

Remembering the Future: Writing Guernica in P.K. Page's "Poem"

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First published in *Preview* magazine in 1944, P.K. Page's "Poem" begins with a solemn plea for solidarity: "Let us by paradox / choose a Catholic close / for innocence" ("Sealed in Struggle" 152). Like many English Canadian poems written in the wake of Franco's (and fascism's) victory over Spain, "Poem" embodies what Alain Badiou terms "a nostalgia of the future... a kind of poetic regret for what we imagine the world will have been when communism has come" (104). In "Poem," this "nostalgia of the future" is paradoxically rooted in the past, in Spain and "at" the bombing of Guernica, the 1937 tragedy that became an emblem of the atrocities of fascist warfare and a rallying cry for a collective, anti-fascist uprising. Yet despite its invocation of Guernica, Page's "Poem" is also distant from the past, from Spain and from Guernica, occupying a kind of limbo-like existence in a land of nowhere and no time, of a past defeated and a future deferred. Of course, given the year of its publication, "Poem" is very much situated within its own temporal and historic moment – namely, the Second World War. I will thus analyse the multiple temporal and geographic paradoxes of Page's "Poem" in order to explore the ways in which the poem invokes Guernica as a remembrance of the future, a future without war, without fascism – a future, that is, without another Guernica.

"Poem" expresses a quiet urgency, an eternal restlessness that haunts the poem's imaginary of the past, present and future. In the poem's closing lines, the speaker invites "us," an unidentified collective, to join together in remembering Guernica:

Let us stand here close

for death is common as grass beyond an ocean
and, with all Europe pricking in our eyes,
suddenly remember Guernica
and be gone.

We are asked – “by paradox” – to remember Guernica from a temporal and geographic distance, to “stand / here close” from afar. To “suddenly remember Guernica” becomes an ideological imperative, but that act of memory, that sudden remembrance, is interrupted and displaced by the present moment. How, the poem asks, can we “sing the certainty that humanity is right to create a world in which the treasure of simple life will be preserved peacefully” (Badiou 103) in the face of the immense tragedies of the Second World War? How can we speak of life when death is “as common as grass beyond an ocean”? How can we “suddenly remember Guernica,” how can we remember –and realize – the ideals of the Spanish Civil War “with all Europe pricking in our eyes”? How can we mourn a past that is not yet finished, or sing of a future that is not yet come?

According to Nicolas Vulpe, the “most striking characteristic of Canadian poetry about the Spanish Civil War is that it has so little to do with Spain but that, nonetheless, it is about the war” (21). For many Canadian and transnational poets, Spain became the ideological site of a displaced future, a dream of tomorrow, wherein fascism is defeated and democracy and freedom prevail: “In Spain tomorrow...was being born” (Vulpe 32). Page’s “Poem” participates in this prophesy of tomorrow, this endlessly deferred dawn, but it also expresses a more sober vision of the future. While the poem issues an incantation, a repeated call for social communion and collective participation, it is also characterized by stasis and silence. For example, the poem is set in a garden, but a garden

that does not grow. In this garden, a fallen, gothic Eden, “pale nuns, handless as seals, move in the still shadow” while we are instructed to “Wince at the smell of beaded flowers / like rosaries on the bush” (152). Given that Catholicism symbolized the kind of wealth, class hierarchy and socio-political corruption that anti-fascists so fervently fought against, the movements of the “pale nuns” and “hatted priests” in this garden of pungent “rosaries” indicates a kind of fascist occupation of Eden, bearing overt resemblance to fascism’s occupation of Spain following Franco’s victory in 1939. But as Eden (that is, Spain) has been taken over, frozen in time and plunged into silence, we “stand” like statues, looking on, indefinitely awaiting the return of democracy to “this silent place” (152). We are the guardians of the future, the watchers of the past, waiting in the ruins of democracy.

In her biography of Page, *Journey With No Maps*, Sandra Djwa attributes the poem’s sombre tone to a difficult period in Page’s life:

The last part of 1943, and the first few months of 1944 were very difficult for Pat. In February she published a fine poem in *Preview*...It is a sombre poem. The outcome of the war in Europe was uncertain; her father was now general officer, commander-in-chief, Atlantic Command, and was subject to the enormous stress of protecting Halifax and the North Atlantic; [and] her brother was at sea and at the mercy of enemy submarines... (86)

Despite the ways in which the war in Europe may have affected Page on a very personal level, “Poem” asserts a collective position. The reader is asked to enter into communion with the speaker from the very first words of the poem: “Let us.” Yet the last words of the poem – “and be

gone” – do not affirm a sense of collective unity, but rather a sense of collective dissolution or, at the very least, disillusionment. In other words, the poem signals the very real possibility for the “communist Idea” (Badiou 107) to fail. In this way, “Poem” is not only an elegy for Guernica, but also for the communist idea, for the failure of the democratic good to triumph over the fascist evil – in Spain and internationally. As Badiou argues, “communist poetry...is also lyric poetry of what communism, as the figure of humanity reconciled with its own grandeur, will have been after victory, which for the poet is already regret and melancholy as well as ‘nostalgic hope’ of his soul, past as well as future” (105). Indeed, the swift and striking shifts of tense throughout the poem indicate its temporal paradox: Page moves from past, present and future in a single breath. The poem is, at once, fully situated within its historical context and utterly out-of-time, distant yet “here close” to Guernica amidst the Second World War. Incidentally, in Page’s 1967 poetry collection, *Cry Ararat! Poems New and Selected*, the poem appears under a revised title, “Poem in War Time.” It is published again under this same title in the 1974 collection, *P.K. Page: Poems Selected and New*. The revised title aligns the poem with other “war time” poetry, signalling its war time context without, in fact, specifying the war or, for that matter, the time. Unlike “Poem,” the revised title “Poem in War Time” expresses a claim to universality, as it situates the poem within a timeless, de-historicized context, yet nonetheless signals a specific event – that is, the event of war. A “Poem in War Time” is, after all, a rather different beast than just a plain old “Poem.”

Like the majority of Canadian poets writing about the Spanish Civil War, Page never visited Spain but nevertheless invoked the “international and acutely ideological nature of the Spanish War” to address the “most pressing issues of the time” (Vulpe 32). Indeed,

Page's "early Montreal poems and stories deal with topics like bank strikes, ship-building offices, typists, conscription, bombs, and Guernica" (Djwa 77). Yet Spain was more than a topic of interest for Page and her contemporaries; it was a way to construct and affirm a collective poetic identity. As Djwa states, "Page wrote as a modern, part of the war generation, saying in a poem with that title: "'Tragically, Spain was our spade'" (113). By writing about the Spanish Civil War, Page claimed allegiance with a new generation of Canadian poets who were finding their poetic and political voices in a foreign country and a foreign conflict. Of Page's generation, Djwa argues that their identification with the Spanish Civil War helped mold their very sense of being, both as writers and as citizens of a new and increasingly global age: "This generation took no definite shape until the mid-1930's...It was the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War that forced some of this generation to reject the past" ("Canadian Poets on War" 50). This rejection of the past is figured in "Poem" as a dual-imperative: even as we are asked to "suddenly remember Guernica," we are instructed to move beyond the past and beyond Spain – "and be gone." Paradoxically, the poem itself never leaves Spain. In her "appropriation of the Spanish war through Christian myth" (Vulpe 43), Page indicates the failure of the Spanish Civil War to bring about the death of fascism, and destroy the social hierarchies and class divisions, the "terrible inequalities" (Badiou 106) of the world. The "pale nuns" and "hatted priests" still lurk in the "still shadow[s]"; war and fascism live on. Given that the speaker implores "us" to come stand guard three times – the same number of times the apostle Peter denied Jesus the night before his crucifixion – the poem transports us from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane, from young idealism to inevitable betrayal. The poem's allusions to Christ's crucifixion also, by extension, allude to his

resurrection, and Page aligns Christ's second coming with the "second coming" of democracy, like so many of her contemporaries (Vulpe 44). "Poem" is thus a tomb, in which the hope of salvation lies, awaiting resurrection.

As the poem never leaves Spain, so too does it never leave Canada: "Let us stand here close, for death is common as grass beyond an ocean." Despite the poem's attempts to bear witness across temporal and spatial borders, the boundaries remain impassable, the distance, incommensurable. Indeed, the collective body of Page's "Poem" is noticeably absent of limbs: while the "hatted priest" and "pale nuns" are able to "move in the still shadow" and "walk with book from Presbytery to border," we are given only "our eyes" to witness a war, a history, a nation, and a future beyond our reach. Yet "our eyes" are also our voice, and our voice is our "Poem." To "suddenly remember Guernica" is to remember the future.

Works Cited

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