

The Challenge of P.K. Page

Linda Rogers and Barbara Colebrook Peace, eds. *P.K. Page: Essays on Her Works*. Writers Series. Toronto: Guernica, 2001. 173 pp.

It was a seemingly ordinary morning late in 1992, and I was opening my mail in my office at the University of Toronto just before meeting a class on modern Canadian poetry. In the latest issue of the *Malahat Review* I found a new poem by P. K. Page entitled "Hologram." I began reading—and it was no longer an ordinary morning.

When I went into class ten minutes or so later, I abandoned my lecture-notes, read the poem aloud, and tried to convey something of its significance. We had discussed a number of Page's poems earlier in the course, but I had not given her the time and attention I devoted to the major Canadian poets. Here was evidence, surely, that she was decidedly more important than I had supposed. We were living, I suggested, through the process by which a major poet became recognized, and I forecast that Page's work would loom far larger within Canadian literature in the future. My excitement must have been obvious, and I hope that at least one or two members of the class took notice.

The volume called *Hologram* duly appeared two years later. Three years after that, the double volume of collected poems, *The Hidden Room*, was published by Porcupine's Quill, and the full extent of Page's achievement began to emerge. Yet Canadians take a long time to accept and do justice to their best contemporary poets. (Consider the shelf-ful of books available on Richard Wilbur and James Merrill—to name two major American poets both younger than Page.) With the exception of the now outdated survey by John Orange in the ECW *Canadian Writers and Their Works* series, also available as a separate pamphlet, this is the first book-length study devoted to Page and her work.

We should be grateful—and I am grateful. There are some useful articles in this collection from which we can all profit. At the same time, I have to say that I don't think the editors are quite up to the challenge of P.K. Page. If I were asked to sum up their editorial abilities in one word, the word I would choose is "amateurish"—with the immediate qualification that both positive and negative

connotations are intentional. This is clearly a labour of love. Devotion and enthusiasm are conspicuous, and this is a good thing: it is a sign of the strength of Page's poetry that it arouses these qualities in her admirers. But ultimately they are not enough, and in the following paragraphs, while insisting on the value of much that is offered, I shall try also to explain what is missing.

Many of the contributions are brief and take the form of personal memoir. These are all very well, but it could be argued that they take up more space than they deserve in a book that claims in its title to contain essays on Page's *works*. Of the four essays of substantial length, Marilyn Russell Rose's contribution, not very helpfully entitled just "P.K. Page," is placed late in the volume, though, given its introductory nature, it should surely have come first. It is a workmanlike but hardly probing survey of Page's earlier volumes, and references to poems like "Arras" and "Cook's Mountains" read lamely after we have encountered more detailed discussions by Patricia Young and Brian Bartlett. Moreover (and this is where editorial deficiency becomes more evident), the article seems to have been written in the early 1990s, since the 1991 enlarged edition of *The Glass Air* is confusingly described as "[h]er most recent poetry collection." I assume that this essay is a reprint, but no details are given. Some minor rearrangement and editorial explanation would have solved the problem.

"Entranced," an interview with Page (the title of which is decidedly puzzling when encountered on the contents-page!), is another contribution that would have benefited from earlier placement. Here I found the interviewers' questions less pointed than they might have been, with the result that the interview tends to ramble. But there is one exchange in particular that proves disturbingly revealing. The interviewers, Lucy Bashford and Jay Ruzesky, refer to a review by Robert Enright of *The Hidden Room* (never, incidentally, identified either here or in the bibliography) in which "he said there's only one other person who can use 'maculate' and that's T.S. Eliot." When Page asks if they know what it means, they answer: "No." This seems to me extraordinary. After all, the interviewers raised the subject, and if they didn't know what the word meant they should have consulted a dictionary. How else could they understand the poem in which it appears? But a further point is involved. Enright is incorrect, since the word occurs prominently at the opening of A.M. Klein's "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," one of the finest poems in Canadian literature. (Page, who acknowledges that Klein's work had a great effect upon her, must have known this, but politely made no comment.) I don't think it's asking too much to expect interviewers to be in full control of their subject.

Another interesting point is made in the course of the interview. The interviewers raise a valid question about the ordering of poems in *The Hidden Room* ("People are troubled by the fact that it's not ordered chronologically"), and ask Page for her comments. She replies, a little testily, that she thinks such people have been "academicized to death," and then asks in return: "is it not possible for a body of work to have an organic whole that's not necessarily chronological?" Now I may be a little sensitive on this matter, since I was one of the people who made that criticism (in an otherwise euphoric review in the *Canadian Book Review Annual*). Page is, of course, right. It is well known, for example, that Robert Graves (a poet she admires and mentions in the course of the interview) arranged his "one story and one story only" in the order the subject demanded rather than the order in which the poems came to him. But there is an important difference. Graves himself organized the numerous editions of his *Collected Poems*, yet Page goes on to admit that both the contents and ordering of *The Hidden Room* were the responsibility of her editor, Stan Dragland. This raises an important issue—which, I maintain, the editors should have raised themselves. Moreover, Page even admits: "Some of the early surrealist poetry I think I wouldn't have chosen myself." Yet, given the non-chronological arrangement, there is no clear way of knowing which poems she has in mind. I sympathize with her fear of being "academicized to death" but a distinction needs to be made between pedantry and serious scholarship, and a study of a poet's *development* surely belongs in the latter category. Once again, first-rate interviewers would have raised the level of the conversation by probing more deeply.

"Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart: Praise, Shadow and Dimensions of Eternity in the Poetry of P.K. Page," by Barbara Colebrook Peace and Kelly Parsons, sounds as if it might prove heavy-going, but it is in fact a thoughtful and valuable piece that succeeds in persuading us to see poems with which we might think ourselves familiar in a new way. For instance, I found their division between Page's colour-filled and her "black and white" poems original and useful. The one qualification I would make (and this applies to most of the pieces in the collection) is that not enough attention is paid to details of language and rhythm. By way of illustration, I would cite what might be regarded as a decidedly minor misquotation that seems to me significant. The writers are discussing "They Might Have Been Zebras" and claim that "the seven forlorn monosyllables of the final line fall on our ears like a bell tolling: 'Is this grey ash all that's left?'" Bothered by the rhythmically odd effect here, I checked all available texts containing the poem and discovered that, without exception, they read: "Is this

grey ash all that is left?"

Now some readers will doubtless condemn me as absurdly nit-picking in complaining about the contraction of a single word, but I submit that an important principle is involved. Ultimately (whatever thematic critics and literary theorists may think), poets stand or fall by their control of words and rhythms. By the same token, critics should be sensitive to even the smallest linguistic and prosodic details. There *is* a difference, for anyone who has an adequate ear for verse, between "Is this grey ash all that's left?" and "Is this grey ash all that is left?" I do not consider myself especially meritorious in recognizing that something was wrong with the quoted version; such skill is, or should be, part and parcel of a literary critic's basic equipment. (That this was not a typographical error or casual slip is proved by the specific "seven . . . monosyllables" and the repetition of the line, still misquoted, on the following page.) The fact that neither writers nor editors noticed the error speaks volumes about the inadequate way in which present-day readers—even qualified literary specialists—respond to the highly delicate and subtle instrument that we call the English language.

Brian Bartlett's "For Sure the Kittiwake: Naming, Nature, and P.K. Page" is the most satisfying of the articles, including as it does a lengthy and close analysis of "Only Child" and proceeding from there to explore the somewhat dangerous but important subject of what readers bring to a poem as distinct from what they derive from it. I write "somewhat dangerous" because, in unskilled hands, such an approach could easily degenerate into self-indulgence; but Bartlett decorously juxtaposes Page's fascination with the power and significance of names and naming with his own interest and wide reading on the topic. Here, because he devotes two thoughtful pages to "Cook's Mountains," I am reminded of another classroom experience. An undergraduate student had undertaken to give an oral presentation on the poem but, showing no apparent gift for literary appreciation or even comprehension, fell back on "political correctness." Captain Cook, she decided, was a wicked imperialist, so Page must be condemning his arrogance and Eurocentrism within the poem. It was a particularly blatant instance of a tendency that still seems rampant. Bartlett, however, is a good reader. While acknowledging properly that "Queensland" and "Cook's Mountains" are "terms of ownership," he continues: "Page's poem is hardly a poem of condemnation or protest, but with illuminating delicacy it encompasses both our marvelling over a union of place and name, and our questioning about what's lost in the process of naming." That is well said. Personally, I would want to make a point about the *quality* of the naming (Cook illuminated the mountains for Page just as Page illuminates them still further for us),

but his reading is responsible, thoughtful, and itself illuminating (and all credit to him for introducing that splendidly appropriate word within this context).

Of the shorter essays, Travis Lane's "Hologram Dimensions" is refreshingly independent in its argument and judgments, though I was puzzled on a first reading because I had expected a specific concentration on the 1994 volume. The essay is recent because it quotes from one of the glosa-poems, but uses the hologram image for a more general study of Page's poetry. This is legitimate enough, but a brief explanation would have been in order. Marnie Parsons' short review of *Alphabetical* is both useful and informative, and particularly welcome since many readers will not be familiar with this limited edition. Patricia Young's "A Reading of P.K. Page's 'Arras'," already briefly mentioned, is also welcome as an exercise in no-longer-fashionable practical criticism that demonstrates how helpful such a traditional approach can be when applied sensitively. The rest are unremarkable, though I should, I suppose, note that Margaret Atwood (naively identified on the contributors' page as merely "a poet and novelist") lends her influential name to the book with a puckishly allusive verse-tribute full of echoes of Page's "The Snowman."

A final word about the bibliography, for which the editors must be responsible. It is eccentric in that it contains several sections relating to biography ("Education" "Career") and unexpected, hardly necessary lists of anthologies that include Page's poetry, magazines in which she has published, the locations of readings she has given, art exhibitions that have included her paintings, and even who's whos and reference books in which she appears. The section on "Critical Studies," however, is highly selective (not to say spotty)—a fact that is not indicated. I have made no systematic attempt to track down omissions, but some are, to those seriously interested in Page, staggering. No interviews are listed, though many of these are at least as important as (often more important than) most literary commentary. Useful items from this journal that are absent include an earlier and detailed reading of "Arras" by Constance Rooke (#4), Page's response to a questionnaire (#10), and three readings of "The Permanent Tourists" (#19). A thought-provoking article by Douglas Freake, "The Multiple Self in the Poetry of P.K. Page," in *Studies in Canadian Literature* (1994) is also conspicuous by its absence. Above all, no mention is made of what is almost certainly the most detailed and scholarly treatment yet published on Page's work: the chapter entitled "Imagist Twilight: Page's Early Poetry" in Brian Trehearne's *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* (1999). In other words, the bibliography is inadequate—an example of what I mean by

amateurism in the negative sense.

As I have indicated, this is the first individual book of any size to be devoted to Page and her work. The editors are to be congratulated on a pioneering effort. Furthermore, it is a book that contains much to augment the enjoyment and understanding of any lover of her poetry. I therefore feel a little mean in devoting so much attention in this review to the book's weaknesses. The fact remains, however, that the editors had a splendid opportunity that they did not exploit to full advantage. For instance, we badly need an essay devoted to Page's interest in Sufism, another focused on her paintings, and yet another, as I have implied, on her poetics. We also need a detailed study of *Hologram* as a fully achieved whole. These would have been far more valuable than memoirs of her brief period as instructor in a creative-writing class or worthy but fairly obvious praise of her visionary qualities. P.K. Page may well be "Canada's finest poet," as Constance Rooke claimed many years ago now. She deserves the best scholarship and critical commentary that can be mustered. This is a worthwhile book, but it falls well below the level of excellence that she herself attained in both poetry and the fine arts.

W.J. Keith
