

P.K.PAGE'S "CONVERSATION": A DIALOGUE BETWEEN PAINTING AND POETRY

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- **ABSTRACT:** This work analyzes P.K.Page's poem "Conversation", which concerns the remembrance of a dialogue between the Canadian poet and the Israeli ambassador Arie Aroch, while both were engaged in painting a canvas in her studio on Estrada da Gávea, in Rio de Janeiro. By way of a stylistic approach – foregrounding the recurrence of a specific vocabulary related to painting, of formal and pictorial frames (the picture within a picture) and of images suggestively symbolical –, the analysis will reveal that, in spite of the informality of the dialogue enhanced by the use of free verse lines, the poem actually becomes a dialogue between the art of painting and the art of poetry.
- **KEYWORDS:** Canadian poetry. Stylistics. Aesthetics.

In contrast to P.K.Page's other Brazilian poems, which deal with specific cultural, historical and social aspects of Brazil, as the titles of the poems already convey – "Brazilian Fazenda", "Brazilian House" and "Macumba: Brazil" –, "Conversation" (PAGE, 1997, p.124) actually concerns the remembrance of a dialogue between Page and the Israeli ambassador Arie Aroch, "a famous painter in his other life" who used to paint together with her occasionally². This conversation took place while both were painting in Page's so-called "studio"³, in the *palacete* on Estrada da Gávea in Rio de Janeiro, where she and her husband used to live in the late fifties, while he was the Canadian Ambassador to Brazil. For this reason, the contextual and situational parameters (LEECH, 1985, p.40) which define "Conversation" will project the informality of the relation between addresser and addressee – the "I" and the "you" in the poem – through the communicative activity they are engaged in: painting a canvas together.

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² P.K.Page's letter to the author, on January 6th, 2006.

³ P.K.Page's letter to the author, on November 11th, 2007.

If the title “Conversation” already suggests a friendly informal talk, this informality becomes apparent not only in the style of the dialogue but even in the lineation of the poem – composed of four free-verse strophes of 4-9-6-4 lines respectively, all of the strophes characterized by nonmetrical structuring, reliance on grammatical breaks and absence of regular endrhyme (PREMINGER; BROGAN, 1993, p. 425). The very root of “conversation” – to converse: talk with person about a subject, from French *converser*, from Latin *conversari* > to keep company (with) – adds a further intimacy to the conversation, reminding us that, as both artists are painting and talking to each other, they are simultaneously keeping each other company. Even the expression “conversation piece” – a type of genre painting, popular in the eighteenth century, in which a group of people, usually of the upper classes, are shown in an appropriate setting –, will become concretized in this poem, as the first image of strophe it already conveys:

We were set in the green enamel of Brazil –
You – monumental, an Old Testament prophet, caught
Mid-stride and speaking in utterances:
“Thou shalt. Thou shalt not.” (PAGE, 1997, p.124).

Here we visualize Page and Aroch, “set in the green enamel of Brazil” and thus also placed inside a picture, glazed in green, surrounded as they are by the gardens of the *palacete* and, as our eyes move from the foreground to the background of the picture, by the “forested mountains”(PAGE, 1987, p.5) encircling the place. Besides reminding us of Brazil’s lush vegetation and thus with symbolic connotations of fertility and freshness, while also related to sensations and to the emerald (VRIES, 1974, p. 226-7) the color “green” has its meaningfulness further enhanced by “enamel”: this glass-like semi-transparent coating of metallic surfaces for ornament, or painting done on enamel, leading on the one hand to its poetical suggestiveness of a smooth bright surface coloring, and verdure, and thus connoting transparency and light spreading over the vegetation, while on the other hand it also points forward to a specific vocabulary related to painting. The very word “Brazil”, as well known, derives from the reddish trunk of a tree – *pau-brasil* – and thus also anticipates and relates to the red color of “fire” and “flame” in the last strophe.

The visual beauty of the image created by “the green enamel of Brazil” is phonologically further enhanced by the repetition of the liquids /l/, /r/, in green/enamel/ Brazil, as well as of the nasals /n/, /m/, as if “enamel” came as a sequence to “green”, for visually the ending of “green” is retaken in the first letters of “enamel” and the last syllable of “enamel” forms an internal rhyme with “Brazil”. Besides, the interlacing of all these sound effects, together with the softness of the voiced consonants /b/, /g/, /z/, and the sonority of the vowels in green/enamel/Brazil,

as if the sounds in “green enamel” prepare us for the sounds in “Brazil”, contribute not only to the fusion of colors and sounds, but simultaneously usher in the image of the luxuriant landscape of the tropics.

The conversational tone is further enhanced by the fact that the poem starts with “we were set”, suggesting that the reader already knows who the speakers are, while the dash, in its turn, marking a break in the sentence or an interruption in thought, confirms the colloquial tone of the poem. The past tense corroborates that the action was completed at some time in the past and thus, that the addresser – the “I” inside the “we”, is remembering the event.

Although it is easy to associate the addresser or the poetic “I” to the poet Page, herself a renowned painter, it becomes actually vital to know the identity of the addressee – who is not identified throughout the poem – for his characterization as “monumental, an Old Testament prophet”, becomes much more meaningful if we know that he is Israeli ambassador and thus, Jewish. In this way, “monumental”, with its suggestions of being great and lasting, tremendous – the noun “monument” (from *monumentum*= *monere*, remind) retrieving the meaning of somebody who will always be remembered –, prepares us for his identification with an “Old Testament prophet”, and thus establishing from the start his ascendancy over the addresser. As “equivalence in sound, projected into the sequence as its constitutive principle, inevitably involves semantic equivalence” (JAKOBSON, 1964, p.368), the re-echoing of the sounds of “monumental” in “Testament” further corroborates the intimate relationship established in this context between both words. Moreover, if “Old Testament” already reminds us of that portion of the Bible dealing with the Mosaic dispensation, while “prophet” (from Greek *pro+phetes* = speaker, spokesman) is a person inspired by God to speak for him, as in announcing future events, both qualifiers further confirm the solemnity of this inspired man, “caught mid/stride and speaking in utterances: /“Thou shalt. Thou shalt not.”

The fact that he is “caught/ mid-stride”, and thus in the middle of an action, adds movement to his power of expressing himself, as he is giving Page his orders on how a painting should be done. The imperative statements, “Thou shalt. Thou shalt not”, in their turn, become even more meaningful as they simultaneously retrieve, through the archaic use of “thou” and “shalt”, the very language of the Old Testament, and, specifically, words from the Ten Commandments, thus further reinforcing the addressee’s expressions of command and future duty towards the addresser. The rhyme caught/not – unobtrusive at first sight, for “caught” is unstressed –, besides binding the lines of verse together, also helps to intensify the “semantic relationship between rhyming units” (JAKOBSON, 1964, p.367), as both units refer to Aroch’s action and speech, in this way also stressing the addressee’s formality.

This formality, nevertheless, will then be abruptly broken in strophe II:

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.
No “shalt”. No “shalt not”.(PAGE, 1997, p.124).

The adversative conjunction “but” – introducing an objection which is further reinforced by another dash – breaks down the addressee’s solemnity, for both were “laughing”. Their expression of mirth suggests not only a happy occasion but also the fact that, as laughter is related to joy, triumph or challenge both could also be defying the solemnity of his utterances. This challenge at the same time reminds us of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival laughter – this ancient kind ritual laughter directed toward a higher order, in order to disparage and ridicule the sun, the other gods, or the highest earthly authority, and thereby force them to renew themselves (BAKHTIN, 1973, p.104) – , in this way also corroborating to the relaxed tone of this “conversation”.

The present perfect tense in “have you forgotten?”, in its turn, suggests the experience is over but not its remembrance, therefore confirming that the addresser is recalling the episode, which is then retrieved and developed in the next lines. By acknowledging “I was high –” the addresser acknowledges being in “high spirits” and thus feeling even “higher than Corcovado”. The height symbolism associated to mountains – high thought, mysticism, freedom – increases our sense of her elatedness – further foregrounded by the repetition of the diphthong /ai/ in /I/ high/higher/light in the same line of verse, which propitiates the identification of herself with her exalted state–, as she is ecstatic over “the light/ the colour, the sharp smell of turps/ and the little jewel of a canvas” both she and Aroch “had made”. Simultaneously, Page’s inspired state in viewing “the light”, “the colour”, and the “turps” on the “canvas”, continues the sequence of the other images in the poem related to the art of painting.

The denotative meaning of “light” in this context – as the natural agent that stimulates the sense of sight, the medium of space in which sight is possible, the amount of illumination in place, daylight –, leading to its symbolic connotations of spiritual life, knowledge, cosmic energy and creative force, enhances its importance in relation to the art of painting, as “light” is the effect that most painters aim at, in their effort to create illuminated surfaces.

As if deriving from the concept of “light”, “colour” – this sensation produced on eye by rays of decomposed light, as well as any mixture of the constituents into which light decomposes as in spectrum, but also, in painting, meaning pigment, paint –, adds brightness and gayness to the scene, while at the same time retrieving the image of the “green enamel of Brazil”.

The stimulation of our senses continues with the mentioning of “the sharp smell of turps” – this oil obtained from certain trees, used in mixing paints and varnishes and thus also anticipating the painting itself – the concrete *objet d’art*. Moreover, by way of the symbolism of “smell” as a bridge to heaven, the function of the odor of turpentine becomes similar to that of incense – related to inspiration for prayers, meditation or prophecy –, therefore predisposing for the creation of “the little jewel of a canvas” they “had made”.

As we reach the word “canvas” – this strong, coarse cloth used by artists for painting on in oil, synonymous of picture and, as cloth, symbolic of immortality – we suddenly realize how Page is talking about her own work of art, thereby introducing, through “the little jewel of a canvas we had made”, the theme of meta-painting and meta-poetry, or, in other words, art speaking about art – the poet/painter talking about her poem/picture: we have a painting – the canvas – inside another painting – both artists, engaged in talking and in painting, “set in the green enamel of Brazil”. In this way, the canvas with the painting on it becomes iconic of the page of a book with the poem about a painting printed on it, thus indelibly mixing both arts and both artists, and therefore also retrieving Horace’s “ut pictura poesis”.

Moreover, by inserting herself in the poem while describing how a painting is done, the theme of a picture inside a picture is further enlarged by encompassing the motif of a painting portraying the painter showing himself painting on a canvas, thereby also calling to mind, among other masterpieces, Vermeer’s “The Art of Painting”. This painting depicts presumably Vermeer (2007) himself painting a model who poses with a crown of laurel on her head a trumpet in one hand and a book in the other. The competition between the illusion of reality and the physical evidence of the brushstroke transports us into a different realm, that of Painting. In this space the brush strokes seem what they are, touches of the brush, but applied within the fictive space of the painting, and not on a canvas which is located various meters in front of the figures. It also calls up Courbet’s “The Painter’s Studio” in which the painter has taken as the subject of his masterpiece his own pictorial inspiration: we see Courbet himself, surrounded by his friends, his enemies and the poor, painting on a large canvas the landscape of his birthplace, in order to manifest his refusal to accept the current vogue in art that considered a landscape not being a dignified theme for a serious artist (CUMMING, 1998, p.83). It recalls, as well, Velázquez’ “Las Meninas” in which, according to John R. Searle (1980, p.485) “the painter is

painting the picture we are seeing: that is, he is painting *Las Meninas* by Velázquez”, while Sir Thomas Lawrence, the famous English portrait painter, wrote that the work incarnates “the philosophy of art”. By serving as commentaries, among other aspects, on the art of painting and on the role and status of the artist, these paintings concomitantly enhance the relationships that can be established between the art of painting and the art of poetry, as well as how the “step-by-step connections between linguistic details and an integrated appreciation of the text” (LEECH, 1985, p.55), which are being established in relation to “Conversation”, can be further enriched by extending them beyond the frontiers of verbal language.

The comparison of the canvas to a “little jewel” – this ornament containing precious stones, worn for personal adornment, or a highly prized thing – with its symbolic connotations of superior truths, fertility, purity, durability and immortality, also conveys the artist’s own evaluation of the painting she and Aroch had painted together. Page is aware of the value of this work of art that resulted from their joint creative effort, which is further emphasized by the use of the past perfect tense, for she is remembering a past episode and thus an action that has been completed before the actual remembrance of the event. Moreover, the brightness of this “little jewel”, already prefigured by the alliteration *light/little* and by the repetition of the voiceless consonant /t/ in both words, will then be extended to “jewel”, to then be extended, once more, through the rhyme *light/bright*, to the insects.

The description of the painting –

insects, of all things, winged and crawling, bright
iridescent bodies, hexagonal eyes
and the absolute stamp of air
in the gauze of their wings. (PAGE, 1997, p.124).

– reveals that they have been painting mosquitoes or flies, so abundant in tropical regions and, therefore, in the forests covering the mountains in Rio. If “insects” – these small, winged animals with three pairs of legs, including bees, flies, mosquitoes and beetles, among others – already connote short life and being a product of metamorphosis (from the egg to the final stage), the fact that they are able to fly and crawl points further to their versatility in spite of their diminutive size. As crawling animals, they move along slowly with the body close to the ground, pointing to their vulnerability and thus to their being able to be “caught” in a painting, while as winged animals, they are able to escape from their predators through flying away. The symbolic connotations of “wings” – related to elevation, active aspiration, power, time, speed, resurrection, air, ubiquity, victory – confirm their power to survive in adverse circumstances in spite of their fragility.

The value of these qualities seem to have been intuited by both artists, as they have been “caught” on the canvas, portrayed with their “bright/iridescent bodies, hexagonal eyes/and the absolute stamp of air/in the gauze of their wings” and therefore reminding us of “little jewels”: their “bright iridescent bodies” – showing colors like those of a rainbow or changing color with position, qualities which are further enhanced by their bodies simultaneously reflecting light – retrieving the iridescence and brightness of a precious stone; their “hexagonal eyes”, suggesting that their organ of sight is much quicker and more powerful than ours, and thus related symbolically to the sun, knowledge, understanding, and the orb, further retrieving the hexagonal cutting of a precious stone, in order to enhance its brightness; while “the absolute stamp of air/ in the gauze of their wings”, in which the denotative meaning of air – as atmosphere, free space overhead, breeze, light wind – leading to its connotations of creative breath of life, space, related to lightness, is made concrete by having these qualities completely and perfectly stamped on “the gauze of their wings”. The suggestiveness of gauze – this very thin fabric of silk or cotton –, symbolizing freedom as dematerialization, only corroborates the transparency and brightness of these wings, while concomitantly recapturing the transparency and brightness that irradiates from a precious stone or a jewel. Moreover, the alliterative and consonantal effects in absolute/stamp/air as well as the re-echoing of the voiced consonants g/z in hexagonal/gauze/wings – all of these words having the insects as referent –, further binds these images in form and meaning.

In this way, as we have moved from the background to the foreground, from the outer frame of the scene to the canvas, we now visualize the details of the canvas, in another *mise-en-abîme*: the insects, shining as tiny jewels inside “the little jewel of a canvas” and themselves emblematic of metamorphosis, have undergone another metamorphosis, as they have been changed through art from objects/things into *objets-d’art* – bright, iridescent and precious as jewels.

As the addresser denies the commands uttered above, in transforming the sentences into “ “No “shalt”. No “shalt not”. ”, the conversational tone is resumed again, for we move from the description of the painting back to the painters’ dialogue, in this way framing the picture one more time, inside the poem. In this manner, the dialogue between painting and poetry becomes foregrounded again, while preparing us for Strophe III:

I was laughing – true. Not up to utterances.
 Able only to slosh and slosh my brush
 in the paint your Old Testament hand had mixed
 with such assurance – additive colour – paint like light,
 when under its sudden weight, my hand collapsed.
 Each cell grew heavy. My arm fell. (PAGE, 1997, p.124).

Retaking once more the informality of the occasion by conceding that it was she who was actually laughing because she was “not up to utterances”, the addresser is at the same time retrieving the main points of the two antecedent strophes, thus creating syntactic and semantic parallelisms of similarity and contrast which act again like the frames of a picture, as they involve their act of painting – “we were set in the green enamel of Brazil/we were laughing/ I was laughing” and “Thou shalt. Thou shalt not” / “No “shalt”. No “shalt not”” – in this way involving their act of painting with their acts of congeniality: laughing and talking.

Her informality, nevertheless, only allows her “to slosh and slosh” her brush in the paint his “Old Testament hand had mixed with such assurance”, in which we almost hear, through the repetition of the onomatopoeic “slosh”, followed by “brush”, the sounds of her brush splashing paint.

The addressee’s “hand”, in its turn, has its symbolic connotations of strength, power, authority, labor, blessing, and consecration further enriched and corroborated by being the hand of “an Old Testament prophet”, and thus , by retrieving the connotations of this image in the first strophe, adding the quality of inspiration to it. It is an inspired hand that is painting the picture, which is confirmed not only by the self-confidence with which Aroch mixes the paint, but also by the quality he transmits to it as he adds color to the painting: “paint like light”. And, as if in sequence to the words related to painting mentioned above, we now visualize the artist’s implements: the “brush”, itself representative of the art of painting; the “paint” – this solid coloring-matter which imparts color to a surface – , adding the sense of touch to the scene, while the repetition of “color” and “light” enhances once more their importance through their symbolic associations, as seen.

The following lines

when under its sudden weight, my hand collapsed.
Each cell grew heavy. My arm fell. (PAGE, 1997, p.124).

suggest that the addresser’s hand, in contrast to Aroch’s Old Testament hand, apparently grew suddenly tired of painting, as if the weight of the paint on her brush were too much for her. Consequently, her hand “collapsed” – connoting that it underwent a sudden shrinking together or prostration by loss of nervous or muscular power and thus failing suddenly and completely. The rhyme mixed/collapsed underscores again the semantic relationship that is established between both words, as mentioned above. The fact that “each cell grew heavy” – the meaning of “cell” as the smallest part of living matter enhancing her tiredness and heaviness –, not only corroborates her loss of muscular power, but simultaneously prepares us for “my arm fell”. Directing the hand, the arm is equally emblematic of power, activity,

and readiness for work, in this way reinforcing once more, through its dropping, Page's incapacity to go on with the activity of painting. The visual similarity between collapsed/cell, as well as the internal rhyme cell/fell and light/weight, contribute to make the lines become closer in meaning, while the repetition of the concept of "weight" in "grew heavy", plus the syntactic parallelism "my hand collapsed/my arm fell" leading to its semantic parallelism, further indicate that inspiration seems to have left her.

The last strophe

It was then you put the fire in the canvas,
flame in the wings.
Made little phoenixes of the simple flies.
Spun, on the ball of your foot. (PAGE, 1997, p.124).

brings another turn to the scene, as Page recalls how Aroch adds not only "light" to the paint, as in strophes II and III, but "fire" to the canvas and "flame" to the wings. As the creative force in vegetation, and one of the elements that made the earth, the symbolism of fire – the Creative God of Light (Yahweh almost always manifested himself as fire, as for example to Moses on the Mount), the essence of life, the sun, authority and power –, deepens its significance and confirms Aroch's talent in transmitting life to the canvas, and transcendence to the wings of the flies. Moreover, the alliteration fire/flame contributes to the superposition of both images – the fire covering the whole canvas, and the flame, as a blaze of light or color, shining on the wings, the whole and the part retrieving simultaneously, inside the symbolism of fire/flame, the concept of the prophet as God's spokesman, with his inspired words/ hands, setting the painting on fire.

Concomitantly, the fire/flame imagery brings to mind not only the origin of the word Brazil, as seen above – *pau brasa*: the color of ember, live coal, thus binding the background scene or the outer frame with the details of the foreground, the macrocosm reproduced in the microcosm. As both artists are set in a Brazilian landscape painting fiery insects, all the other images related to the associations of fire and flame are recovered: light, color, jewel, bright, iridescent and air. The symbolic associations of "wings" mentioned above, all of them also applicable to the flies, now acquire another property: flame/fire, thus making the flies, already indicative of metamorphosis, undergo another transformation, as the prophet's hand has made the "simple flies" become "little phoenixes".

The reference to this mythological bird (from Greek *phoenix*: Phoenician, purple, phoenix) – the only one of its kind, that after living five or six centuries in the Arabian desert burnt itself on a funeral pile and rose from the ashes with

renewed youth to live through another cycle – , brings out not only the longevity that these flies acquire, through the painter’s “prophetic /inspired” hand and thus through art, in contrast to their usual short life; the “color” they derive from the word “Phoenix” meaning “purple”; but mainly the associations that are related to this bright colored bird: solar worship, resurrection, immortality, eternal youth. These connotations emphasize once more that flies are a product of metamorphosis, thus making their innate characteristics as well their images overlap with those of the phoenix, while simultaneously retrieving the concept of liberty and inspiration embedded in the wings. In sequence to the alliteration fire/flame, the alliteration phoenixes/flyes further binds these four words together in meaning, as they have been brought together in sound, for the images and associations of these four nouns overlap.

The last line of the poem, “Spun, on the ball of your foot”, suggests that, as Aroch turns round, the painting is done, the inspiration/magic is completed. For “spun”, in sequence to “you put” and “(you) made” and as the past tense of “to spin”, means to whirl or rotate swiftly, to move along swiftly and smoothly, therefore connoting a movement away from the picture. If the circumferential movement of turning around already suggests faultless activity, all cyclic existence, and thus corroborates the fact that the painting has been completed and is now perfect, the painter’s action of “turning around” is further enhanced by being done on the ball of the foot: in direct contact with the earth and thus emblematic of seat of power, magic power, soul, the symbolism of the foot confirms the painter’s capacity to transmit fire/life to the flies, while the very image of roundness contained in the “ball” of the foot, again symbolizes perfection.

The poem thus ends centered on Aroch, the monumental Old Testament prophet, turning away from the painting he has just completed. This movement, significantly, recalls the end of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, when the painter Lily Briscoe turns to the canvas she had painted and, “with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (WOOLF, 1955, p.310). Both Aroch and Page have also had their vision, as painters and poets – one, elated by the little jewel of a canvas they had just made; the other, putting the finishing touch of fire onto the work of art; one, transferring the experience into the spatial structure of a free-verse poem; the other, closing the scene by turning round and away from the canvas.

The “conversation” between the painter/poet and the painter/prophet has ended. Nevertheless, the merging of the sensations of sight, sound, smell, touch, and movement remain, transmitted through by colors, light, space, dialogue, laughter,

objects and insects, all set inside the frame of “the green enamel of Brazil” and printed on the page of a book, as we recreate the experience in the poem.

In this way, if “the stylistic features of a text may be seen as to a greater or lesser extent predictable from its situational parameters” (LEECH, 1985, p.40), what could not be predicted, because of the informal tone of “Conversation”, was how the “framework of description”, which “envisages a poem as a successful manifestation of a central invariant, or *theme*” (ZHOLKOVSKY, 1985, p.106), would reveal Page’s poem to become not only rhetorically derived from the theme – a “conversation” – but simultaneously the concretization of a new *ars poetica*, in which the arts of painting and poetry overlap.

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- **RESUMO:** *O presente trabalho faz uma leitura do poema “Conversation” (1997), de P.K.Page, que reproduz a lembrança de um diálogo entre a poeta canadense e o embaixador israelense Arie Aroch, enquanto ambos pintavam um quadro no estúdio da Estrada da Gávea, no Rio de Janeiro. Através de uma abordagem estilística – salientando a recorrência de um vocabulário específico da pintura, de molduras formais e pictóricas (o quadro dentro de um quadro) e de imagens sugestivamente simbólicas – a análise irá revelar que, apesar do tom informal do diálogo ressaltado pelo emprego de versos livres, o poema na realidade se torna um diálogo entre a arte da pintura e a arte da poesia.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Poesia canadense. Estilística. Estética.*

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