

Editorial: P.K. Page Trust Fund for Mentoring – DC Reid

At the time of P.K. Page's passing early in 2010, in a room filled with family and friends, along with 50 poets, many also friends, it crossed my mind that it would be good to have something tangible to remember her by. Closely thereafter, I asked Marilyn Bowering, who was a closer friend than I, whether a mentoring program in her name would be a good focus for a fundraising purpose to both remember her and to benefit Canadian poets.

Marilyn responded, saying: "Although P.K. is not known to have used the word 'mentorship' when describing her relationship to other poets, it is what she stood for. She supported, advocated for, arranged meetings between, fostered community among and wrote letters for poets she believed in. Often these were younger poets, but not always. She had an eye out for the talented and overlooked and quietly, in the background, offered literary, social and sometimes financial support." (1)

I had just allowed myself to be talked into being president at the League of Canadian Poets, mostly, on my part, so I could create some financial benefits for poets. I decided that the League would be a good place to mount a mentorship program to benefit those starting out and those with many books already published. This conviction started what turned out to be a decade's long journey of raising enough money, and donating just as much, to get the fund to almost \$50,000 in 2020.

The reality is that that amount is the minimum to get a program off the ground. The League's bank, TD, runs a Private Giving Foundation for investments. It pays out 5% of the fund balance every Dec 31st, so, in this case, some \$2500. The danger in down years is that the disbursement dings the fund in two ways: it pays out in deflated dollars; and the balance goes down as well; meaning much work wasted and more required.

The first goal was to raise TD's minimum \$10,000 investment amount. In 2011, several of us donated to start the fund. Her son Neal Irwin and brother Michael Page donated \$1,000 each, while I and Roger Nash donated \$2,000 each. And before the end of the year, I put together a P.K. Page Trust Fund reading in Victoria, as well as published a book of the poems read, and raised an additional \$2,300. Along with this, 8 – 12 readings were allocated to members who donated their fees, and that pushed us over the bar.

Other League members have held readings for raising funds, and, over the years, I realized just how hard fundraising was, the most important aspect being: having different strategies, because once someone has donated to the cause, they will not do so again. Different projects with different objectives were needed constantly.

Now, I want to tell you more about P.K. herself through the decades and how mentorship influenced her art, both poetry and visual, and how she influenced me and others. The words mentor and mentee were not related with poetry until the 1990s but digging into her story makes it clear P.K. was both a mentor and mentee since the late 1930s. And her raw talent at painting is

almost stunning when you look at her Birthday Card for Daddie, painted when she was 4 years old, as in preternaturally talented.

I discussed her story and art with Zailig Pollock, Sandra Djwa, author of the Governor General's award-winning P.K. biography, *Journey with No Maps, A Life of P.K. Page*, and Michele Rackham Hall, author of *The Art of PK Irwin – observer, other, Gemini* and with quotes from them and other books, wrote what follows. I also reread their books and highly recommend them. Each was good enough to write pieces on their areas of special interest, and you will find them within this editorial section. Michele, along with Zailig wrote captions for each tiff. Through these three, what emerged was Page's life and association with many mentors over the many decades.

Now, P.K.'s story: while she was every bit as creative as the rest in her Montreal poetry group, *Preview*, in the 1930s and '40s, and accepted as an equal, she was in the company of men as much as 16 years older than her, and the natural structure for passing on things learned with a longer poetry background – as in mentors. This is the era when F.R. Scott was the lead and he became both a poetry influencer as well as a long-term, deep romance.

Soon after this period, P.K.'s poetry books were being devoured by a generation of new, women, writers. For example, Alice Munro was working at Munro's Book Store, the iconic place to pick up a book in Victoria, when P.K. walked in, and, in conversation, mentioned she was a writer and added her name. Alice went pale and then blushed deeply because P.K. was an icon to her. She thought she might faint. (4, P200)

"What was really important to me was just her existence as a good Canadian writer whom I read in the forties and fifties when Canadian writers were so rare. Her example, the sense that it was possible." (4, P 201)

Munro meant: women were so rare. In due course, Page invited Alice and her husband, Jim, over for an afternoon party in the upscale Uplands. Enscenced on the couch was Jack McClelland, of M&S, making friends with Arthur's scotch, something he was well known to foster.

Well into the malt, Jack warmed to Alice and suggested she write a novel. The following year Page followed up her pushing Alice toward being published by reminding Jack in a letter on her own work, "Have you thought again about Alice Munro to whom you throw out the possibility of a book? I mention it as I admire her very much and think you might find her a good investment." (4, P 201)

This is shrewd mentorship as Jack was also well-known for wanting authors from whom he could make money. Too bad for him being slow. In the period between lunch and letter, Munro had been picked-up by Ryerson.

Other writers were also influenced by P.K.'s guiding hand. Margaret Atwood was also a great admirer of P.K.'s poetry. "P.K.'s importance as poet, cultural figure, and inspiration to many younger poets (including me, way back when) cannot be overestimated." (4, P 213)

Margaret had spent the late '50s in University of Toronto reading Page in her scruffy rooms. She found some of her images “blew the top of my head off.” (4, P 226). This was the late fifties, in an era where women were not so easily inserted into the writing world. Atwood found Page, and the fact that she was a woman was of great importance to her as well: “It was ...like a laying on of hands, a feeling that you could do it because, look, it could be done” (4, P 227)

In fact, for a time, many of the two poets' poems bore resemblance to one another. In one of them, P.K.'s *Element*, her influence is easily seen. The woman protagonist is portrayed as injured, and compared with a fish, on a hook who is 'silently hurt – it's mouth alive with metal.' (4, 227)

In Atwood, this was revealed in the wildly painful, well known image from *Power Politics*:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an empty eye. (5)

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/151653/you-fit-into-me>)

Page went on to mentor many poets over the years. The list included Jay McPherson, who at only 15, wrote astonishingly good poetry. (4, P 112) PK helped her get published, leading to the Governor General's Award in 1957 for *The Boatman*.

The mentorship influence of P.K. extended to a new generation, including Marilyn Bowering, Patricia Young, Michael Ondaatje, and, later, influenced me to write a book of glosas from her lead in *Hologram*. “Her incredibly high standards, [were] coupled with great kindness to younger writers.” (6, Sandra Djwa, Malahat Review)

Husband Arthur Irwin, diplomat, was posted to Brazil in 1957 as Canada's representative. After leaving Australia, Page had come to a complete standstill in her poetry world, mistrusting her senses, and arriving in a bright, wildly imagistic Brazil.

She despaired, and came to write it this way: “how do you write a Chagall? It comes down to that.” (7, P 31) But in her art world, Irwin was energized by the new colours, textures and images of the tropics. She needed a new artistic persona for her art. That is how deep the need was. Luckily, Irwin found Ivan Serpa, a largely self taught abstract expressionist movement artist. And as she admitted: “Brazil pelted me with images.” (7, P 31)

Irwin soon discovered, through Serpa's teaching, etching, oil paint and egg tempura. And at Serpa's suggestion (7, P 43), she embraced her artistic life, rather than written. The tools of the trade, such as papers, paints and implements, she learned from Frank Shaeffer. But she broke with the latter because he had to her mind a too rational, rules-following method, where her mind wanted to charge everywhere and reach the sky. But Irwin was very fond of Serpa and was later to write what he had shown her, in her *Hand Luggage* (8):

... He taught

me the stuff of his world. I took in what I could.
... and led me in ways I'd not ventured before.
“Dream a little”, he said. “Your pen's full of dreams.”
He was right. And I dreamed. And the dreamer awoke.

Hand Luggage ll. 1543–4, 1548–1550:

Arthur was posted to New York in 1959, a year when the old world was relinquishing its hold on the art centre of the world, Paris; and artists were fleeing the broken continent, flooding New York, the new world centre of art. The Solomon R Guggenheim Museum opened that year and solidified New York's reputation. And it was her great fortune to be there and meet some of her important art mentors. (7, Chapter 2)

Among them, Irwin found Mark Tobey and Morris Graves piqued her sense that they were of like minds, and that meant Zen, a conversion before its time. And both were also poets. Their ‘white writing’ influenced Irwin deeply. It was under Charles Seliger's tutelage, however, that she blossomed the most. She enrolled in a weekly, hour long lesson, down the subway half an hour to his house outside the ‘village’. (7, P 65)

Also, years later in *Hand Luggage*, Irwin was to say of Seliger that he ‘offered this pupil a pearl of great price / when he emphasized, water and oil never mix’. (7, P 65). She had finally found a teacher of authentic worth to her. Irwin began painting in oil gouache, then letting it dry. Then she applied the oil glaze that she brushed over with a wet brush before it dried, showing the layers below. It gave her art a luminosity she had sought. And felt that the two ‘saw with one eye’. (7, P 65)

Of Seliger, Irwin said he nurtured her toward ways of doing things rather than ways of seeing. Seliger shared her inclinations to paint both the curvilinear and the biomorphic. (7, P 71)

Arthur was then posted to Mexico where Irwin met her next mentor, Leonora Carrington, at a British embassy party. Although schizophrenic, and as politely commented by Irwin as ‘dotty’ (7, P 71), Leonora passed on some valuable techniques. And she was the first female mentor, which made a great influence and difference.

Their shared gender and age allowed them to talk effectively. And Carrington never acted as critic, a male tendency. Irwin was to say: ‘she opened doors / and I walked through’. (7, P72) And also passed on a long list of artistic techniques, glazes and techniques. Carrington's method of tempura and how to use it lead to a breakthrough for Irwin, ‘it is like working hand in hand with the Holy Ghost’. (7, P 72)

And with similar interests in the mystical, it helped Irwin move on, and toward the Sufism that occupied her religious sense as well as the calm of its geometric art forms, which are evident in Page's *Hologram*, (9, 1994) which introduced the glosa to Canadian poets.

In this *Hologram for P.K. Page Anthology*, you will find numerous examples of amended glosa forms, by many poets, myself included. This was a whole new world from the diplomatic circuit,

to live in Victoria, a much smaller 'metropolitan' world than she had lived, and she was depressed in the early years here.

It was in this era, that Page became the mentor for the generations of Canadian women writers, and which was followed by a wide range of examples, of both genders, as this Anthology clearly demonstrates. Canadian poets picked up from the bright examples of her sharp, silver images. And their stories of her influence are wide and varied. Read this book. It is a coming full circle. The mentee, the mentor, either or, at the same time. She affected us all.

As a young pup, I was lead-off poet for P.K. on several Victoria readings. Her influence led me to write my own glosa, but I inverted the form, making the first line of the stanza, be a line from the four line, P.K. quote I chose from her *Hologram*. I handed it to her as I was about to read, fearing she might not like my changing a form that had survived some 600 years.

Instead, she read the poem, and looked up, exclaiming it was beautiful, "And, Dennis," said in penetrating jubilation, "you've invented a new form." At which point I was able to relax and not fear reading it would bring the opposite reaction – in front of an audience. It is the Lemon Stockings poem in this anthology.

Not long after this, I had her read at the Glenlyon Norfolk School reading series I was running. In introducing P.K., and her bright, patrician bearing, I made the comparison of her with the movie star I thought she most resembled, Audrey Hepburn. With her hands pointing down on either side of her hips, a commanding pose we all had come to know, she lifted her hands to either side of my face and gave me a big kiss on my lips. I was so surprised I fell off the stage. Well, I mentally fell off and climbed back to hand her the mic and stagger off stage.

But she could be brutally honest, too. My second 'upside down' glosa she told me directly to my face that it was not 'successful.' At that point, the poem disappeared from my computer and was never to be seen again, proof that her honesty, while it hurt and killed a poem, was very valuable. I kept the poem only long enough to figure out what was wrong. Compared with what she thought was good lead me down roads that I otherwise would not have travelled.

There is another thing about what she taught, without ever saying it: poems that start from work that the poet likes most, makes the poet rise up and write to that quality. That is mentorship, too. My *Spirit of the Thing and the Thing Itself*, is a book of 40 'amended' glosas. I read Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and decided I would write one more glosa, in my own form, rebelling against that 600 years of convention, with the thought that I might get one more poem. I hadn't known that *Duino Elegies* was much longer than one poem. It was a whole book, and I ended up with 26 quotes, even after sending clouds of them to the ether. Then I looked at P.K.'s *Hologram*. I took a quote from each of the 14 poems.

At which point, I could go no further for a long time, as I had moved from one poem to 40, and a full book. I was brain deep in the difficulty for more than a year. I changed from my style of being associative and elusive to strict formalism, meaning that PK enlarged my oeuvre, a great gift.

One poem is about a cougar. He had ripped saplings in a row down a wild road, beaten them to sticks, then covered them with blood red scent. I passed 25 blood red wet poles, ripped from the ground – such strength – before going down into a dry wash on my way to the Eve River. When I lifted my eyes, there was the male cougar at the far end of the gravel. I cleared my throat, and he began running directly for me. I didn't give it a second's thought and began running directly toward him. As we came together, eyes locked on one another, the cougar slid into the forest and was gone. And, so, I am still alive, when I could have died. A magical, dangerous moment for me, and because felines are naturally sexual and female in movement, the final line that came out of the blue, indelible, was: 'touch me I'm so beautiful,' (10, P 51) a perfect, gorgeous line, that I have PK to thank for, not to mention an entire formalist book, I would otherwise not have written.

References:

1. Marilyn Bowering, personal communication.
2. Birthday Card for Daddie, (Page number in this Anthology, **Richard?**)
3. *Preview Magazine*: <https://arccarleton.wixsite.com/modernpoetry/montreal-quebec>.
4. *Journey With No Maps, A Life of P.K. Page*, Sandra Djwa, (P 100, 112, 201, 213, 226, 227, 112, 100),
5. *Power Politics*, 1971, quote from Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/151653/you-fit-into-me>.
6. *Malahat Review*, Sandra Djwa, 2011: <http://www.malahatreview.ca/pkpage/djwa.html>.
7. *The Art of PK Irwin - observer, other, Gemini*, Michele Rackham Hall, 2016. (P 31, 43, 65, 72)
8. *Hand Luggage*, P.K. Page, 2006.
9. *Hologram*, P.K. Page, 1994
10. *The Spirit of the Thing and the Thing Itself*, DC Reid, 2015. Thanks also to David Godkin who had a hand in turning my mind to formalism.

3,478 Words

A Note to DC:

Feb 07/21: Send us all that hot urge and energy saved up over the ramshackle year of 2020—send us your best. We also warmly encourage poets of all backgrounds, identities and ethnicities to submit. You're welcome here.

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