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“A garden of green lace”: P. K. Page’s Ecolect

Abstract I: Scopo del mio intervento è quello di analizzare una strategia retorica ricorrente in una scelta di poesie di P. K. Page che hanno per oggetto la natura. In generale, l’indubbia crescita di attenzione e sensibilità verso l’ecologia nelle opere più recenti e nella critica letteraria pare dimostrare che le analisi tematiche, orientate verso una concezione oppositiva tra natura e paesaggio, sono definitivamente sorpassate.

Molti sono gli scrittori che cercano di ridefinire il rapporto con l’ambiente utilizzando un approccio olistico che riconosce l’uguaglianza e l’interdipendenza tra le forme di vita umane e quelle non umane. L’analisi dell’*ecolecto* (Sykes Davies 1986: 274, 319) impiegato da P. K. Page in una selezione di testi esemplari, dimostra quanto la poetessa sia più interessata a cogliere il rapporto scrittore/natura piuttosto che a riflettere sul rapporto uomo/natura in termini oppositivi.

Abstract II: The aim of my paper is to analyse a recurring rhetorical strategy in some ecologically informed poems by P. K. Page. The growing amount of ecologically-informed writing and literary criticism seems to demonstrate the fact that thematically oriented analyses that regard nature and landscape as adversaries have been finally superseded. Many writers are now attempting to redefine their relationship with the environment by using a holistic approach that recognizes both human and nonhuman life-forms as equal and interdependent. The analysis of the *ecolects* (Sykes Davies 1986: 274, 319) employed by P. K. Page in some exemplary texts I shall discuss, shows her to be more interested in capturing the relationship between writer and nature than to reflect on the man/nature relationship in oppositional terms.

Introduction

The growing amount of ecologically-informed writing and literary criticism seems to demonstrate the fact that thematically oriented analyses that regard nature and landscape as adversaries have been finally superseded. In much recent Canadian poetry, nature is no longer seen merely as what Northrop Frye once called ‘a kind of existence which is cruel and meaningless [...] the source of the cruelty and subconscious stampeding within the human mind’ (Frye 1971: 141-142). Many writers are now attempting to redefine their relationship with the environment by using a holistic approach that recognizes both human and nonhuman life-forms as equal and interdependent. In her essay “Contemporary Ca-

nadian Poetry from the Edge”, Gabriele Helms points out that there is a curious, to say the least, dichotomy between the amount of Canadian writers preoccupied with nature – from Robert Bringhurst to Don McKay, Anne Campbell and Fred Wah, to name just a few of the many possible examples of environmental visions in contemporary Canadian poetry – and critical analyses that seem almost dogmatic in reinforcing the idea of nature as an adversary (Helms 1995).

The aim of my paper is to analyse a recurring rhetorical strategy in some ecologically informed poems by P. K. Page. The texts that I will discuss (P. K. Page’s “Summer”, “After Rain”, “Ecology” and “Planet Earth”) all share common semantic fields that emphasise the relationship, reciprocal influence and interconnectedness between writer and nature. The analysis of the ecolects employed by the poetess shows her to be more interested in capturing the relationship between writer and nature than to reflect on the man/nature relationship in oppositional terms.

The Ecolect

One of the notions I will employ in my eco-critical reading of some P. K. Page’s poems is that of ecolect. The concept of “ecolect” as a language “variation peculiar to a particular household, or kin group” has been introduced to literary studies by Hugh Sykes Davies in *Wordsworth and the Worth of Words* (Sykes Davies 1986: 274, 319) and has been slightly revised and expanded by James C. McKusick who, in a more global sense, considers the whole earth as the household or home (McKusick 2000: 243). In McKusick’s expansion of the term, ecolect functions as a form of language that creates a linguistic analogue to the natural world and, in doing so, conveys a sense of locality and describes the interaction of writer and nature. The ecolect can thus capture a distinctive form of expression related to the conceptual paradigm of ecology. Detailed analyses of poems will be necessary to explore the specifics of a writer’s/poem’s ecolect, since ecolect not only implies subject-matter but also particular uses of language.

P. K. Page

Author of over 30 published books of poetry, fiction, travel diaries, essays, children’s books, and an autobiography, P. K. Page can be listed among one of the most prolific Canadian writers. Critics have praised her for the luminous precision of her language, for the vastness of her poetic imagination, for the profoundness of her poems about looking and seeing, for her exquisite sensibility, for the coherence of the imaginative world created by her. According with Rosemary Sullivan (Sullivan 1998: 16). I would suggest that Page’s poetry moves between two worlds, the green world of myriad physical details (the sensuous detail of her poetry has a painterly exactness) and the white resonant space of those symbols which we use to suggest another dimension of reality. In Page’s writing the world is thus integral, without being fixed or static; it is, quoting Branko Goriup’s definition, a “compass rose” (Goriup 1998: 9, 11), which continually reconstitutes itself from all its existing components into new configurations. In reading P. K. Page’s poems one can almost perceive some of Gregory Bateson’s most profound reflections about the (frequently ignored) interconnectedness between the world and human beings (Bateson 1979). Page

offers a remarkable example of this connection in her poem “Kaleidoscope” (its two parts subtitled “A Little Fantasy” and “A Little Reality”), when she states, self referentially, that the kaleidoscope is “the perfect, all-inclusive metaphor” (Page 2010). A Jungian and familiar symbology is accompanied by Page’s well-known themes, especially her sense of the inexplicable coherence of life in all its forms: “each single thing is other - / all-way joined / to every other thing”. 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 the human consciousness. In short, the world’s reality cannot be pared down in a binary structure. Rather, P. K. Page’s texts often neutralize boundaries of all sorts.

In many poems the poetess blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, the whole and the part, and the highest and the lowest (it is worth remembering that her intellectual insights are rooted in the Cabbala, Gnosticism, Sufism, St. John of the Cross, seventeenth century metaphysical poets and the works of Jung). To mention but one example, the oneiric atmosphere of “Before Sleep”, which is sustained by metaphors rooted in the semantic field of water, underlines once again the interconnectedness between human beings and nature: “we stir / and stars swim in our arteries” (ll.1-2); “the silver room becomes a ‘pond’ / and I an object if removed from this / environment in which I act my part as frond or fish / then ‘pond’ becomes an ‘eye’ reflecting ‘sky’” – The human being is seen as a part of the universe and her/his role is not seen as superior to that of a frond or a fish.

As I have argued above, this interconnectedness between human and the natural environment results in a particular rhetorical device which may be observed throughout the work of the poetess and which consists in a double movement. On the one hand, Page attributes human terms to nature and describes nature through human traits and characteristics. On the other hand, while referring to human beings, she describes them through metaphors drawn from nature. Through the close analysis of a few examples, I will show that this particular use of language may be seen as a reflection of the mutual relationship between the writer and her environment, an expression of the reciprocal influence of writers and nature in the ecotone, and a clear sign of the need and desire to redefine the terms of human-nature interaction and to develop another mode of human behaviour.

If in “Personal Landscape” the poetical voice refers to the land as “A lung-born land, this, / a breath spilling, / scanned by the valvular heart’s field glasses” (*Poems 1944-1954* 1991), in the superbly embroidered “After Rain” Page goes a step further and invites the reader to participate in the transformation of the mutable world of nature (her “garden”) into a fabulous lacework, reminiscent of a woman’s “wardrobe”. Snails and spiders are depicted as talented designers who have made a “garden of green lace”:

The snails have made a *garden of green lace*:
broderie anglaise from the cabbages,
chantilly from the choux-fleurs, tiny veils-
I see already that I lift the blind
upon a woman’s wardrobe of the mind.

The perceptual shift from cabbages to “broderie anglaise”, from nature to art(efact), allows the speaker, before slipping in the mud, to see the garden as an “unknown theorem argued in green ink”, “Euclid in glorious chlorophyll”.

The attribution of human characteristics to nature can be most clearly observed in the ecologically informed poem “Planet Earth” (*Hologram: A Book of Glosas* 1994). Read simultaneously in New York, the Antarctic, and the South Pacific to celebrate the International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations in 2001, this poem is also part of a larger artistic project which reflects Page’s work on the glosa, a metrical form that consists of an opening quatrain written by another poet and of four ten-line stanzas with their concluding lines taken consecutively from the quatrain. Used by the poets of the Spanish court, this form dates back to the late 14th and early 15th century.

In “Planet Earth” the opening quatrain is taken from “Oda para planchar” (“Ode to Ironing” 1961) by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, a poem in which an initial analogy between poetry and water is superbly interwoven with the semantic field of the gentle and compassionate smoothing of our planet’s crumpled skin:

La poesía es blanca:
 sale del agua envuelta en gotas,
 se arruga, y se amontona,
 hay que extender la piel de este planeta,
 hay que planchar el mar de su blancura
 y van y van las manos,
 se alisan las sagradas superficies
 y así se hacen las cosas:
 las manos hacen cada día el mundo,
 se une el fuego al acero,
 llegan el lino, el lienzo y el tocuyo
 del combate de las lavanderías
 y nace de la luz una paloma:
 la castidad regresa de la espuma¹.

In her poem P. K. Page reuses the semantic field of domestic activities already encountered in Neruda’s text and attributes it to the relationship that human beings should have towards the world that surrounds them:

*It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet,
 has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness;
 and the hands keep on moving,*

¹ “In Praise of Ironing”: Poetry is pure white./ It emerges from water covered with drops,/ is wrinkled, all in a heap./ It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet,/ has to be ironed out, the sea’s whiteness;/ and the hands keep moving, moving,/ the holy surfaces are smoothed out,/ and that is how things are accomplished./ Every day, hands are creating the world,/ fire is married to steel,/ and canvas, linen, and cotton come back/ from the skirmishings of the laundries,/ and out of light a dove is born -/ pure innocence returns out of the swirl (translation by Alastair Reid 2001: 74).

smoothing the holy surfaces.
 (In Praise of Ironing by Pablo Neruda)

It has to be *loved* the way a laundress loves her linens,
 the way she moves her hands *caressing* the fine muslins
knowing their warp and woof,
 like a lover coaxing, or a mother praising.
 It has to be *loved* as if it were embroidered
 with flowers and birds and two joined hearts upon it.
 It has to be *stretched and stroked*.
 It has to be *celebrated*.
 O this great beloved world and all the creatures in it.
It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet.

The trees must be washed, and the grasses and mosses.
 They have to be polished as if made of green brass.
 The rivers and little streams with their hidden cresses
 and pale-coloured pebbles
 and their fool's gold
 must be washed and starched or shined into brightness, the sheets of lake water
 smoothed with the hand
 and the foam of the oceans pressed into neatness
It has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness.

[...] and pleated and goffered, the flower-blue sea
 the protean, wine-dark, grey, green, sea
 with its metres of satin and bolts of brocade.
 And sky - such an O! overhead - night and day
 must be burnished and rubbed
 by hands that are loving
 so the blue blazons forth
 and the stars keep on shining
 within and above
and the hands keep on moving.

It has to be made bright, the skin of this planet
 till it shines in the sun like gold leaf.
 Archangels then will attend to its metals
 and polish the rods of its rain.
 Seraphim will stop singing hosannas
 to shower it with blessings and blisses and praises
 and, newly in love,
 we must draw it and paint it
 our pencils and brushes and loving caresses
smoothing the holy surfaces.

The poem is imbued with a sense of urgency that derives from the iteration of verbs, as if to demonstrate the need for human beings to be aware of the necessity to change their destructive attitude towards the surrounding world. As emerges in the first stanza, the planet has to be “loved”, “caressed”, “known”, “coaxed”, “praised”, its skin has to be “stretched” and “stroked” and “spread out”, “celebrated”. What is implied in the first stanza, *a contrario*, is that our planet’s skin is crumpled and old and, what is more, that instead of knowing and celebrating it, we frequently tend to ignore and underestimate its needs.

In the second stanza, dominated by the accumulation of details, indicating the threatened richness of the natural world, the poetic voice stresses the need to “wash and polish”, “to wash and starch” into brightness the grasses, the trees, the rivers, the lakes, the streams and the pebbles. Again, what is implied is the contrary: that the environment, which needs to be washed, polished, shined into brightness and lovingly smoothed with the hands, is, instead, polluted, stained, contaminated.

The urgency of action (which is expressed not only through the rhythm of the verse but also by the last line of the stanza “and the hands keep on moving”) is also at the centre of the third part of the poem, in which the reader encounters again the analogy between cloth and nature and also the semantic field of “washing” (expressed here through the verbs “burnishing” and “rubbing”). What is implied in this case is the idea that human passiveness, indifference or carelessness can lead to a progressive darkening of the sky: “by hands that are loving / so the blue blazons forth / and the stars keep on shining”. Human beings are invited to “burnish and rub” the sky, unless they do not want to see the stars stop shining

This leitmotiv is positioned in the opening line of the last stanza (“It has to be made *bright*”), a sentence that concludes the poem with a sense of religious awe in front of the sacredness of the planet, and of the urgency for human beings to celebrate and take care of it: by coaxing and praising it as we usually do with a lover or a child, by keeping it clean as we do with the clothes that protect us.

The second rhetorical strategy I was referring to at the beginning of this paper looms large in the poem “Summer”. In “Planet Earth” the dominating metaphor was the one that saw the world as a cloth to be ironed (I referred to this linguistic strategy as “human characteristics applied/attributed to nature”), in “Summer” we see the metamorphosis of a human being into something which is thoroughly part of the natural world, a process which is charged with erotic connotations:

I grazed the green as I fell
and in my blood
the pigments flowed like sap.
All through my veins the green
made a lacy tree.
Green in my eye grew big as a bell
that gonged and struck
and in a whorl of green in my ear
it spun like a ball.

Orphaned at once that summer
 having sprung
 full grown and firm with green,
 chorused with fern.
 Oh, how the lazy moths were soft upon
 my feminine fingers,
 how flowers foamed at my knees
 all those green months.

Near reeds and rushes where the water lay
 fat and lusted by the sun
 I sang the green that was in my groin
 the green
 of lily and maidenhair and fritillary
 from the damp wood
 of cedar and cypress from the slow hill,
 and the song, stained with the stain of chlorophyll
 was sharp as a whistle of grass
 in my green blood.

The first stanza announces the beginning of the metamorphosis with the lines “in my blood/ the pigments flowed like sap” and elaborates the ongoing fusion between the poetic I and what surrounds her through images that are concerned with spreading. The green makes a “lacy tree” through the poetess’ veins and proliferates in her “eye”. The second stanza describes the poetic I from the “outside” and sees her perfectly at home in nature, surrounded by fern, moths and flowers, almost ripe (“firm with green”) to become something else, or to give birth to something else (it is interesting, in this sense, to observe Page’s painting that accompanies the poem). The third stanza makes more explicit the erotic connotations of the poem and leads the reader to visualise the complete fusion of nature and the poetic I, i.e. of nature and poetry. The poet, in whose veins flows “green blood” refers to her art as a song “stained with the stain of chlorophyll”, “sharp as a whistle of grass”.

Much more could be said on this topic, and many other P. K. Page’s poems could be quoted on the topic related to the interrelatedness of poet and nature. What I have tried to draw attention to in this paper is Page’s attempt to elaborate a form of art which investigates and celebrates the world and tries to speak about it from a point of view which is profoundly oriented towards the overcoming of oppositional or destructive attitudes. This element of P. K. Page’s poetics urges human beings towards a thorough awareness of the importance to preserve the intrinsic and systemic (to say it with Gregory Bateson) multiplicity of being (Bateson 1979: 128) and is firmly opposed to the danger of *single-mindedness* and to a homophonic vision of the world.

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