

POETIC EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE IN P.K.PAGE'S "BRAZILIAN FAZENDA"

EXPERIÊNCIA POÉTICA E CONHECIMENTO CULTURAL EM "BRAZILIAN FAZENDA" DE P.K.PAGE

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ABSTRACT: Starting from Northrop Frye's statement that "it is not a nation but an environment that makes an impact on poets, and poetry can deal only with the imaginative aspect of that environment", this paper² investigates the impact that the specific environment of a Brazilian farm has made on P.K.Page, as revealed in her poem "Brazilian Fazenda". In the description of her surroundings from an unusual perspective, she not only highlights the imagistic precision of her visual perception but simultaneously foregrounds her poetic sensibility, as she transforms the referential aspects of the *fazenda* into an intense poetic and cultural experience.

KEY-WORDS: Canadian poetry. P.K.Page. Brazilian culture.

The aim of this article is to investigate the impact that the experience of visiting a Brazilian coffee farm made on P. K. Page, as revealed in her poem "Brazilian Fazenda". Drawing on Northrop

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Frye's theoretical postulations in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, I discuss how Page describes her surroundings from an unusual perspective, caught as she is between two cultures, as well as between a real and an imaginary world. Both the imagistic precision of her visual perception and her poetic sensibility are highlighted as she transforms the referential aspects of the *fazenda* into an intense poetic, cultural and metaphysical experience. My response to the poem reflects the delight I feel as a Brazilian on reading it, as well as the assurance I have gained from Frye's critical views regarding poetic experience and cultural knowledge.

In his "Preface to An Uncollected Anthology", Frye presents certain critical principles which he considers essential for dealing with Canadian poetry:

The first of these principles is the fact that the cultivated Canadian has the same kind of interest in Canadian poetry that he has in Canadian history or politics. Whatever its merits, it is the poetry of his own country, and it gives him an understanding of that country which nothing else can give him.

He also claims that "the qualities in Canadian poetry which help to make Canada more imaginatively articulate for the Canadian reader are genuine literary values, whether they coincide with other literary values or not." (FRYE, 1971, p.163).

Both statements are already significant for an understanding of the Canadian reader's stance *vis-à-vis* the poetry of his or her own country, and could thus serve as a means of comparison with the attitude adopted in other cultures. They also help us to keep in mind that literariness¹ is the essential quality in the literary production of any country.

However, it is actually the following assertion by Frye that will be the starting point for my own argument: "It is not a nation but an environment that makes an impact on poets, and poetry can deal

only with the imaginative aspect of that environment.” (FRYE, 1971, p.164). This provides me with the key to a better insight not only into Canadian poetry, but also into the poems that P. K. Page has written about her experience in Brazil. These poems make the landscape of my own environment suddenly become more meaningful, “more imaginatively articulate”, seen as it is not through the eyes of my own countrymen, but through the eyes of a cultivated Canadian poet.

P.K. Page was already a well-known writer when she arrived in Brazil in 1957 with her husband, William Arthur Irwin, the newly-appointed Canadian ambassador. Besides poems in several Canadian poetry magazines, she had also published a novel, *The Sun and the Moon* (1944) and two books of poems, *As Ten, as Twenty* and *The Metal and the Flower*, which won the Governor General’s Award for poetry. As critical comments emphasize, the poems in *As Ten as Twenty* (1946) showed Page’s “strong awareness of English poetic trends in the 1930s” and her sharing “the psychoanalytic preoccupations of contemporary English poets”, while the poems in *The Metal and the Flower* (1954) reflect “in their sharply visual presentations of concrete situations (...) the cinematographic perceptions” she had acquired while working as a scriptwriter for the National Film Board (TOYE, 1983, 630-31). From 1942 onwards Page also became associated with the Preview group in Montreal, where she met F.R.Scott, A.J.M.Smith and others who had introduced the aesthetics of modernism into Canadian letters (ORANGE, 1987, p. 9).

The fact that Page studied art and learned to speak Portuguese during the time she lived in Rio de Janeiro² already suggests how fascinated and intrigued she must have been with her new environment. As she said in a 1975 interview, “Well, I think Brazil gave me a whole dimension or emphasized a dimension that I had, I don’t know how to explain it, but I honestly felt in a kind of way that my consciousness was altered.” (KEELER, *apud* ORANGE, 1987, p.4). Yet even though Page’s “consciousness was altered” by

the Brazilian environment, the impact of this new landscape on her poetic sensibility would only be transformed into verse many years later, as during the time she lived away from Canada (from 1953 to 1964, when W. A. Irwin served as Canadian ambassador in Australia, Brazil, and Mexico) she wrote comparatively little poetry. She concentrated instead on paintings and intricate drawings, which show how her various arts reflect one another, evoking as they do both poetic and aesthetic images (TOYE, 1983, p. 631).

This background, plus the fact that the traditions out of which Page's poetry grows are the French Symbolist movement, Surrealism, and the modernists – she herself lists Lorca, Rilke, Auden, Eliot and Stevens, among others, as having influenced her (ORANGE, 1987, p. 8) – makes it even more of a challenge to evaluate a poem such as “Brazilian Fazenda” (PAGE, 1997, p. 123), in which the historical, religious and cultural elements of the external landscape become transmuted and reappear as a lyrical vision. It is this challenge that underlies my reading of Page's poem, as she moves back and forth from a visual portrayal of the external landscape to a conceptual rendering of the experience.

The title “Brazilian Fazenda” immediately arouses a dual feeling in Brazilian readers: firstly, a sense of a *déjà vu*, due to the familiarity which the image of a Brazilian *fazenda* conveys to us Brazilians, as it is part of our historical and cultural background³. On the other hand, the title also creates in us a sense of expectancy, of curiosity as to how a foreigner would be affected by this strange new environment. This dual feeling is reinforced by the alliteration (LEECH, 1969, p. 92)⁴ and consonance in “Fazenda” and “Brazilian”, which seem to draw the words together both in sound and meaning (JAKOBSON, 1971, p. 371), despite their belonging to different languages and cultures.

This combination of two different words/worlds will also characterize the poet's ‘suspended’ position in the poem, as Page, caught between two cultures, is not only viewing one country with the eyes of another. She is also divided between a real,

representational world and an imaginary one, between referential and emotive language, as her literal or scenic rendering of the farm merges with the visionary experience which this visit to a *fazenda* has produced in her. In reply to my request as to whether she could recontextualize the specific experience that led to the poem, Page wrote the following to me on June 29, 2001:

The specific experience that gave rise to the poem was in 1957 although I didn't write the poem until many years later. In my Brazilian Journal, pp. 43-45, I describe our visit to a fazenda in São Paulo owned by the Meireles family. It was old, elegant and very beautiful. (...) It was the first fazenda I had ever seen and its beauty made the day special for me.

This double distancing in time and place (the poem was published in 1967 and “written about that time”) recalls Wordsworth’s poetic principle that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” (WORDSWORTH, 1973, p. 608), and stresses even further the extent to which this experience must have affected her, and how the beauty of this *fazenda* made that day “special” for her.

Although “Brazilian Fazenda” is composed of 23 lines of irregular length grouped in seven strophes, this graphological irregularity, so characteristic of free verse, is deceptive. A closer examination of the poem reveals that every strophe encapsulates one complete scene or event and that the prosodic pattern of each strophe is further bound not only by enjambment but also by subtle sound parallelisms, discussed below. These enhance the semantic relationships among the images impregnating each scene, and highlight the intricate texture that underlies Page’s verbal art.

At the same time, the sentences in the first six strophes, in which the persona gives us a scenic yet surrealistic rendering of the farm, are made up of coordinate clauses of equal rank, which give the images a cumulative effect. On the other hand, the complex sentence in the last strophe, in which the clauses are bound by subordination,

will reveal the effects of the “extraordinary” experience that this visit to a Brazilian plantation has caused in the persona: her plea to return on an ordinary day, in order to look at the *fazenda* with literal eyes.

This syntactic organization is reinforced by the way the semantic units of the first six strophes (lines 1-17) are dominated by the adverbial phrase “that day” with which the poem begins, and by the use of the past tense in which the persona narrates the events. By contrast, the seventh strophe (lines 18-23) is controlled by the adverbial phrase “on a day”, and the persona addresses herself in the present tense. In this manner, a sophisticated, multi-layered linguistic structure emerges which will transform the apparent randomness of the referential details caught by a foreigner’s eye into a coherent yet complex whole as well as an intense poetic and cultural experience.

As we enter this Brazilian *fazenda*, we are immediately drawn into the past, with the connotations of distance in time and memory evoked by “that day”:

That day all the slaves were freed
Their manacles, anklets
Left on the window ledge to rust in the moist air

And all the coffee ripened
Like beads on a bush or balls of fire
as merry as Christmas

and the cows all calved and the calves all lived
such a moo.

At the same time the deictic “that” draws us into a definite day in the past, already understood by the persona, as she visualizes “that day” on which “all the slaves were freed”, reminding us of the actual day on which slavery was abolished in Brazil by the *Lei Áurea*, May 13, 1888. A further link between the day and the event is established by the assonance in day/slaves, while “freed” is given

visual prominence and thus further highlighted by being placed at the end of a line.

Freed from slavery and thus from their symbolic chains, the slaves have their handcuffs metaphorized into ornaments, the juxtaposition of the images in “manacles, anklets” leading to their superposition not only in meaning and form (both are plural nouns) but also in sound and graphology, as “anklets” is partially contained in “manacles”. Significantly foregrounded in line 2, and referred to in Page’s *Brazilian Journal* as she describes her visit to the first of these “two early nineteenth-century *fazendas*” – “Off the hall, a room full of trophies and slave relics, and off that, the slaves’ room.” (PAGE, 1997, p.43) – these “slave relics” consequently become the concrete signs of the abolition of slavery not only on this *fazenda* but, by extension, in the whole country.

The fact that the relics were “left on the window ledge”, either forgotten or abandoned, “to rust in the moist air”, to be corroded and spoiled by nature itself, is highlighted by the alliteration in left/ledge, manacles/moist and the consonance in rust/moist. Furthermore, by leading us to visualize the window as a gateway to air, light and vision, the image also emphasizes the unnaturalness and cruelty of the institution of slavery. The word “air” is strategically placed at the end of the first triplet and introduced phonologically by “their”. As the first element, the first essential need of human life, air is symbolic not only of space as the medium for movement and the emergence of life processes but also of freedom as dematerialization (VRIES, 1974, p. 7). It thus reminds us of the newly acquired freedom of the slaves and of the removal of their material emblems of bondage.

As a consequence, “moist air” or “moisture”, suggesting a state of indetermination between the formal and informal, as well as being the source of fertility, will destroy what is unnatural and simultaneously prepare the way for the renewal of nature that takes place in the next two strophes. This transition is also prefigured phonologically in the alliteration rust/ripened:

and all the coffee ripened
like beads on a bush or balls of fire
as merry as Christmas

Paralleling the juxtaposition of manacles/anklets, emblematic of the abolition of slavery, the syntactic connection between the first and second triplets effected by “and” establishes several links between the date of the liberation of the slaves and the time of the ripening of coffee on the *fazenda*. First of all, it brings out a seminal aspect of Brazilian history and culture by reminding us of how 19th century coffee plantations, especially in the states of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and São Paulo relied on slave labor. This makes the time link established between the liberation of the slaves and the ripening of the coffee even more significant, by stressing the deep and contradictory connections that exist between bondage and liberty, man and nature.

Vegetation can be said to have two main emblematic implications: in relation to its annual cycle, it is symbolic of death and resurrection as it follows the pattern of winter and spring, while its abundance links it to fertility and fecundity (CIRLOT, 1971, p. 359). Coffee naturally shares these implications, which can be extended if we remember that beans are not just a form of food but also symbolize energy, resurrection and reincarnation (VRIES, 1974, p. 37; CHEVALIER & GHEERBRANDT, 1974, p.314), while seeds are associated with fertility, growth, and human nature (VRIES, 1974, p.409); CIRLOT, 1971, p.282). The date consequently acquires an even broader dimension by linking a historical event to a natural one. The renewal and fertility of vegetation stresses the fundamental unity of life, a metaphor that continues to be developed to the end of the poem, as vegetation, like man, is born from the earth, and an incessant circuit runs through the lower and higher levels of life (CHEVALIER & GHEERBRANT, 1974, p 363). The combination of the two events thereby becomes a metaphor for the “fundamental unity of life”, as the ripening of the coffee not

only coincides with the date of the liberation of the slaves, but, like the anklets, becomes emblematic of their freedom.

This superposition is further enriched by the simile “like beads on a bush or balls of fire” through the structural and conceptual analogies established between the tenor and vehicles of the comparison (LEECH, 1969, p.151).⁵ By way of their similarity with beads and balls of fire, these red coffee beans are visualized as bright ornaments hanging on the green bushes, making the work of resemblance – their roundness, color and ripened splendor – become a “pictorial or iconic moment” (RICOEUR, 1979, p.143). If we compare these lines to Page’s description of the coffee plantation ten years before, we become aware again of how the poet’s and painter’s eye has kept the vivid colors and light of her experience: “After luncheon we saw the coffee plantation. Bright, shiny green bushes with scarlet berries – birds in a bush, beads of fire. As far as the eye could see, coffee bushes stippled the lovely, undulating land.” (PAGE,1997, p. 44).⁶ The comparison also brings out the way the poem moves both from description to perception and from the presentation of imagery to the use to which it is put, as “the poetic image is an instrument of the poetic language.” (SHKLOVSKY, 1990, p. 3).

At the same time, the conceptual analogies foregrounded in “beads”, connoting not just decoration but also prayer (VRIES, 1974, p. 37), and “balls of fire” – “ball” being symbolic of the earth, perfection, eternity, the circle (VRIES, 1974, p. 33; CIRLOT, 1971, p. 46-7), and “fire” of the essence of life, sun, fertility (VRIES, 1974, p. 187-88) as well as of transformation and regeneration (CIRLOT, 1971, p. 105) – emphasize the “fundamental unity of life” symbolized by vegetation, adding a festive, joyous, religious element.

We cannot detach the particular use of the image of the beads, as an explicit comparison with the coffee beans, from its symbolic associations with prayer, not only because in a largely Catholic country such as Brazil the word “beads” would immediately be associated with the beads of a rosary, but also because these symbolic

associations are reinforced by the simile “as merry as Christmas”. The images of the fertile coffee bushes adorned with red beads and shining in the sun merge with the associations in folklore of the sun shining through the trees at Christmas as a symbol of fruitfulness, while the Christmas tree symbolizes enduring life, fertility and resurrection (VRIES, 1974, p. 97-98; CIRLOT, 1971, p. 346-8). Christmas becomes intertwined with the symbolism of vegetation expressing this fundamental unity of life, further highlighted by its association with celebration and spiritual renewal. One could even say that the negative imagery of roundness prefigured in manacles/anklets is now transformed into a positive imagery of coffee beans/beads/balls of fire, making the joy of Christmastide also become an objective correlative for the joy of the freed slaves.

Various sound parallelisms, such as the alliteration in beads/balls/bush, the partial alliteration in coffee/Christmas, the assonance in ripened/fire, and the syntactic and phonological structure “as merry/ as -mas”, serve as an undercurrent to enhance the stressing of “Christ-” as the most important word in the line. All these visual and semantic associations will be transposed into the third strophe, again suggesting the way plants and animals bring forth new fruit and offspring, when nature is ripe:

and the cows all calved and the calves all lived
such a moo.

The scene as depicted in Page’s *Journal* shows clearly how she has selected an image and remodeled it in such a way that it fits into this atmosphere of release, joy and fruitfulness established in the first two strophes: “In the dairy we visited the calves, which sucked your fingers as if they were udders when you put your hand out to stroke them, and saw the elaborate forecasting, month by month, of the number of calves to be born” (p. 44). Nature continues its fertility cycle as we move from man to vegetation and to animals. The image of the cows giving birth projects the cows’ symbolic associations

with earth and fertility (VRIES, 1974, p. 114; CIRLOT, 1971, p. 69), while the image of the young calves adds a touch of innocence and tenderness to the picture, with the humorous, onomatopoeic “moo”.

The alliteration in cows/calved/calves, reverberating backwards to include coffee/cows/calves, draws the images of vegetation and animals even closer together in sound and meaning, as we visualize the sheer number projected by the repetition of “all the cows/ all the calves”. Moreover, the structural parallelisms in the first three strophes (all the slaves were freed/and the cows all calved/and all the coffee ripened/and the calves all lived) reinforce the connections already established at the three levels of linguistic description: realization, form and semantics (LEECH, 1969, p. 37). The structural and conceptual analogies overlap, giving the four statements a kind of semantic equivalence. The strophes thus become a single metaphor for the “fundamental unity of life”.

Still within the sphere of “that day”, which initiates the poem, the following three strophes (lines 9-17) present another angle of the *fazenda*, as we move from an external landscape to the veranda of the colonial house:

On the wide veranda where birds in cages
sang among the bell flowers
I in a bridal hammock
white and tasseled
whistled

Page describes the scene thus in her *Journal*: “on a deep veranda, dark from creepers with pink bells, were birds in cages and a white tasseled bridal hammock.” (1997, p.43). In contrast with the freedom of the extensive fields of the coffee plantation, she presents a series of images of containment or partial containment. The wide veranda is typical of a Brazilian *fazenda*, with its open space along the sides of the house and the roof supported at the front by pillars, and has connotations of shelter and security but also contact with the outside world/landscape. Cages, like the manacles,

are emblematic of cruelty and imprisonment (VRIES 75). As such they highlight still further the positive symbolic associations of the birds with air, wind, sun, divine essence, immortality and creation (VRIES, 1974, p. 47; CIRLOT, 1971, p. 28), and of their song with the winds, fertility and enticement (Vries, 1974, p. 431), by negating them, emphasizing the birds' lack of freedom. The showy pink bell flowers indirectly recall the symbolism of the birds' song through the associations of "flower" with beauty, joy, transitoriness and the soul (VRIES, 1974, p.194-95; CIRLOT, 1971, p.109-110). They thus remind us of the connotations of the "bell" itself – worship, joy, freedom, fertility, the creative power of sound (VRIES, 1974, p.44; CIRLOT, 1971, p. 24) – while at the same time their shape, like the cage, suggests containment.

As if all these images of containment are turned on herself, we finally visualize the persona's "I" precisely in the middle of the poem, encapsulated by the sentences above and below, enwrapped and suspended "in a bridal hammock". "White and tasseled", it is not only adorned with bell-shaped tufts, but is also, in its bridal whiteness and beauty, symbolic of purity, illumination, intuition and the unconscious (VRIES, 1974, p. 499; CHEVALIER & GHEERBRANDT, 1974, p. 206). This typical Brazilian artifact projects first of all the persona's literal suspension between air and ground, but by involving her in a state of illumination and intuition it also suggests her state of suspension between two worlds, as mentioned above: between a historical past and her present moment, between her liberty and the confinement of the slaves and birds. Suspension, as unfulfilled longing or tense expectation, will thus propitiate the merging of reality and surrealism in the next strophe.

While our senses have already been stimulated as we moved through the three initial strophes, sight, sound, scent and touch also pervade this network of intricate visual parallelisms of containment. Veranda/ cage/ bell flower/ tassel/ hammock are all bound by subtle sound parallelisms, while the appearance of the persona's "I" is phonologically preceded and then followed by its

asymmetrical assonance with wide/bridal/white. The sequence of nasals and liquids in sang/among/bell reflects the sonority of the birds' song, with a slight reechoing of "among" in "hammock", while other effects such as alliteration or partial alliteration in bird/bell/bride, consonance in sang/among, and assonance in tasseled/hammock further contribute to the drawing together of sound and meaning. In addition, the graphological similarities in "wide veranda" justify Page's change of the original "deep veranda" in the *Journal* to "wide".

We arrive now at the only action the persona performs in the poem: to whistle. On a first reading, the whistling only seems to imply that the persona, by imitating the birds' singing, is trying in an inconsequential way to pass the time. However, the alliterative effects and visual similarity between white/whistled, plus the rhyme tasseled/whistled and the assonance in I/bridal/white, once more foreground the intimate relationship between sound and sense, between whistling and being suspended. The paradigmatic and syntagmatic equivalence of the two clauses "birds in cages sang among the bell flowers/ I in a bridal hammock, white and tasselled, whistled" suggests a symbolic connotation of whistling, as a general magic act or archaic device for attracting the theriomorphic deities (VRIES, 1974, p.499; CIRLOT, 1971, p.372). This reinforces the sense of the persona being suspended between a real and a surreal world, leading to the merging of these two worlds. In whistling she has performed a magical act, for the external landscape reappears to her as vision in the next strophe:

and bits fell out of the sky near Nossa Senhora
who had walked all the way in bare feet from Bahia.

Blue is the color associated with the immensity of upper space and depth, and thus with freedom, spirituality and eternity (VRIES, 1974, p.54; CIRLOT, 1971, p.53). The bits of sky not only fall "near Nossa Senhora" but are emblematic of her very colors, blue and

white (FERGUSON, 1972, p.151). They thus establish an intimate connection between this vision of Our Lady, surrounded by the blue sky and wrapped in a sky-blue mantle, and the way she is portrayed in images and paintings in Catholic churches. This is probably how Page saw her when she visited the chapel in the *fazenda*, “with a beautiful Nossa Senhora” (1997, p.45). The vision brings out clearly the surrealists’ unification of exterior reality with interior reality, in which the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the high and the low, the communicable and the incommunicable cease to be perceived as contradictory (PREMINGER, 1974, p.821). It is then further amplified in the next line as the persona, with almost metaphysical knowledge, imagines the coming of this image to the *fazenda*.

The distancing in time and space, which sets another frame around Page’s actual visit to the *fazenda* and the writing of the poem, serves to make this vision pregnant with religious, cultural and historical connotations. The past perfect already places the action at a time before “that day”, the day the slaves were liberated, while “in bare feet” symbolizes humility and willing servitude because the foot touches the dust of the earth (VRIES, 1974, p.197-98). It brings to mind both the image of Nossa Senhora barefoot and the bare feet of the slaves. “From Bahia”, besides bringing to mind the long journey on foot to be traveled to reach the *fazenda*, evokes its fascinating history. Bahia was where the Portuguese made their first landfall in Brazil, where the first mass was celebrated, the first capital of Brazil and also the richest captaincy or province in the first half of the 18th century, thanks partly to its being a center for the slave trade.

As Page confirms in her letter

Looking at the poem today I think, in reference to the slaves, I was trying to incorporate a small piece of Brazilian history. We had not been to Bahia at the time we visited the *fazenda* [1957], so from the vantage point of '67 [when Page wrote the poem] I was trying to make

the fazenda a vehicle for other elements of Brazil that impressed or moved me.

While a preliminary reading of this line might make it seem like a continuation of the persona's visionary/surrealistic experience, as she conjures up the picture of Nossa Senhora coming to the *fazenda* back in the days of slavery, we cannot ignore the fact that an image of Our Lady could literally have been carried from Bahia by barefoot slaves on a litter with poles, as is still customary in religious street processions. The line also brings to mind religious pilgrimages in which people walk barefoot, even on their knees, to obtain or pay for a certain grace. Moreover, the literal and the figurative use of walking "in bare feet" is not just a question of transferred meaning, a concreative metaphor (LEECH, 1974, p.158) attributing physical existence to the image of Nossa Senhora. Walking "in bare feet" actually merges the image of Nossa Senhora walking barefoot with that of the slaves, as if by walking barefoot she is identifying with them and showing her sympathy towards them, or walking towards them, on "that special day" of their liberation.

This line, foregrounded by being the longest in the poem and thus iconic of "walked all the way", is further interlocked by phonological parallelisms such as the alliteration in bits/bare/Bahia and Nossa/Senhora, the assonance in I/sky, bits/lit, feet/Bahia, and the alliteration and assonance in "walked all the way", "all" also being visually contained in "walked". At the same time, the assonance in bits/lit provides a transition between this strophe and the next:

and the chapel was lit by a child's
fistful of marigolds on the red velvet altar
thrown like a golden ball.

Still subordinate to "that day", the magic atmosphere of the previous strophe continues in the next, and again has its origin in excerpts from Page's *Journal*:

The second fazenda, smaller than the first, was equally old. ...

The main room downstairs was shaped like a dumbbell.... Flowers, in a child's small bunches, without leaves (...) pushed tightly into mug-shaped vases, were perfectly placed by a painterly eye.(...)

After the semen , 'the chapel, with a beautiful Nossa Senhora, and on the altar, as in the house, the same child's tight fistful of flowers – marigolds this time, against the red velvet backcloth. (1997, p. 44-45).

From the openness of the external landscape in the last strophe we move back to an image of containment, that of the chapel that envelops visitors in its religious atmosphere. The chapel on a Brazilian *fazenda* may be a separate building or part of the main one, and is usually dedicated to the Virgin Mary. As marigolds open from daybreak to noon, then stay closed till night, the “child's fistful of marigolds” that lights the chapel can be seen as emblematic of the sun (VRIES, 1974, p. 313), while their golden color associates them with spiritual illumination and pure light, the heavenly element in which God dwells. (FERGUSON, 1972, p.42).

At the same time, “the fistful of marigolds” takes us back to the image of Nossa Senhora, since in Christian symbolism this flower is also an attribute of the Virgin Mary (VRIES, 1974, p.313), while the color gold symbolizes the color of her hair (VRIES, 1974, p. 220). For this reason, other connotations of the marigold such as constancy, mercy, devotion and piety become virtues which are associated with the Mother of Christ. The marigold also partakes of the general symbolism of the flower, regeneration, thereby linking back with the atmosphere of renewal in nature stressed in strophes II and III, on “that day” on which the slaves were freed.

The fact that the fistful of marigolds has been left on the altar by a child brings out the association of children with purity, spring, fertility and unity in nature, so that the image shares that same atmosphere of renewal in nature. The child's symbolism as mediator and bringer of healing (VRIES, 1974, p.96) can also

suggest renewed faith in the future of mankind. It also reinforces the symbolism of the marigolds as regeneration, and hence the fundamental unity of life.

This religious atmosphere attains its greatest significance in the image of the altar, emblematic in Christian Art of the presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist (FERGUSON, 1972, p.161), as well as of devotion, sacrifice and faith. Its significance is enhanced by being covered with red velvet, for the color red, apart from its associations with light, resurrection, gold, love and fire (VRIES, 1974, p.382-83), is used during the Church's season of Pentecost. "That day" is thus inserted even more deeply in a religious season, established in strophe II, and then reinforced in strophe V.

Closing the strophe, the simile "thrown like a golden ball" foregrounds the structural analogy between a fistful of marigolds and a golden ball on account of their roundness and color. Besides merging their structural and conceptual analogies, the overlapping of the images simultaneously retrieves the imagery and symbolism of "balls of fire" and reinforces the intimate connection between the renewal of nature and the religious atmosphere which impregnates strophe II and the scene inside the chapel. Above all, the placing of the simile at the end of the first part of the poem, subordinate to "that day", makes the visual and symbolic associations of "golden ball" an illuminating final image of the perfection of this "extraordinary" day on which the slaves were freed, a perfection that once more recalls the fundamental unity of life.

The images in this strophe are again interspersed with sound parallelisms that enhance their semantic relationships. Chapel/child are bound by alliteration, while chapel/marigolds, red/velvet, gold/golden/thrown, altar/ball are bound by assonance. Most conspicuously, perhaps, /l/ occurs in almost all the words of the strophe, and /r/ to a lesser extent. Besides further interlocking the images in chapel/lit/child, red/velvet/altar, golden/ball and fistful/marigold, the liquids add a touch of softness to the images and fluidity to the lines, enhancing the delicacy and beauty of the

vision. These parallelisms are then carried over into the second part of the poem, with the assonance in thrown/golden/Oh also establishing a phonological transition between the two segments.

The last and longest strophe contains the second time frame in the poem, for in contrast with the former strophes, controlled by “that day” and narrated in the past tense, this one is controlled by “on a day”, and the persona now addresses herself in the present tense:

Oh, let me come back on a day
when nothing extraordinary happens
so I can stare
at the sugar-white pillars
and black lace grills
of this pink house.

The strophe opens with the emphatic interjection “Oh,” its hint of regret heightened by the silent stress which follows the comma, conveying the strength of her emotion as she utters her prayer or invocation: “let me come back on a day/ when nothing extraordinary happens”. With this a contrast is immediately established between “that day” on which “extraordinary” (from *extra-ordinem*> outside the usual order) events took place and this “ordinary” (inside the usual order) day on which she longs to return.

As the persona realizes the imaginative distance which separates the “ordinary” from that magical moment when the referential world became an imaginary one, the historical past merged with the here and now of her experience, and a golden glimmer imbued and fused the external and internal landscapes, her plea to return on an common day becomes a prayer to see, to “stare at” reality again, as if the surrealism⁸ of her vision has been too intense for her eyes. “Stare” is strategically foreshadowed in “nothing extraordinary”, for “nothing” annuls “extra”, allowing “stare” to stand out. Its letters also form a chiasmus with “extra”, revealing their contrastive implications of vision versus reality. “Stare” thus becomes the most

meaningful word in the line, further emphasized by being placed at the end.

As the subordinating conjunction of purpose “so” suggests, in the concluding statement “so I can stare”, the persona only wishes to look, literally, with eyes fixed and wide open, at the façade:

at the sugar-white pillars
and the black lace grills
of this pink house.

One could almost say that, by looking steadily and intently at the concrete façade of the house, she would not allow herself to visualize “extra”- ordinary events taking place, almost as if “stare”, like “nothing”, annulled the implications of “extra”.

Comparing these last three lines with the entry in Page’s *Journal* – “We visited two early nineteenth-century fazendas. The first, a colonial house, light pink with white pillars, and lacy black grilles on the windows.” (1997, p.43) – there seems to be little alteration at first sight between what is recorded as fact and as fiction. However, by qualifying the white pillars as “sugar-white”, by removing “on the windows” from “black lace grills”, and by simplifying “a colonial house, light pink” to “this pink house”, these exterior features, subtly bound by the consonance in pillars/grills/house, become even more emphasized, besides evoking historical and cultural associations again in the Brazilian reader. The sugar-white color of the pillars, symbolic of ownership, remind us that sugar was the main produce of Brazilian *fazendas* up to the end of the 17th century. The black lace grills, in spite of their fine ornamental design, connote protection against outsiders but also, by retrieving the image of the manacles, imprisonment. Their black color, moreover, reinforces the association with slaves. The “pink house”, a final image of containment, brings back the image of the colonial house with which Page started her *Journal* entry, but in an inverted order, thus projecting the contrast between the vision of freedom

established in the first line and that of bondage in the last line of the poem.

In this way, the last three images of the poem simultaneously become emblematic of the three basic elements of the Brazilian colonial economic structure – the great plantation, one-crop farming, and slave labor – making the poem end, despite the persona's wish to only “stare” in aesthetic contemplation at the beauty of this colonial house, with a concrete vision of economic and cultural dominance.⁹

Our entrance into this “Brazilian Fazenda” has thus provided us on the one hand with a scenic rendering of the environment, foregrounding the images which have caused an impact on the poet's visual perception. However, the description of the external topography also reveals the inner eye of the poet, as, in her reverie and with her poetic sensibility, she evokes and transforms the natural events, through the richness of their symbolic connotations, into a transcendental experience. Above all, by linking her almost metaphysical knowledge to her cultural knowledge of Brazil – further stressed by the time gap between the experience and the writing of the poem – and by retrieving historical, religious and cultural associations which enhance still further the unification of exterior with interior reality, Page has created an unforgettable lyrical vision of a Brazilian farm.

As a verbal message, projecting the emotive function of language conveyed in the lyrical “I” and breaking the arbitrariness of referential language through foregrounded phonological, morphological and syntactical parallelisms as well as by paradigmatic and syntagmatic equivalences, this vision simultaneously establishes the poetic function of language, centered on the message (JAKOBSON, 1971, p.356), as the determining function of this poem.

Frye ends his “Preface” by stating that
Every good lyrical poet has a certain structure of imagery
.typical of him as his handwriting, held together by
certain recurring metaphors, and sooner or later he

will produce one or more poems that seem to be at the centre of that structure. These poems are in the formal sense his mythical poems, and they are for the critic the imaginative keys to his work. Such poems (...) enrich not only our poetic experience but our cultural knowledge as well, and as time goes on they become increasingly the only form of knowledge that does not date and continues to hold its interest for future generations. (1971, p.179)

We can further qualify this statement by adding that Page, in her response to our natural and historical environment, has not only enriched our “poetic experience” as readers and our “cultural knowledge” as Brazilians. She has also sharpened and deepened them for, by making “Brazilian Fazenda” a metaphor for the fundamental unity of life and thus for an intense poetic, cultural, and above all transcendental experience, she has made us much more keenly aware of the poetic possibilities of our own fascinating environment and cultural background.¹⁰

Notes

¹ “That which makes of a given work a work of literature” (JAKOBSON *apud* Preminger, 1101).

² From January 1957 to August 1959, when Rio de Janeiro was still the capital of Brazil.

³ The coffee farm in particular, which helped to expand human occupation in the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais, had its period of greatest opulence in the 19th century, due to a considerable extent to the use of slave labor. The coffee plantation owners became the social and political elite of the country either as “coffee barons”, as important political figures, cabinet ministers or senators of the Empire. Their wealth manifested itself not only in their elegant mansions, but also in their bringing European culture to theaters built in the new cities in the hinterland of the state of São Paulo.

⁴ According to Leech, “it is the main stressed syllable of a word which generally carries the alliteration, not necessarily its initial syllable”.

⁵ According to Leech, the “tenor” of a metaphor is that which is actually under discussion and the “vehicle” is the image or analogue in terms of which the tenor is represented. As metaphoric transference can only take place if some likeness is

perceived between tenor and vehicle, the third notional element of metaphor is the “ground” of the comparison.

⁶ Please refer to Page’s drawing of this fazenda in *Brazilian Journal* (edited by Suzanne Bailey and Christopher Doody). Erin: The Porcupine’s Quill, 2011, p. 74. Page’s description also brings to mind Cândido Portinari’s 1939 painting “O lavrador de café” (The coffee farm hand) at MASP (Museu de Arte de São Paulo), which portrays a black laborer on a coffee plantation at the beginning of the 20th century. Standing in the foreground, with a hoe in his hands, he is gazing at the coffee bushes stippling “the lovely, undulating land” in the background. It is one of Portinari’s most famous paintings, and representative of his interest in this national theme. Page was not only acquainted with his work, as mentioned several times in her *Journal*, but even sat beside him during a dinner party.

⁷ Page and her husband were visiting the dairy with their hosts. As the remark preceding the quotation explains, “We also saw the equipment used for artificial insemination – and there, under a microscope, for the edification of the men, some semen”.(p.45).

⁸ Reminding us that Surrealism is one of the traditions out of which Page’s poetry grows, as mentioned in the introductory notes.

⁹ This dominance can be better evaluated by following a brief outline of the History of Brazil: Colonial Brazil comprises the period from its discovery in 1500 by Pedro Álvares Cabral until 1815, when Brazil was elevated to a kingdom alongside Portugal as the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves. During these three centuries, the economic exploration of the land was based on the extraction of “pau-brasil” (brazilwood) in the 16th century, on sugar production from the 16th to the 18th centuries, and on gold and diamond mining in the 18th century. African slaves furnished most of the working force of the Brazilian economy. With the coming of the Portuguese royal family to Brazil, in 1808, fleeing from the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal, Brazil became the seat of the Portuguese colonial Empire. When D. João VI returned to Portugal in 1821, he left his eldest son Pedro to rule Brazil. After declaring independence on September 7th, 1822, Dom Pedro was acclaimed as the first Emperor of Brazil on October 12th. Pedro I abdicated on April 7th 1831 in favor of his five-year-old son, Pedro II, in order to depart for Europe to restore his daughter to the Portuguese throne. After a weak Regency period while he was a minor, D. Pedro II, once he was declared of age, managed to bring peace and stability to the country, which gradually became an emerging international power.

According to historian Boris Fausto, “coffee and slavery, in the states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, financed the Empire and bound the elite together during the 19th century. However, with the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 1850s” (*Reviews in History* n. 146), slavery was gradually restricted, until it was abolished in 1888 by Princess Isabel, Pedro II’s daughter. The Imperial Period thus lasted from 1822 to 1889, when Brazil was proclaimed a Republic. Fausto also emphasizes that “Brazil is unique in the Americas in that independence from the mother country was ‘presided’ over by the heir to the metropolitan throne. Perhaps this also accounts for the survival of ‘colonial’ institutions – monarchy, plantation and slavery – and national unity” (*Reviews in History*, n. 146) in the 19th century .

¹⁰ P.K.Page's e-mail concerning my presentation of this paper during the *VI International Congress of ABECAN : Transculturalisms* is in honor of her memory.

Subject: Re: Brazilian Fazenda

Date: Mon, 10 Nov 2001 11:07:00 -0800

From: "P.K.Page" octogen@home.com

To: turbo@ipnet.com.br>

Dear **AUTOR**, The e-mail came through loud and clear this time and I am delighted that it did as I was greatly interested.

First, I am astonished by your sensitivity to my language. Critics today seem so intent upon meaning that they are inclined to forget that much of the meaning is in the language itself. A kind of meaning beyond meaning.

More importantly, I was surprised by the richness you pulled from the poem, the layers beneath its surface, and how deeply you were able to mine seams I didn't know were there. As I am not a Catholic I was astonished to realize how much Catholic imagery and symbolism the poem contained. All of which re-inforces my belief that a poet is only a vehicle. On good days a better vehicle than on bad days, but a vehicle non-the-less.

Your close reading of my poem has given me great pleasure and I am especially delighted with the circularity of it all – that my pleasure in your beautiful country fifty years ago has given you pleasure today, and that you in turn....

I thank you most sincerely and hope your paper is as well received in academic circles as it has been by me.

Best wishes and warm regards. PKP

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