

"Selecting P.K. Page"

Page, P.K. *The Glass Air: Poems Selected and New*.
Toronto: Oxford UP, 1991. 216 pp.

P.K. Page's *The Glass Air: Poems Selected and New* was first published by Oxford University Press in 1985. Any examination of the 1991 edition naturally elicits a comparison with its original. Let me say first that we are blessed indeed to have *The Glass Air*, no matter which "edition" one prefers, for it is the best "selected" P.K. Page to date. Page chose the poems herself; in her last selected volume (Anansi, 1974), entitled *P.K. Page: Poems Selected and New*, Margaret Atwood did the choosing, and the result was a book that showed the concerns and aesthetics of Atwood — the fear, paranoia, and psychic distress so intrinsic to Atwood's work of the 1970s.

Like many selecteds, the Anansi and the Oxford need but lack some explanation of the principles that underlie selection. Publishers feel, wrongly, that an introductory essay somehow interferes with the aesthetic presentation of the poems. The four-part structure in the Anansi book, for example, is without clear purpose. The divisions are only roughly chronological, with some very early poems (1944-45) included among "new" ones in part IV. Oxford has imposed a three-part structure on Page's canon. *The Glass Air* was the closest thing we had in 1985 to a "collected" for Page. It came complete with reproductions of her visual art from the sixties, and it included her two famous essays — "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman" (1970) and "Questions And Images" (1969). Many of Page's books have included more than one of her art forms. *Cry Ararat!* (1967) was the first volume in which Page published her visual art alongside her poetry. And in her 1981 volume, *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies*, Page places her story "Lest the Eye Catch Fire" in the middle of the book, right there among her poems.

Oxford was obviously striving to make *The Glass Air*

seem at least somewhat scholarly, for they attempted to arrange the poems chronologically in the table of contents: Poems 1944-1954; Poems 1955-1967; Poems 1968-1985 (an arrangement Page has never been particularly interested in, the matter of dates being of no importance to her). All of the poems Page selected for the volume were then listed under one of these headings. The problem is that several poems were placed under the wrong headings. Page's "Cry Ararat!," for example, which appeared in her volume by the same name in 1967, is listed under "Poems 1968-1985." The same mistake was made with "The Snowman." "Arras" first appeared in *The Metal and the Flower* in 1954, but it is listed in the 1955-1967 section; "Travellers' Palm" first appeared in Mike Doyle's Victoria magazine *Tuatara* in 1969, and was later reprinted in *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* — it should therefore not have been included in the 1955-1967 section. I mention here only a few examples of the problems with dates; there are, sadly, many more.

I was shocked to find that these problems were *not* corrected in the 1991 reprinting of *The Glass Air*. When I asked Oxford's editors about the errors I was told that *The Glass Air* was intended to be a "trade book," the implication being that scholarly accuracy was not of the first importance. This unsatisfactory attitude has found expression again and again in Oxford's texts, most recently in the Moses and Goldie anthology of Native literature. This anthology offers not a single apparatus to assist us with the teaching/reading of what is for most in our universities and colleges a "new" literature. No translations of indigenous language, no notes, no essays are appended, only the transcription of a self-indulgent conversation between the editors. This anthology effectively silences its contributors because we do not know how to read them. But these complaints are for another review. My point is that our reading of a text is shaped in part by its editing and its design. If the editors' intentions are blurred or withheld, our reading might well be distorted.

Now, the design problems of *The Glass Air* might not be as serious as, for example, those that have plagued Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems*. Talonbooks, when they published

Webb's *Selected Poems* 1954-1965 in 1971, suppressed a bibliographic essay by John Hulcoop, an essay that might have explained the reasoning behind at least some of the inexplicable textual emendations in this edition of Webb's poems. This is another refusal on the part of a publishing house to take responsibility for its texts. But while the poems in *The Glass Air* do not depend on the integrity of the collaboration between verbal and visual design so crucial to *Naked Poems*, we do find in Page's collection an important relationship between written and visual art that has been neglected by Oxford. When the 1985 edition of *The Glass Air* appeared, Lorraine York quite properly complained about the unprofessional presentation of Page's visual art:

The arrangement of the visual material . . . leaves much to be desired. Eight of the nine drawings appear in two "clumps" between chronologically-arranged sections of poems and they are not dated. Occasionally, we are presented with a detail of a drawing without seeing the drawing in its entirety. No information is given as to medium, size or location of the drawing. Such details are not trivial — not in a volume which implicitly asks the reader/perceiver to make connections between visual and verbal expressions, and to recognize Page as a poet, essayist, and painter.

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At least in the 1985 edition of *The Glass Air* the reproduction of Page's Klee-like work on the front cover is in colour, giving us some sense of her palette, even if the other works are offered only in black and white. But York is quite right; we are offered too many bits of works, and our sense of Page's visual art is therefore fragmented and incoherent. Page's drawings are absolutely decontextualized in *The Glass Air*; none is accompanied by any explanatory or interpretive text. The visual art functions as room dividers, marking off sections of text rather than plotting any course. None of these problems has been remedied in the 1991 edition; in fact, they are made worse because the reproductions are poor, and none is in

colour. They look like photocopies of photocopies.

The Glass Air privileges the verbal over the visual, when, in fact, painting, drawing, and etching were absolutely central to Page in the late 1950s and were to become her way of speaking of the impossibility of representation — a concern missed by critics who see only the established Pagean topos in her poetry.

While the obsessive lineation of a piece like "Labyrinth" (reproduced in *The Glass Air*) certainly points to the infinity that is meant to suggest transcendence of the mundane world in "Dot," "The Maze," and several other poems typical of Page's canon, late references to Brazil in her visual art of 1959-1961 are expressed only by synecdoche: a hint of tropical foliage in a tangle of lines might, for example, be the only indicator of Brazil. This hinting at Brazil in the early 1960s, after approximately two years of trying to reproduce it through figuration, is only one expression of the tentative nature of an artist's canon that at first glance might seem poised. Having moved away from models in her depiction of Brazil, Page is conceding that mimesis is problematic. I would argue that Page's crisis over representation is perhaps most clearly indicated in her visual art, and therefore the editorial configuration and the anthologizing of this art are tremendously important.

Brazilian Journal, published in 1987, makes a more convincing attempt to reproduce Page's art, at least offering most in colour (even if, once again, no dimensions or proper titles are included). But *Brazilian Journal* cannot seem to move beyond Page's very early work, where mimesis was central and stood in the way of what would become an increasingly complicated metaphysics. The subtle and radical changes Page's visual art underwent in the relatively short time she painted shed a great deal of light on her writing, but the complexity of the relationship between Page's verbal and visual art has been ignored in *The Glass Air*.

It is clear that the 1991 edition of *The Glass Air* was issued so that Page could include several "new" poems. A

few of these poems were written long before they were published; Page has often hung onto poems for a long time before showing them to the world. After Brazil, visual art and its attendant metaphors preoccupy Page's work. A number of her "new" poems in *The Glass Air* (1991) have to do with visual art. "Conversation," for example, features two speakers painting — "the green enamel of Brazil" — experiencing through art and, importantly, through human love a kind of transcendence:

'But — we were laughing. Have you forgotten?
I was high — higher than Corcovado on the light
the colour, the sharp smell of turps
and the little jewel of a canvas we had made:
insects, of all things, winged and crawling, bright
iridescent bodies, hexagonal eyes
and the absolute stamp of air
in the gauze of their wings.

(*The Glass Air*, 1991,

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The winged insects are a version of Page's birds; her birds are angels. The "iridescent bodies" suggest the luminosity attached to Page's sense of mystical experience; the phrase "hexagonal eyes" is a version of the kaleidoscope, which plays the role of facilitator — allowing the viewer to re-see the object in all of its cubist parts — and represents the several dimensions of experience Page believes exist. The kaleidoscope is a favourite symbol in Page's work that appears in a number of poems, including "Cook's Mountains," "Shaman," "Chinese Boxes," and "The Flower Bed." In "Chinese Boxes," for example, the layered geometry of the kaleidoscope is suggested in Page's depiction of the boxes:

Box within box.
From small to large increasing —
angles, blocks,
enormous, made of plexiglass,
the sky
filling with them,
visible as air

(G. A. , 1991, 116)

These boxes transform themselves; they are "huge as the Kaaba / luminous as ice / and imperceptible to any sense / more coarse than sightings of that inner eye" (116). The idea of refracted light is important in these images of the kaleidoscope; altered light is a code for the ability to re-see and to see beyond the phenomenal world.

In *The Glass Air* (1991), Page publishes a new poem actually titled "Kaleidoscope" (its two parts subtitled "A Little Fantasy" and "A Little Reality"), in which she states, self-referentially, that the kaleidoscope is "the perfect, all-inclusive metaphor" (182). This poem, like her other new poems, uses a symbology familiar to Page readers — the Jungian quaternity and alchemical transformation, for example. Page's system of symbols (particularly the colour gold) has lost none of its potency in these new poems and is therefore all the more remarkable. A familiar symbology is accompanied by Page's well-known themes, especially her sense of the inexplicable coherence of life in all its forms. In "A Little Reality," "each single thing is other — / all-ways joined / to every other thing" (182). These lines echo similar ones from "Chinese Boxes," published ten years earlier, in 1981. Both poems insist on the unity of the cosmos, a kind of Jungian individuation that unifies the heavens and human consciousness.

The poems new to the 1991 edition of *The Glass Air* are an eclectic group: some are about visual art, some about seeing, some offer protest. One poem, "I Sphinx: A Poem for Two Voices," was originally written for radio. Still another, "Address at Simon Fraser," is a convocation address written in the form of a long poem. Page has always been interested in experimenting with form. "I Sphinx" is a long series of short poems spoken by a "Narrator" and "Sibelius." In this poem Page presents her role — she is the "Narrator" — more overtly than usual.

"Address at Simon Fraser" is a protest poem, reminding us that Page wrote this kind of poetry in the 1940s, when she was part of the *Preview group* in Montreal. Whereas in