

Canada's Regal *Embaixatriz*

P.K. Page, *Mexican Journal*. Ed. Margaret Steffler. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 2015. 286 pp.

In his celebrated short essay on Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges makes a compelling case that writers can affect the way we read not only those who follow them but, more importantly, those who preceded them. Building on T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Borges provocatively posits that "each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (243). Along the same lines, it could be argued that a writer's later works (including those published posthumously) can alter the way we read his or her earlier writings. This is certainly true of P.K. Page's recently published *Mexican Journal*, which is bound to demand new interpretations of her autobiographical texts in general and of her Latin American ones in particular, notably *Brazilian Journal*.

Following her marriage to the journalist-turned-diplomat W. Arthur Irwin in 1950, Page accompanied her husband in his official postings, first as the high commissioner to Australia (1953-1956) and then as ambassador to Brazil (1957-1959) and Mexico (1960-1964). One of the fortuitous consequences of her travels is that she wrote journals about all the countries where Irwin served, texts that record both her impressions of those exotic lands and her so-called "poetic silence" for much of that time. The most important of these is indisputably *Brazilian Journal*, which was first published in 1987 and describes the two and a half years Page spent in South America in the late 1950s. Most critics of *Brazilian Journal* have commented that Page focuses largely on a privileged Brazil, the upper-class Brazil where she circulated as Canada's *embaixatriz*, meaning not female ambassador, as the term implies, but the wife of the (male) ambassador—as Page herself points out, the term is a "misnomer," for it was "a Brazilian custom to make us [ambassadorial wives] all *embaixatrizizes!*" (*Brazilian* 31). Yet even Brazilian scholars tend to condone her elitism as being part of her "*prerrogativa*" not to intervene in the affairs of a foreign country (Almeida 112). As Miguel Nenevé underlines, "Page had a diplomatic position and had to be neutral, avoiding any moral outcry or judgment. Besides, any censure of the country observed could also be interpreted as a 'colonizing' view" (166). However, the publication of *Mexican Journal* suggests that Page's patrician detachment in her portrayal of Brazil was not

due solely to her role as an ambassador's wife, or even to the fact that she hailed from a military family, which was necessarily "[a]political" but "pro-war" (*Hand* 19, 20). Rather, it was more likely a reflection of her seemingly anachronistic views on race and class, especially the latter, which warrant a reconsideration of her earlier writings.

Like other posthumous publications, *Mexican Journal* raises a series of issues about both the structure of the book and its authorship. In her introduction, Margaret Steffler notes that Page's manuscript was published "fifty years" after it was written (8), and obviously without the author's approval or supervision. Steffler also states that she "tried to preserve the immediacy of the document of the moment," striving "to be as true as possible to the dynamic nature of the journal as spontaneous life-writing, which is what it is, as opposed to a formal and reworked piece of autobiography" (17). At the same time, she acknowledges that, because of the length restrictions of the print edition, she has excised substantial portions of Page's text, "all of which will be included in the online edition" (18). That is, in some ways, Steffler has become the author of Page's manuscript, by virtue of her power of "selecting and deleting material" (Bailey and Steffler 95). Still, the main reason that *Mexican Journal* elicits so many questions about Page's political and aesthetic outlook is not because of Steffler's editing but because of what Page actually writes.

Mexican Journal, which is a physically beautiful book—handsomely designed and illustrated with some fifty reproductions of paintings and drawings by Page [i.e., P.K. Irwin]—is divided into two volumes. The first volume, by far the longer, details her personal encounter with Mexico between 10 March 1960 and 28 August 1962. The second volume, covering the period between 9 September 1962 and 27 October 1963, deals mainly with her spiritual journey, which culminates in her apparent embrace of an esoteric (non-Islamic) version of Sufism. By the time Page arrives in Mexico, she has "been looking for some kind of a way" for some time (192). As she had done in Brazil, Page continues to delve into Catholic mysticism, specifically the life and writings of the sixteenth-century Spanish saint Teresa of Ávila, whom she considers "a most extraordinary woman" (243). Largely under the influence of the English-born spiritualist Stella Kent, Page also immerses herself in Subud. Initially, she is confident that the Indonesian-inspired spiritual exercises constitute "a very real 'way'" (199) but eventually concludes that "the whole thing (Subud) was a kind of hypnosis—for the purpose of control by various unknowns" (218). Soon after, though, she is introduced to the teachings of the Sufi proselytizer Idries Abutahir Shah, whom she becomes convinced is "a new

prophet, as it were of the Fourth Way” (255), who will synthesize all knowledge of the afterlife. So affected is Page by her discovery of the Afghan-Scottish Shah that she says that she and her close friend, the English-born painter Leonora Carrington, “are agreed that if he is not a real teacher, nothing matters. If he is, nothing matters” (259), the words that close her book.

In the later part of *Mexican Journal*, Page is extremely reserved about her spiritual search. She reveals little about the motivation for such a quest, except when she obliquely discloses that it may mask some hidden carnal desires. She writes that Kent asks her “if it was possible that I was really wanting a love affair rather than God?” (201). Even more telling, Page then adds that, some years earlier, Carrington had told her: “‘your trouble is that what you are looking for *cannot be got respectably*.’ Very acute insight. Certainly the closer I come to understanding what God is, the more I understand why people take refuge in churches!” (204). Page, however, does not expand much on those observations, other than discussing a dream in which she was “living with Arthur but *really* married to a young man” (247), a detail that may be significant given that Irwin was eighteen years her senior.

In contrast, in the opening section of *Mexican Journal*, Page shows no such reticence, perhaps to her detriment. She begins her book by juxtaposing Mexico and Brazil, and makes it explicit that she does not deem her new host home nearly as compelling as her previous one. “One cannot help comparing this with Brazil,” she remarks. “It is nothing like as beautiful at first glance” (25). For Page, it is not just that Mexico is supposedly less cosmopolitan than “sophisticated Brazil” (39), but even its natural light is somehow less brilliant. As she complains within months of her arrival, “I am tired today with the Mexican tiredness—what I shall call the fatigue of the grey sun. I don’t know why this image burns in my head but I feel that the sunlight here *is* grey. It gives one none of the incredible happiness of a Brazilian sun, which was anything but grey” (51). Indeed, little in Mexico appears to capture her imagination, beyond bullfights and markets, the latter of which she visits religiously.

Page shows some grasp of the Mexican—and Canadian—mindset. For instance, she writes that Mexicans “are like us in a way—while disliking aspects of the U.S. they nevertheless want to be like them” (35). While watching the re-enactment of Christ’s Passion in the Mexico City borough of Iztapalapa, where the local people traditionally burn Judas, she observes that often “Judas is made in the form of a *gringo*” (109). But surprisingly for a poet and painter, Page exhibits little enthusiasm about most aesthetic

expressions during her Mexican residence. This includes the work of fellow Canadians, principally Earle Birney. Page explains that Birney was in Mexico on a Canada Council fellowship and that the Embassy held “a large buffet” for him, attended by “some bright people . . . : Carlos Fuentes—Mexico’s Communist novelist, [José] Gorostiza the poet, etc. etc.” (177). Birney gave a lecture on Malcolm Lowry, which she “found fascinating. . . . There was a writer.” But that seems to have been the only thing about the visitor that impressed her. Page asserts that Birney’s “latest book is quite meaningless to me. It shows how much he’s travelled—a poem on a bear in India, a snowflake in Japan, etc. etc. But it is meaningless. Technique and words—nothing else.” Page is not just indifferent to Birney’s poetry; she also does not think too highly of the poet himself, or of his spouse. As she elaborates, “Birney seemed old and white rather like an unsuccessful and disappointed trust company employee. And his wife tactless and drab and probably stupid” (177). Page further remarks that Birney is “living in San Miguel [de Allende] I don’t quite know why and writing” (177). The fact that Page has no idea why Birney might be in the historic Guanajuato town is curious, since it has long been the home of a sizable colony of Canadian (and US) artists, such as Birney’s friends Leonard and Reva Brooks. Moreover, considering that the author of poems like “Cartagenas de Indias, 1962” and “Letter to a Cuzco Priest” is widely considered “one of our imaginative pioneers to Latin America” (Hazelton and Geddes 12), her lack of interest in his work reveals at least as much about her as it does about him.

In any case, Birney is far from being the only artist who is not appreciated by Page. She is equally dismissive of contemporary Mexican painters, including some world-famous muralists. From the outset, Page reveals that she has “become increasingly suspicious about Mexican art having seen so few signs of anything that was any good at all” (48). She is particularly scathing in her assessment of Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, contending that of the early paintings by Rivera that she has seen “nothing [is] good” and the “immense Siqueiros murals . . . are violent and horrible” (42). In fact, Page does not disapprove only of the work by prominent Mexican painters but even of their tastes in decoration. After visiting the Frida Kahlo Museum, which used to be the home that Kahlo shared with Rivera, she expresses her surprise “to see how the house of two artists . . . could in so many respects be so banal” (55). While Mexico may have an ancient culture, it is apparent that Page feels that its contemporary artists do not measure up to her criteria and, for whatever reason, wants people to know about it.

If anything, her observations on race and class are even more problematic than those on contemporary Mexican art and art in general, which supposedly consists of the “great vomits of paint modern man throws about” (92). During a visit to New York City in October 1960, Page makes the following confession:

I never come back to Canada or the U.S. without the overwhelming impression of the barbarians and how helpless the rest of us are, now and forevermore, before them. The lowering of standards of: service, spelling, workmanship; the disregard for and in many cases destruction of beauty; the disregard for manners. All these things bother me acutely, or have on my return from Brazil and Mexico. In those two countries the masses haven't yet control. Politically or sociologically of course I wouldn't want it otherwise for us and heaven knows my voting and my thinking had something to do with our being this way. But what a long time it will take before the masses—will they ever?—learn once again about standards. This depresses me always when I come ‘home’. And the fact that the so-called ‘élite’ has already been corrupted is even more disturbing still. (82-83)

Later, upon mentioning that the Embassy's “servants [are] all at each other's throats again, all threatening to leave and generally telling lies and driving me mad,” she confides that she “would like to live in Mexico with two servants—no more” (191). It seems fair to say that introspection is not Page's forte. Despite her self-image as a socially-conscious world citizen, she envisages herself surrounded by the great unwashed, not least servants who have deluded themselves into believing that their voices should matter, and systematically fail to live up to the expectations of the Brahmin.

Page's dearth of self-knowledge is especially conspicuous in her response to Mexico's Indigenous populace, whom she tends to see through “a ‘noble savage’ complex” (Deshane). In her writings, Page often presents herself as a product of the wilds of “western Canada / Tomahawk country – teepees, coyotes, / cayuses, lariats,” someone who as a youngster “spent many summers camping” with her family on the lands of the Sarcee (Tsuu T'ina) in southern Alberta (*Hand* 9, 26). But one detects little evidence of such influences in *Mexican Journal*. Page opens her manuscript by writing that “[b]lack, black, black is the colour of a Mexican night” and that her “first impressions” of the country are of “blackness and carnations and small brightly dressed Indians—mother, father and the little papooses trailing” behind them (23). Most of the workers at the ambassador's residence, both inside and outside, are Indigenous. Or as Page phrases it, “I feel I have a little tribe of Indians living in my house. Another little tribe is

busy painting it" (25). Betraying the influence of D.H. Lawrence's writings on Mexico, she proclaims that she is "impressed" by all of the country's Indigenous inhabitants and that she believes "they are full of good will." But she immediately clarifies that hers is "a strange reaction because these are a strange people, I know, descendants of a people who made human sacrifices, practised ritual cannibalism and who may, for all of me, do so still" (24). Presumably, it is because of its Indigenous roots that there is something "sinister" about Mexico (116). Or perhaps it is because of the collective psychology of peoples, which determines that some cultures are anthropophagic. Page describes meeting at a party a McGill-educated young Mexican lawyer who tells her that he can understand why foreigners are terrified of Mexico but who maintains that, "in order to come to terms" with his country, "one had to free oneself of one's western concepts." As she listens to the young man, Page has an epiphany, in which "he seemed to make me see a great mystery, as if all the Mexican Indians stood on the sill of a great black womb, illumined suddenly in bright sunlight and understood by me. And I understood them then clearly as an Eurydice people" (94). That is, the reason that Mexicans appear to be so forbidding is that they do not share the Western framework, even if one must rely on Western paradigms to attain such insights.

In conclusion, *Mexican Journal* may not demonstrate why Page is so unenthusiastic about Mexico, but what it does underscore is the need to revisit her earlier Latin American texts, particularly its Brazilian counterpart. As mentioned earlier, Page devotes most of *Brazilian Journal* to the country's upper classes. Yet, throughout her text, she also chronicles her relentless effort to learn Portuguese. No less important, thanks to her growing mastery of the language, she becomes actively involved in the cultural life of Brazil. This is never more evident than in her speech to the Brazilian Academy of Letters in May 1958, an address that she delivered wholly in Portuguese and which included not only two short nature poems but also numerous citations of beloved Brazilian poems. No such transcultural exchange occurs during her Mexican sojourn, however. Page's lack of cultural engagement in Mexico therefore leads one to conclude that her Brazilian experience is not the breakthrough that it has been interpreted to be. Instead of being proof of her intellectual curiosity, her openness to other cultures, it is really an anomaly. Indeed, in light of *Mexican Journal*, one cannot help but suspect that, beyond her many political and cultural affinities with the local elites, the reason Page became so involved with Brazilians during her stay in Rio de Janeiro is that there was not a significant

English-speaking expatriate community as there was in Mexico City while she lived there.

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