

The Brazilian Apotheosis: P.K. Page's Portuguese-Language Poems

By Albert Braz

*"Brazil . . . took away my tongue.
I had no matching vocabulary."*

—P. K. Page

Brazil occupies a privileged place in P.K. Page's literary and mental evolution. Page (1916-2010) lived for two and a half years in the South American country in the late 1950s as the wife of the Canadian ambassador, the journalist and editor turned diplomat W. Arthur Irwin. Those years, which she spent mostly in Rio de Janeiro, then the capital, were transformative to the point that she felt she had developed a Brazilian personality. However, they were also traumatic, purportedly leading her to stop writing poetry. Thus it is ironic that during this poetically barren period in English that Page would write two (actually three) poems in Portuguese, a language that she had just begun to study. Her short nature poems were included in a speech that Page delivered in Portuguese to the Brazilian Academy of Letters (Academia Brasileira de Letras) in May 1958. As I will argue in this essay, like the speech itself, the poems reveal not only the depth of Page's determination to learn Portuguese but also her considerable involvement with Brazilian culture, especially poetry. In the process, they also underscore the uniqueness of her cultural engagement in Brazil; it certainly has no parallel during her subsequent stay in Mexico.

By the time Page arrived in Brazil in January 1957, she was an established poet. She was the author of two collections of poetry, the second of which, *The Metal and the Flower*, had been "well received wherever it was that books *were* received in those days" and was bestowed the 1954 Governor-General's Award for poetry (Page, "Writer's Life" 13); under the pseudonym Judith Cape, she had also published a novel, *The Sun and the Moon*. To Page, though, her literary reputation must have seemed of little consequence in the tropics. In her *Brazilian Journal*, first published in "a substantially edited version" in 1987 (Bailey 8)—about three decades after the events it documents—Page confesses that she finds "it hard now to remember why Brazil fell on my heart with so heavy a thud" (2). Part of her explanation is that, after Irwin had served as high commissioner to

Australia for three years, both of them had been hoping for “a European post.” Just as important was her realization that the Brazilian assignment entailed that they live in another language. This posed a major challenge for Page, since she was keenly aware that she “had never properly mastered French” during the years she lived in Montréal in the 1940s (2). In fact, her struggles with Portuguese would come to define her Brazilian sojourn, an experience that she captures with acuity. In her “attempt to translate the country for her Canadian audience” (Nenevé 160), Page is prone to making “sweeping generalizations” about the relation between language and culture (Braz 45). At the same time, she can be quite perceptive in her analysis of the crippling impact of being unable to function in a language, which she notes not only results in frequent miscommunication with others but also leads to self-infantilization, as one is reduced to “a kind of baby talk” (Page, *Brazilian* 26).

Page has often affirmed that her exposure to the Brazilian landscape and culture, particularly the Portuguese language, had a paralyzing effect on her poetically. Convinced that “[n]o English vocabulary worked for Brazil” (*Hand* 59), she turned to another aesthetic medium, painting. As she writes in the passage that serves as the epigraph to this essay, “Brazil . . . took away my tongue. I had no matching vocabulary. It was painful for me to be unable to write, but by some alchemy the pen that had written, began to draw” (“Writer’s Life” 14; see also *Brazilian* 75). Page goes as far as to assert that the prospect she “feared most of all had happened at last. This time I never *would* write again” (“Questions” 36). Her claims about her inability to write need some qualification, however. Page herself elucidates that by “writer’s block,” she does not mean a total cessation of writing. “Actually, I *was* writing—almost daily—but because it was not poetry, it didn’t feel like writing” (“Writer’s Life” 15). Besides, there is evidence that she never completely stopped writing poetry in English. Scholars such as Sandra Djwa, Zailig Pollock, and Margaret Steffler maintain that Page has overdramatized her “poetic ‘silence’” in Brazil (Steffler 38; Pollock, *Conversation*), as “she did find words for a number of short poems, mostly unfinished” (Djwa 163). Moreover, Brian Trehearne has shown that Page’s poetic production had slowed down considerably prior to her moving to Brazil, suggesting that her writing “crisis” was not precipitated solely by her cultural and linguistic alienation in South America (99). That being said, there is no disputing the fact that Page’s primary means of artistic expression in Brazil was not poetry but painting, and to a lesser degree drawing, which makes her writing poems in Portuguese even more exceptional.

In her verse memoir *Hand Luggage*, which she wrote near the end of her life, Page recounts her speech to the Brazilian Academy and she does not camouflage her enormous satisfaction with her performance during what she considers an honour not only to herself but also to her “Pátria” (Discurso 1):

And talking of speeches—when asked to address
the Brazilian Academy, based on the French,
a room of grey-bearded professional men—
I addressed them in Portuguese (written and read!)
with quotes from their poets, and brought down the house.
An astonishing act, nine parts terror, one—text.

(*Hand* 69)

If she needed more evidence of her triumph, she finds it in “Arthur’s face when I singled it out in the crowd,” which “was as bright as the sun in mid-summer. He shone” (69). After all, Irwin was not just a husband, duty-bound to support his spouse, but a gifted journalist and editor. Prior to joining the diplomatic service, which led him to champion Canada’s need to accept that its “physical presence in the hemisphere is an immutable fact” and that its “historical experience is that of an American nation” (Irwin 293), he had “made an impressive contribution” to *Maclean’s* magazine, not least by recruiting a posse of “bright young” writers, such as Pierre Berton, Robert Fulford, Peter Gzowski, Christina McCall, and W.O. Mitchell (Chalmers 210, 211). Or as Page encapsulates his achievement, “With him at the helm, / ‘colonial rag’ became ‘national mag’” (*Hand* 85). Thus she had ample reason to value his judgment.

Still, it must be noted that Page’s legendary Brazilian address did not materialize by accident. Page gave her talk along with two other women writers with diplomatic connections: the historian Courtney Letts de Espil, the Chicago-born wife of the Argentinian ambassador, and the novelist Stella Zillianus, the wife of the British ambassador. While they were all invited by the Academy’s president, Austregésilo de Athayde, the decision was not based solely on literary or scholarly merit. This was surely true of Page, who, with her husband, had entered the highest social and intellectual circles in Brazil. As Djwa points out in her biography of Page, “The Irwin’s [sic] made quite a coup when they became friends” with such establishment figures as the “president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters . . . , the most important newspaper owner in Brazil,” and the “president of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio” (166). Tellingly, in *Brazilian Journal*, the response that Page says gives her confidence to speak during her

speech is not that of Irwin but of Athayde, who “smiled so lovingly” every time she glanced at him that “it gave me heart” (151). Page leaves little doubt that “The Three Graces” had been selected primarily because of the positions held by their husbands (150). She states that one of the reasons she left the writing of her lecture until the last minute was that she “had not been able to take any of it very seriously. I felt that, had we not been wives of ambassadors, this would never have happened—and, of course, it wouldn’t have” (148). Even more than the transparent nepotism behind the invitation, and her feeling that she was a writer who was “no longer writing,” Page was profoundly troubled by the fact that “no Brazilian woman writers had been so received” (149). In truth, she had been concerned about the lack of female representation in the Academy almost from the moment she landed in Brazil. In her journal entry for 1 August 1957, Page describes a dinner that she and Irwin attend at the home of “a famous Brazilian judge who has the largest private library I have ever seen—like the stacks at McGill” (66). Among the eminent guests is “an ageing and distinguished judge who is a member of the Brazilian Academy.” This leads Page to quip that the Brazilian literary temple was “modelled exactly on the French Academy and no women allowed!” (67). Needless to say, she cannot help but be ambivalent about being associated with such an institution, especially considering its ingrained sexism.

In light of Page’s limited knowledge of both the Portuguese language and Brazilian culture, it is not surprising that the composition of her talk—including the poems—was somewhat unorthodox. Page relates that she was having difficulties writing the text until, “due, I can only think, to the direct assistance of the Holy Ghost, I wrote two small nature poems in Portuguese and then the whole speech began to move—an account of the places we have visited in Brazil, as described by their poets” (*Brazilian* 149). But it is apparent that she must have benefited from more than divine succor. She acknowledges that with the assistance of Irwin’s “editorial skills and a translator who was able to provide me with Portuguese words I could pronounce, I finally had something that was usable: my discovery of their Brazil” (149). It seems fair to deduce that the Brazilian translator must have played a more substantial authorial role than merely serving as the vehicle for transferring Page’s English text into Portuguese.

Letts de Espil was the first of the three speakers to address the academicians, during what was an “appallingly hot [day], the sun pouring through windows closed against the noises of traffic” (*Brazilian* 150). Page writes that, like herself, Letts de Espil spoke in Portuguese, but was “pretty jumpy about it. She began calmly enough and read a rather long speech,

most of which I couldn't understand. I was interested to hear her accent, which was markedly Spanish—and why not? Although American, she is married to a Spanish-speaking husband” (150). Zilliacus would speak third and do so “prettily, in English, but made the mistake, I think, of being too general in her remarks” (151). The session's undisputed success, however, was reportedly the Canadian writer. Page states that despite being naturally nervous, she managed to get “a laugh in the first paragraph, which assured me they could hear me and understand my accent.” Her “climax,” in particular, “worked like a charm” (151). This was a strategic citation of a well-known line by the beloved Brazilian romantic poet Gonçalves Dias, an episode to which I will return.

Page, in fact, opens her address with a gutsy allusion to the Academy's gender policy, as we can see in the English version of her talk. Upon thanking her illustrious hosts for the distinction they have conferred on her and her country, she underlines that she is “immensely proud to be received by the immortals here in the Petit Trianon...yet humble to appear before you—mortal, a woman” (Speech 1). That is, she and the members of the Academy not only belong to different genders but to altogether distinct species—mortals and immortals. Page then briefly traces the history of the Academy, starting with the opening address by its first president, the fabled nineteenth-century novelist Machado de Assis. She informs her auditors that she had intended to express her gratitude for their tribute by writing “a speech of homage to your poets,” listing a series of them by name, such as Gregório de Matos, Castro Alves, Jorge de Lima, Cecília Meireles, Manuel Bandejas, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. But since there are so many Brazilian poets, “too numerous to even mention” (Speech 1), she decided to do something shorter but much more difficult, to try to write some poems in their own language.

The first poem, entitled “Pássaro Gigante,” or “Gigantic Bird,” gives an indication of Page's aims. Like the rest of her speech, it has an English version interwoven between the lines of the manuscript, which I reproduce after the Portuguese text:

Durante a noite o vento arrancou
Uma folha seca de palmeira –
Uma pena enorme de pássaro.
Eu acho que a pré-história voltou.

During the night the wind pulled out
An old [A dry] leaf from the palm tree.
With this enormous feather of a bird

I think pre-historic times have returned.
(Discurso 3)

Page immediately follows that with another poem, “Teia de ouro,” or “The Golden Spider-web,” which once more is accompanied by an English version:

Há mosca que tem
Tanto gosto.
Só teias de ouro
a atraem.

Aranha que faz
aquela teia
velhaca é, e feia
e voraz.

There is a fly which has
So much taste
That only gold spider webs
attract it.

The spider that makes
those golden webs
is evil and ugly
and voracious.

(Discurso 3)

She then concludes her speech with a paragraph in which, after saying that she has “seen much more...than palm trees and spiders [sic] webs” during her travels with Irwin around Brazil (Discurso 3), she quotes key passages from the writings of several prominent Brazilian poets. The pivotal one, as noted earlier, is the last, which is the closing line of Gonçalves Dias’s 1851 Indianist narrative poem *I-Juca-Pirama*. The line is spoken by an old Indigenous man who, when challenged about the truth of the stories he tells young people regarding the pre-Columbian past, responds: “Meninos, eu vi,” which Page renders as, “Little boys, I have seen it” (Discurso 4; Gonçalves Dias, *I-Juca-Pirama* 392), and which I would translate as: “Little boys [or, children], I saw it myself.” Given that Page is addressing not only a group of men, but largely older if not elderly men, the line gains even more resonance.

Page writes that the response to the three speeches was extremely positive, attracting extensive coverage in the national media. She notes that the president of Brazil, Juscelino Kubitschek, “complained he hadn’t been invited” and that she was showered with “flowers and phone call and telegrams” as if it had been her “birthday” (*Brazilian* 151). Yet Page appears to have had mixed feelings about the impact of the event, especially concerning women’s participation in the Academy. She had envisaged that the talks by three prominent foreign female authors might be a catalyst for change, “the thin edge of the wedge” (*Brazilian* 149). But this was not meant to be. As she lamented to her close Canadian friend Jean Fraser, “I had fondly hoped that it might be [Athayde’s] way of getting women accepted by the Academy—to start with us, but when I tackled him on it his attitude was ‘heaven forbid’” (qtd. in Djwa 170; bracket in the text). Whatever else the experience may have taught her, it was that, for the members of the Academy, “women writers are not as respected as politicians’ [or, more precisely, diplomats’] wives” (Nenevé 166). Indeed, perhaps Page comes to regret her response as she entered the building, when she had been “delighted” to discover that the academicians were “all light-hearted as schoolboys on a holiday” and that “they really were *meninos*” (*Brazilian* 149). It seems that one of the ways in which they are *meninos* is by insisting that a national academy remain an all-boys club.

Of course, the most notable aspect of Page’s address to the Brazilian Academy of Letters is that it is in Portuguese, not least its poetic component. In the preamble, Page apologizes that her poems are “no more than brief observations” about a landscape and wildlife that are new to her (Speech 1). Yet, while the poems are semantically and syntactically simple, they are not devoid of interest. “Pássaro Gigante” certainly captures the poet’s encounter with a variety of nature that is not familiar to her and thus that she cannot adequately describe or classify. For Page, a dry leaf from a palm tree does not evoke a natural part of flora but a mammoth bird feather, as if she has entered pre-historical times. This sense of strangeness is equally evident in the type of fly she describes in “Teia de ouro,” which possesses such taste that it is only attracted to golden spider webs. However, these exceptional webs are made by a spider that is not only insatiable but also “evil and ugly,” suggesting that the South American nature the poet is discovering is both marvelous and, possibly, dangerous. The degree to which Page must have detected promise in the two poems is reflected in the fact that she later returned to both of them, reworking “Pássaro Gigante” as “Anachronism” (*Hidden* II, 69) and “Teia de Ouro” as “Fly: On Webs” (*Hidden* I, 178; see also Pollock’s footnote to Page, *Filled* 36).

Page actually wrote one other nature poem in Portuguese. An earlier draft of her address to the Academy included a one-stanza poem entitled “Jardim Botanico [Botânico],” or “Botanical Gardens.” Although Page excised it from her final text, it is worth inserting here to convey the range of her writings in the language:

Olho as palmeiras imperiais—
 Alameda dorica [dórica] de marmore [mármore]—
 Como o elefante é para os outros animais
 Assim são elas para as arvores [árvores].
 (Esboço 2)

I gaze at the imperial palm trees—
 Doric avenue of marble—
 As the elephant is to other animals
 So are they to other trees.
 (My translation)

Again, Page appears to be trying to come to terms with the tropical nature she has encountered, a flora that, for her, is exemplified by the ubiquitous palm tree. Her seeing the palm not simply as majestic or regal, but as “imperial,” perhaps also reveals the extent to which even the simple portrayal of a tree can hint at an author’s political frame of mind.

No less significant than Page writing her poems in Portuguese, though, is her engagement with Brazilian literature, specifically poetry. When Page addressed the Academy, she had been in Brazil for just over a year and was still struggling with Portuguese—as she did for the duration of her stay in the country. **Her uneven command of the language is discernible in another of her transcultural interventions. Toward the end of 1958, Page translated Emily Dickinson’s poem that begins with “I never saw a Moor” for her Portuguese teacher, reproducing both texts in *Brazilian Journal*, “for the record” (179):**

I never saw a Moor,
 I never saw the Sea;
 Yet know I how the Heather looks,
 And what a Wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
 Nor visited in Heaven;
 Yet certain am I of the Spot

As if the Chart were given.
(179)

Nunca vi um matagal
E nunca vi o mar;
Com tudo, conheço a urze,
A onda—como fôr.

Não falei eu com Deus,
Nem visitei o Céu;
Com tudo sei aonde é
Como se fosse meu.
(180)

Page states that she has taken “liberties” with Dickinson’s English text (179), which varies noticeably from the version included in the New England bard’s *Complete Poems*, both in punctuation and wording (Dickinson 480). But it is clear that not all the transformations in her translation are intentional, as is conspicuously evident when she renders “Yet,” not as *Contudo* but as “*Com tudo*,” or with everything.

Still, despite her imperfect Portuguese, Page reveals a considerable awareness of Brazilian poetry, notably in the last paragraph of her speech. She opens the section by saying that she and Irwin have seen much of Brazil. Besides the landscape and wildlife, she writes, she remembers “Itabira—‘noventa por cento de ferro nas calçadas’” (Discurso 3; Drummond de Andrade 66), or “ninety percent of iron in the streets” (Lacey 144). This is a reference to Drummond de Andrade’s “Confidência do Itabirano,” or “Confidences of an Itabirano,” a celebrated poem about growing up in a soulless Brazilian town, Itabira—incidentally, this is a text that has also captured the imagination of at least two other Canadian poets, R.A.D. Ford (33) and Edward Lacey (144-45). Before closing the paragraph (and the speech) with the allusion to Gonçalves Dias’s *I-Juca-Pirama*, Page cites nine more poems by Brazilian poets. Among them is Oswald de Andrade’s “Ocaso,” or “Sunset/The End,” the last section of his long poem “*Roteiro das Minas*,” or *The Minas Gerais Guide Book*. There she demonstrates that she is familiar not only with Andrade’s work but also with its subject, Aleijadinho, or The Little Cripple, the colonial-Brazil sculptor and architect whose iconic soapstone sculptures of the Twelve Prophets at Congonhas do Campo, Minas Gerais, “monumentalizam” the landscape (Discurso 3; Andrade 140).

To be sure, there are indications that Page's knowledge of Brazilian poetry remains limited. For instance, she prefaces "Jardim Botanico" with a reference to Cruz e Sousa's line "Assim ao Poeta a Natureza fala" (Esboço 2), or "Thus does Nature speak to the Poet," from his poem "Supremo Verbo," or "The Supreme Word" (530; my translation). Cruz e Sousa is often considered "the greatest of all nineteenth-century Brazilian poets, and far and away the greatest poet of African descent to appear in the Americas before the twentieth century" (Haberly 105). But Page seems unaware that he is also the founder of Brazilian Symbolism and that he is not really speaking about nature. Similarly, nearly two years after highlighting how the "meninos" line by Gonçalves Dias contributed to the success of her address to the Brazilian Academy, Page describes a visit to the northeastern city of São Luís, Maranhão, in which she notices that both the new library and the old law school are located on the "Praça Gonçalves Dias, named after an early romantic poet" (*Brazilian* 227). It is as if she has forgotten that she has already discussed how she used the poet so strategically. Interestingly, upon mentioning the Gonçalves Dias Square, she writes "*Minha terra tem palmeiras / Onde canta a Sabiá*" (227; Gonçalves Dias 105). The couplet, which means "My land has palm trees/ Where the song thrush [*sabiá*] sings" (my translation), is the opening of Gonçalves Dias's "Canção do exílio," or "Exile Song," one of the most famous (and nationalistic) poems in Brazilian literature, extolling the uniqueness of both Brazilian fauna and flora. Yet Page neither identifies nor translates the poem, as if she assumes her readers would be familiar with it.

There is one more reason why Page's engagement with Brazilian poetry is noteworthy and that is that it is not duplicated during her subsequent Mexican residence, another "watershed period[]" in her life and career (Bailey and Steffler 83). After he finished his term in Brazil, Irwin served as the ambassador to Mexico, where he and Page lived between 1960 and 1964. Page's initial response to Mexico is not positive, invariably judging it wanting in comparison to Brazil. She finds Mexico City painfully grey and bemoans the fact that it is "nothing like as beautiful at first glance" as Rio de Janeiro. It lacks "the sea" and "because it is dry it has not the lushness of a tropical city" (*Mexican* 25). Even more disheartening, Mexico is dark. As Page memorably opens her *Mexican Journal*, which was only published after her death, "Black, black, black is the colour of a Mexican night" (23). Or as she writes in *Hand Luggage*, "if Brazil was the day / then night followed next. The dark night of the soul" (81). Furthermore, as the last quote suggests, for Page, it is not just the Mexican night that is permeated with darkness; everything in the country is gloomy, including its cul-

ture. Even a young Mexican lawyer that she meets at a party, “a charming boy” who had studied with F.R. Scott at McGill and “knew him well and admired and liked him immensely,” tells her that he understands how people “could be frightened” of his homeland (*Mexican* 94). Page definitely is, asserting that there is something “sinister in Mexico” and that it “enters your heart.” But she then adds that when it does, it is “within you and so can never be examined objectively” (116), which could be interpreted either as a critique of the limitations of rational thinking or as a rationalization of her decision not to identify what is supposed to be such a pivotal national trait.

Page’s coolness toward Mexico, to put it mildly, perhaps explains why during her stay in the country her closest friendships are with expatriates, notably the British-born surrealist painter Leonora Carrington and the spiritualist Stella Kent. Instead of immersing herself in the local contemporary art scene, as she had done in Brazil, she focuses more on the spiritual. Such is her interest in churches and in the mysticism of Saint Teresa of Ávila that, at one point, Irwin tells her that she “will be a Catholic yet” (212; see also 243). This would have been quite a conversion considering that, before moving to Latin America, Page had characterized Catholicism as being “very alien to me” (Page and Heenan 104); however, she soon experiences an epiphany in which she discerns that not only is she not Catholic, but she is not even a Christian. “After all my life thinking I was an unreligious Christian,” she testifies, “I now think I am a religious non-Christian” (*Mexican* 162). This is an insight that she has upon her discovery of a philosophical form of Sufism popular among English-speaking artists and intellectuals in Mexico City, a Sufism without Islam (see Pollock, “Introduction” 15).

While it is evident that Page’s Mexican journey is largely spiritual, what is not so clear is if her religious quest is triggered only by celestial matters or if it is also the result of a disillusionment with art itself, particularly Mexican art. Many Canadian painters have been fascinated by Mexican art, whose “democratic qualities” afforded them “freedom from the status quo” and served as a salutary counterweight to the hegemonic European art (Boyanoski 1). But one senses no such enthusiasm in Page. Almost from the moment she arrives in the country, she declares that she is becoming increasingly “suspicious of the great art movement in Mexico,” since she has “seen so few signs of anything that was any good at all” (*Mexican* 42, 48). She dismisses the early work of Diego Rivera that she sees at Mexico City’s Palacio de Bellas Artes as “nothing good” and David Siqueiros’s murals from the mid-1940s as “violent and horrible” (42). Even when Page

deems a mural by Siqueiros a “tremendously vigorous and exciting piece of work,” she immediately qualifies her judgment. She describes Siqueiros as someone “who, when he is not painting at Government expense is attempting to overthrow the Government” (36), implying that he is both overrated and a hypocrite.

Page is not only critical of politically engaged representational artists. She can be equally contemptuous of abstract ones, branding a sub-group of the then popular neo-Aztec art movement as people who “do non-objective paintings and who are bound together by the clumsiness and ugliness of their work” (129). She is also not always satisfied to merely express her antipathy toward certain kinds of art; she seems to want to see them eviscerated. “Saw some utterly terrible art shows last night,” she writes. “Really terrible. We need a bonfire” (166). Her dismissiveness is not restricted to painting. Upon watching the 1962 Italian film *Mondo cane*, or *A Dog’s World*, a semi-documentary about peculiar rituals around the world, Page states that she feels that she will never “be quite the same again. If there is food for the soul there is also poison, and this was poison” (234). This suggests that she does not believe that artists should have the right to poison humanity, even if it is only aesthetically.

Page’s main critique of Mexican artists is that they allegedly have betrayed their art for political reasons. For instance, she contends that Rivera was “a superb draughtsman” and, “had he lived in a different age he might have been a great artist.” But because of the time in which Rivera lived, “he served another function—he helped bring his people to a consciousness of themselves, at the expense of his own talent” (55). Yet it is also apparent that Page loathes much of the art being produced in her own time, what she terms the “great vomits of paint modern man throws about” (92). Her response to reading Joseph Conrad’s 1911 novel *Under Western Eyes*, in 1961, which she confesses has her “engrossed..., but totally engrossed up to the point of sleep” (104), is worth reproducing at length:

It’s curious how in literature I would settle for the non-contemporary in prose, the contemporary in poetry; in music the non-contemporary; in painting—and here I have more trouble, but my un-considered opinion is—the contemporary. However the whole thing is crazy. I think of contemporary as modern—and of course it isn’t.... All of which leads me to think I’m writing gibberish and would do well to stop. Actually what it boils down to is that I have rejected the contemporary in all the arts, and chosen different periods of non-contemporary. A sign of age no doubt...or, maturity? *Quien sabe?* (104-5)

Perhaps as befits someone who is “compulsively drawn by the primitive” (187), she appears to reject not only the art of her time, but her time.

Page’s lack of cultural involvement in Mexico makes her engagement in Brazil even more striking, a contrast that may reveal as much about the two countries as it does about her. My sense is that the reason Page was culturally at home in “sophisticated Brazil” (*Mexican* 39) in a way she was not in Mexico is that Brazil has more affinities with Canada than does Mexico, at least when it comes to the elites. While the land of Carnival has long prided itself on its racial diversity, the reality is that its cultural and political elites have always been overwhelmingly white—just like their upper North American counterparts. Page herself pointedly notes that, after having been in the country for over six months, she has “never met a Negro [guest] at a party” (*Brazilian* 76), quietly challenging Brazil’s myth of being a racial democracy. No less important, Brazil’s cultural relations are also heavily oriented toward Europe, especially France, which is “a constant theme in Brazilian criticism” (Carvalho 401). Again like Canada and the United States, Brazil has always been in conversation with the so-called Old World. That is, in many ways, Page and the elites with whom she associated in Brazil had a common culture, which, despite the language barriers, made it possible for them to understand each other. This is not quite the case with Mexico, the one country in the Americas that has not deemed its European and Indigenous inheritances “incompatible” and has strived to synthesize them (Wright 158)—as manifest in its Indigenous face, a phenomenon to which Page often alludes.

In a short essay on translation at the turn of the millennium, Margaret Atwood states that she “know[s] many Canadians with several personalities, one for each of their languages” (155). The implication is that people who speak different languages develop distinct selves and see the world differently. If this is the case, then the question that raises itself is whether Page comes to perceive the world differently when she writes in Portuguese than when she does in English. Page herself would seem to subscribe to Atwood’s version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. She has affirmed that her “first foreign language” precipitated significant “personality changes” in her, famously asking: “Who am I, then, that language can so change me? What is personality, identity?” (“Questions” 36). Yet the poems that Page wrote in Portuguese do not really support this position, being extremely close both formally and ideologically to her work in English.

Excluding their subject matter—notably the customary palm trees—Page’s Brazilian poems reflect the “impersonal artistic mode” that marks so much of her English-language poetry (Roy 61). Moreover, there is much

evidence that Page's cultivation of a disinterested stance is due less to her position as an *embaixatriz*, who must avoid the social in order not to risk injuring local sensibilities, than the direct result of her problematic views on race and class. Throughout *Mexican Journal*, Page frequently comments on the Indigenous presence in the country. She finds Indigenous Mexicans "very impressive," while noting that they are "strange people, I know, descendants of a people who made human sacrifices, practised ritual cannibalism and who may, for all of me, do still" (24). The matter of their character is probably not insignificant, given that she feels she has "a little tribe of Indians living in my house. Another little tribe is busy painting it—its chief is a brother of Diego Rivera, I am sure!" (25). Even more telling in terms of class, she confides that she believes there is a direct link between the expansion of workers' rights in Canada and the United States and what she considers the "lowering of standards" and "the disregard for manners," in contrast to countries like Brazil and Mexico, where "the masses haven't yet control" (83). She is convinced that "the barbarians" are taking over and it always depresses her when she "come[s] 'home'" and starts to ponder "what a long time it will take before the masses—will they ever?—learn once again about standards" (82, 83). The reason that Page is so troubled by such developments is that, philosophically, she is all in favour of worker rights, being a self-described unwavering supporter of the "underdog" (*Hand* 20). Or to phrase it differently, she is someone who embraces a species of socialism or social democracy that allows for voiceless servants and carefree but worldly aristocrats. No wonder that she escapes into either aestheticism or spiritualism in her poetry. After all, one does not have to be part of the diplomatic corps to realize that it is much less complicated to ruminate on palm trees and spider webs than on class stratification and social injustice, particularly when the latter are likely the result of cultural and political conquest.

Notes

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Zailig Pollock, P.K. Page's literary executor, who not only authorized me to cite Page's speech to the Brazilian Academy of Letters but also kindly shared with me various versions of the document.

Works Cited

- Andrade, Oswald de. "Ocaso." 1925. *Obras completas VII: Poesias reunidas*. 4th ed. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1974. 140-41.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Translation: Three Small Entries." *Literary Imagination* 1.1 (1999): 154-55.
- Bailey, Suzanne. Introduction. *Brazilian Journal*, by P.K. Page. Ed. Suzanne Bailey and Christopher Doody. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 2011. 7-20.
- Bailey, Suzanne, and Margaret Steffler. "Editing Brazil and Mexico: Light and Shadow, Strands and Gaps in P.K. Page's Mid-life Writing." *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 75 (2014): 83-101.
- Boyanoski, Christine. *The Artists' Mecca: Canadian Art and Mexico*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992.
- Braz, Albert. "The Missing Continent: Canadian Literature and Inter-American Identity." *Global Realignments and the Canadian Nation in the Third Millennium*. Ed. Karin Ikas. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010. 45-54.
- Carvalho, Tania Franco, "Cultures and Contexts." 2001. Trans. Delia Ungureanu. *World Literature in Theory*. Ed. David Damrosch. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. 398-404.
- Chalmers, Floyd S. *Both Sides of the Street: One Man's Life in Business and the Arts in Canada*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1983.
- Cruz e Sousa, João da. "Supremo verbo." 1905. *Obra completa, volume I: Poesia*. Ed. Lauro Junkes. Jaraguá do Sul, SC, Brazil: Avenida, 2008. 530. Web. fcc.sc.gov.br/cruzesousa/cruzesousa_voll_poesia.pdf. 14 March 2016.
- Dickinson, Emily. "I never saw a Moor." Ca. 1865. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown, 1961. 480.
- Djwa, Sandra. *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2012.
- Drummond de Andrade, Carlos. "Confidência do Itabirano." *Antologia poética*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2005. 66.
- Ford, R.A.D. "Confidences of an Itabirano" [*From the Portuguese of Carlos Drummond de Andrade*]. *A Window on the North*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1956. 33.
- Gonçalves Dias, Antônio. *Poesia e prosa completas*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1998.
- Haberly, David T. *Three Sad Races: Racial Identity and National Consciousness in Brazilian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Irwin, W. Arthur. "Should Canada Join the Organization of American States?" *Queen's Quarterly* 72.2 (1965): 289-303.
- Lacey, Edward A. "The Lindsayite." *Collected Poems and [Poetic] Translations*. Ed. Fraser Sutherland. Toronto: Colombo, 2000. 144-45.
- Nenevé, Miguel. "Translating Back P.K. Page's Work: Some Comments on the Translation of *Brazilian Journal* into Portuguese." *Interfaces Brasil/ Canadá* 1.3 (2003): 159-69.
- Page, P.K. *Brazilian Journal*. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1987.
- . Discurso perante a Academia Brasileira de Letras, May 1958. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page Fonds, Box 17, File 14. 4 pp.
- . Esboço do discurso perante a Academia Brasileira de Letras. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page Fonds, Box 17, File 14. 3 pp.

- . *The Filled Pen: Selected Non-fiction*. Ed. Zailig Pollock. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007.
- . *Hand Luggage: A Memoir in Verse*. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 2006.
- . *The Hidden Room: Collected Poems*. 2 vols. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 1997.
- . *Mexican Journal*. Ed. Margaret Steffler. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 2015.
- . "Questions and Images." Page, *Filled Pen* 35-42.
- . Speech to the Brazilian Academy of Letters, May 1958. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page Fonds, Box 17, File 14. 3 pp.
- . "A Writer's Life." Page, *Filled Pen* 3-22.
- Page, P.K., and Michael Heenan, "Souvenirs of Some: P.K. Page Responding to Questionnaire." *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 10 (1982): 100-05.
- Pollok, Zailig. Conversation with the author. 25 Jan. 2016.
- . Introduction. *Kaleidoscope: Selected Poems of P.K. Page*. Ed. Zailig Pollock. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 2010. 7-18.
- Roy, Wendy. "Visual Arts and the Political World in P.K. Page's *Brazilian Journal*." *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 75 (2014): 61-82.
- Steffler, Margaret. "P.K. Page's 'Religious' Homecoming: Writing Out of the Mexican Night." *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 67 (2010): 38-56.
- Trehearne, Brian. *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999.
- Wright, Ronald. *Stolen Continents: The 'New World' through Indian Eyes since 1492*. Toronto: Viking, 1992.