating like theirs. Rooke calls the arras’s original inhabitants representatives of “the poet’s ideal self” (“Approaching” 69), and perhaps they are, for she evidently has achieved only a partial transcendence. She has projected herself and contributed her own creative impulse into an artist’s creation, but the original figures of this creation remain impervious to her presence. Aesthetic transcendence does not overcome the problems of human connection, and she is faced, like the landlady, with the unresponsive expressions of those with whom she wishes to unite. Her frustration does not immobilize her anew, however, for she projects “another line” (37) to penetrate the sphere of their space coupled with “another bird” (38), vowing to continue her attempts to push beyond the boundaries in this new space her presence has changed.

As the last published poem (*Poetry Chicago* 1956) preceding her move to Brazil with her husband in 1957, “After Rain” (*Planet* 180-81) attempts again to close the subject-object distance of other poems in exploring more directly the capacities inherent in the intuited well of visual potential behind the eyes. As in “Arras,” Page’s speaker, having crossed the threshold into a heightened capacity for perception, encounters a challenge in her aestheticization of her surroundings, for she is not alone in the garden like the man in “Spring.” She realizes that her sensory experience must reconcile itself with her social self, a realization that proves problematic for her vision.

Inside a lush garden, the speaker has likewise tapped the resource of the “area behind the eyes,” redecorating the natural ‘dis’order of the garden after rain with artificial, stylized vocabulary. She admits the garden’s

new decoration has originated from “female whimsy” (6). This “woman’s wardrobe of the mind” (5) imposes alternate frames on the scene, so as quickly as it is freed from the “tyranny” of “geometry” (9), the speaker replaces math’s “green ink” (10) with “green lace” (1). Killian’s feminist reading finds in this poem the beginning of “a new wholeness of vision” (100) in which Page “openly claims her poetic vision as *belonging* to a gendered self” (97; original emphasis), rather than, presumably, remaining the objective (and neuter) observer of a male experience in a garden, as in “Spring.” The feminine language functions most overtly, however, to accentuate the poem’s thematic isolation, in this case the speaker’s alienation from the male gardener, rendered more explicit as the poem continues.

Her frank admission in the next stanza, “I suffer shame in all these images” (25), seems a faint echo of the confession in “Arras” and contrasts with the delight conveyed in the poem’s previous descriptions. This stanza is longer than the poem’s two opening and two closing stanzas, and while its preceding stanza figures the speaker traipsing through the garden’s muddied furrows, drunk on a liquor of “chlorophyll” (12), stanza four introduces another character to the scene. Her shame springs from her observation of the gardener’s “doleful” (29) reaction to what he sees as the garden’s “ruin” (28). The speaker recognizes the need to exercise a similar “whim” (34) over Giovanni, for neither her shame nor his regret corresponds with the dynamic of the scene as she has experienced it. She thus does not allow her shame to prevent the continued generation of images by which she seems momentarily embarrassed. It is not as a gardener, with a stake in the ruined vegetables, that the speaker craves Giovanni’s inclusion, but as a “beautiful and diademed” (30) figure, his “Italian hands” not caked with mud, but poetically “wrung with rain” (31). Rooke maintains that this inclusion is not one of aesthetic objectification, believing instead that the speaker permits him entry “as himself” inside her “rim” because “his pain cannot be left out of the account while a talented poet pursues the delights of a private imagistic world” (“Chameleon” 191). It seems, however, that his pain *must* in fact be left out. He is “broken” (33) both by his own dejection and by her disassembling of him for his inclusion in this “female” imaginative realm — as a beautiful object he can join her, but his all too human “ache” (32) must first be excised. This excision of Giovanni’s suffering implies a parallel excision of the speaker’s own capacity for sympathy; she can only “almost weep” (33) for his position. In “Arras,” the speaker makes her own contribution to the creation of another artist and

is ultimately unable to connect with the figures already present; in a similar manner, although this time she is not “other” to the poem’s setting as in “Arras,” the speaker in “After Rain” changes the ordered creation of Giovanni, decorating its post-rain destruction with her “female whimsy,” and is likewise unable to forge a connection with him as the garden’s original creator. She is prevented from the achievement of a complete sensory experience, but like the speaker in “Arras,” does not intend to stop the flow of her creative power.

To further delineate this separation of the two figures in the garden, the “hub” (27) of the speaker’s descriptive realm still has a “rim” (32). As Brian Trehearne notes, “The two obscure images fix for the persona (and for the poem) a centre and a circumference; they create a within and a without; and they divide two people whose mutually disappointed labour in the garden might be uniting them” (44). Giovanni is thus excluded from her “centre” and relegated to the outside bounds of its “circumference.” Just as in “Arras,” the process to complete visionary power remains incomplete. The speaker has gleaned an enhanced power of vision and used it to change the scene, but similarly fails to melt entirely into it, needing to exclude from her version everything whose presence she cannot justify. There are politics here, still, it seems, even as the speaker strives for release from such earthly trappings.

Perhaps as a corrective, the speaker next invokes birds to “choir him” (35), to aid, with their musical accompaniment, Giovanni’s entrance “within this beauty” (36), an entrance she herself cannot enable. She may be seeking absolution for this dismissive treatment of the gardener in using the last of the shorter framing stanzas to beseech the same birds to “choir” (42) her also, recognizing the imbalance of her experience. This plea also allows her to step out of herself, to absolve herself of responsibility for her vision’s failure. She admits to a tendency to be distracted by “each / bright glimpse of beauty striking like a bell” (43-44), and to allowing these involuntary images to obscure her vision of the “whole” (45), which may not “toll” (45) as long as her experience remains unbalanced. Only once this wholeness is achieved can “the myriad images” (47) produce a pure “meaning” (46) that transcends their clutter. Perhaps this idea mirrors in some way the circumstances of some of the individuals in the poems thus far discussed — the “whole” of some kind of universal union or transcendence is similarly unable to “toll” as long as its observers are blocked from it. The speaker’s response to these images in the garden,

then, must also be “whole,” hence her request that her heart be kept “a size / larger than seeing” (42-43), a suggestion that the heart and the eyes must both function at once in the service of this new perceptive power.

Moreover, her distance from her experience remains as long as she is able to describe what she sees in language. If, as a poet, she is compelled to write, to describe the images she is likewise compelled to see, she realizes she cannot transcend this separation. Her seeing, even in this enhanced state, is contingent on the distance she wishes to close. Indeed, her descriptions are all visual, interwoven with tactile comparisons, but her senses are not all engaged in the garden. The speaker is hindered from a full fusion with the scene in which the old man of “Spring” revels or of which the speaker in “Element” dreams. Trehearne sees the poem as evidence of “a final testament from a lapsing verbal creativity” (45) before Page’s impending silence as a poet. He does not, however, discuss the role of language or the failure to transcend distance in speculating as to Page’s reasons for this silence. The thwarted attempts at closeness chronicled in earlier poems, and the attempted transcendence of the distance these poems reproduce even in their structures, might better explain Page’s silence and her replacement of poetry with visual art upon her move to Brazil. To close the space, to describe a whole experience without language, and to reproduce her vision directly from the creative impulse of the eye that loosed a peacock in “Ar-ras,” visual art might have allowed her a purer translation of experience into art.

What makes these poems so intriguing is their almost visceral self-awareness and daring in their confrontations of their own failings; Page’s poems utilize all the tools at their disposal — their form, their images, their language — to encompass and express both the earnest intensity of their poet’s vision and her subtle frustration with its flaws and obstacles. Though the poems sometimes lack resolution, they never lack authenticity. Her speakers struggle with their own complicity in what they observe both as objective, distanced narrators and as creative individuals directly responsible for the images presented in the poems. Even in these subjective, personal poems, Page is unable to close the subject-object distance entirely to achieve the union she desires, to reconcile her image-making capacity, her poetic impulse, with the demands of human sympathy and connection, rendering this wholeness a false but beguiling lure. Indeed, the human alienation resulting from the kinds of limited perception she wishes to surmount remains inescapable even as her speakers progress in their own visionary jour-



neys. Underscoring the frustration of these attempts is Page's increasingly developed and clear articulation of what sort of "intuited alternative" she posits in negotiating the limits of vision and perspective, an inspirational force whose repercussions she must likewise negotiate. John Sutherland's 1947 critique of Page's first volume of poetry remarks that "Finality is difficult for the poet to achieve" (19). This is perhaps because such "finality" escapes even her in these poems, slipping through her fingers even as she seems to have it within her grasp. These issues remain pivotal to a poet as intensely attuned to the power of the visual image and committed to the ultimate truth of the sensory experience as Page is. At this pre-Brazil stage in her poetic process, Page's speakers (and perhaps Page herself) are unable to experience the "total I" (114) she describes in triumph in 1967's "Cry Ararat!" (*Planet* 148-51). To transcend the "tyranny" of one's "eye/I" proves a more difficult task than they imagine.

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