

The Galvanizing Force for her “Generation”: P.K. Page’s Spanish Civil War

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A socially conscious poet throughout the length of her career, P.K. Page was beginning to develop her poetic voice at the time of the Spanish Civil War. Her poem “Generation,” originally published in the Montréal modernist magazine *Preview* in October 1942, and then in Page’s first solo collection, *As Ten, As Twenty*, in 1946, is less concerned with the details of the Spanish Civil War than it is with how the war was a galvanizing force for her generation. In her speaker’s conception, the conflict in Spain functioned as a pivotal moment through which her generation defined themselves in their commitment to a cause, which became hardened into “permanent beliefs” (Page 51). This turning point is mirrored in the language and imagery of the poem, in which the first two strophes depict the “opacity of adolescence” (12). With the mention of Spain, the language shifts, to instill in the last half of the poem the activity of this generation and their newfound purpose. In “Generation,” we see the kinds of imagery, specifically that of aesthetic representations of the body and the garden, for which Page would become well-known in her later work.

In many ways, Page’s treatment of her subject seems to be indicative of Canadian treatment of the Spanish Civil War. In her essay “This Issue is not Ended,” Nicola Vulpe describes how much of Canadian poetry about the Spanish Civil War is defined by the absence of Spain despite its focus on the war (21). According to Vulpe, this treatment directly correlates with contemporary familiarity with Spain:

Until the start of the war on 18 July 1936, few Canadians (poets included) knew or cared much about Spain; and during the war what they did know they

learned through the war. Spain thus for them soon became practically synonymous with the war, or more accurately, with the issues being decided there: its ideological and international significance. (21)

Page's "Generation" is even more dramatic in its refocusing of the conflict's significance: the Spanish Civil War is, for her speaker, not so much about Spain, or even the struggle for democracy, but instead is about the significance of that conflict for a generation of Canadians. Despite this root in the conflict, "Generation" is not a call to action:¹ while many contemporary poems dealing with the conflict ring with words like "Liberty" and "Freedom," such words are conspicuously absent from Page's poem. Indeed the only mention of Spain positions it as "our spade" (Page 24). While one might argue that this is a somewhat problematic stance in its elision of the suffering of the Spanish people and its appropriation of their struggle for the purposes of giving a generation of Canadians a cause around which to rally, Page's poem demonstrates how the Spanish Civil War came to represent different things for different people, and different generations, of different nationalities. Thus the uniquely international nature and significance of the Spanish Civil War is made evident in its illustration of a pivotal moment for this Canadian generation, as its members transform from ill-defined adolescents into active adults – a turn which is manifested in the form and language of the poem.

Before the mid-poem mention of Spain (24), "Generation" is marked by passivity and ill-definition; in both their imagery and language, the first two strophes illustrate "the dreadful / opacity of adolescence" (11-12). Thus, the first word of the poem, "schooled" (1), represents an adjectival description based on a passive verb.

¹ Indeed, it was not published until well after the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War.

Similarly inactive descriptions, such as “promoted” and “freed” (2; 6), follow in subsequent lines of the first strophe. Indeed, the subject of the first sentence (which constitutes the entirety of the first strophe), “we,” and its verb, the not particularly active “reached,” is not explicitly stated until the eleventh line. Page’s speaker describes her generation as an “ignored / and undeclared ultimatum / of solid children” (13-5). This is a generation of adolescents trying to come to terms with their own nascent consciousnesses. They are “treading,” “shifting,” and “merging” (8, 20, 20): in other words, agitating without coming to a definable position. Action is curiously separated from the body: “moving behind our flesh,” this generation “tak[es] no definite shape” (16, 19). Even the possibility of being “freed from the muddle of sex” is brought about “by the never-mentioned method” (6, 7): potentially liberating adolescent awakenings are obfuscated by silence in this pre-Spain moment.

Conversely, the latter strophes ring with clarity and activity, ushered in by the mere mention of Spain (24). Shorter, less convoluted sentences and increased punctuation give the poem, and its imagery, clear definition. In contrast to their earlier attempts to “tread... / the treacherous tight-rope / of un-believed religion” (8-10), this generation “commit[s]... arson— / firing our parent-pasts” (30-1). This action is strong, final, even drastic. It is this drastic action that is precisely what is needed to push the adolescents of the first two strophes out of their confusion. The verbs of these latter strophes are similarly active: “we dug,” “we strapped,” and “we touch” (26, 37, 46) all demonstrate clear actions physically grounded in the body. Thus Spain facilitates the unification of action and the body sorely lacking in the first two strophes.

Despite her speaker's use of "we" and the firm grounding of her generation's commitment in the body throughout the poem, however, neither Page, nor the vast majority of the other Canadian authors writing about the Spanish Civil War, actually went to Spain as volunteers. In fact, Canada's intellectual involvement with the Spanish Civil War is very different from her English and American cousins in that respect. Whereas important literary figures such as George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway² (from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, respectively) among others both volunteered in and wrote about Spain, the Canadian volunteers were largely gleaned from working class backgrounds rather than the intellectual community. By foregrounding the physical in her poem and locating the effects of the war in the body,³ Page combats the idea that Canadian involvement in the Spanish Civil War was simply an intellectual exercise. Considering the poem was first published during the Second World War, and then again in Page's own collection immediately after the war's end, when the dangers of Fascism were being revealed in their totality and imprinted on the collective memory, this rhetorical strategy might also suggest a desire to rebrand the Canadian intellectuals as having been physically invested in the prevention of the escalation of Fascism, represented most dramatically in the pre-Second World War period by the Spanish Civil War.

In this way, Page distances her generation from accusations of appeasement that have come to be infamously associated with the interwar period, especially in its final years, during which the

² Orwell fought with the militia of the Spanish Party of Marxist Unification (POUM); Hemingway worked as a journalist.

³ See my discussion of lines 37-9 later on this page.

Spanish Civil War took place. This fear of indecisive action and “the dreadful / opacity of adolescence” (Page 11-12) is made clear in her declaration, “We strapped our hands in slings / fearing the dreaded / gesture of compromise” (37-9). The strapping of a hand is a decisive action and a conscious decision to prevent it from making the “gesture of compromise” (39), i.e. that of appeasement, that one might be tempted to commit, considering its prevalence at the time. At the same time, the “sling” suggests the hand has been wounded, as if it has seen active duty. Thus, rather than being a part of the system that fails to check Fascism, the speaker’s generation chooses to undergo bodily harm. The suggestion here is that it is not the “hands in slings” (37) that are crippling, but the “dreaded / gesture of compromise” (38-9). In this way, Page locates the commitment of her generation firmly in the body and its ability for decisive action.

In a pivotal moment in her poem, Page positions “Spain” as the galvanizing force in the synthesis of this commitment through the kinds of garden imagery that would later become central to some of Page’s most important works.⁴ For the speaker, “Tragically, Spain was our spade; / the flares went up in the garden. / We dug at night” (24-6). Just as the spade is used to create the garden, Spain, here conflated with the Spanish Civil War, is the tool through which this generation’s social commitment and “permanent beliefs” (51) are formed. Page’s placement of this digging “at night” (26) as “the flares went up” (25) suggests the secrecy required by Canadian volunteers. Under the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1937, Canadians were strictly prohibited from

⁴ See “After Rain” and “Planet Earth.” In particular, all three poems directly link cloth with the garden and/or land. In “Generation,” the speaker describes how this generation “knew love roll from a bolt / long as the soil” (41-42).

volunteering in the Spanish Civil War. Those who did volunteer had to go to often-extraordinary measures to get to Spain. In addition, the leftists at home, who often faced harassment from the traditionally conservative police, needed to work in similar obscurity. This “spade” cultivates the seeds of questioning, the “agenda / of unanswerable questions / growing like roots” (21-3), that had already been planted, and that challenged the conservative status quo. In so doing, this conflict gives this generation the confidence to “walk on foreign streets / wearing crash helmets / of permanent beliefs” (49-51). The conviction of this ending note is in direct contrast to the unconfident “treading / the treacherous tight-rope / of unbelieved religion” (8-10) of the first strophe. Having “committed arson – / firing our parent-pasts” (30-1), this generation can

Now ... touch continents
with our little fingers,
swim distant seas
and walk on foreign streets. (46-9)

While most of the poem is written in the past tense, this switch to the present tense here suggests the lasting impact that the Spanish Civil War had on Page’s generation. Now able to “touch continents / with our little fingers” (46-7), this generation renounces their sense of insularity and turns outward, enabling them to interact with other cultures in a physical and intimate way.

While wounded by the Spanish Civil War, with their “strapped ... hands in slings” (37), Page’s generation is not crippled. In fact, this experience has cultivated confidence, commitment, and conviction in this generation of Canadians. Having been freed from the “dreadful / opacity of adolescence” (11-2), her generation has learned to empathize with other peoples

and grow into their own “permanent beliefs” (51) through the formative experience of the Spanish Civil War.

Works Cited

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