

# ‘But How Do You Write A Chagall?’

Ekphrasis and the Brazilian Poetry of  
P.K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop

“Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or  
some northerly harbor of Labrador,  
before he became a schoolteacher  
a great-uncle painted a big picture.”

ELIZABETH BISHOP, “Large Bad Picture”

“As I stepped from the small box of an elevator into the apartment  
of the Swiss minister, I entered a Matisse painting”

P.K. PAGE, *Brazilian Journal*

“your eyes proclaim,  
That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there  
And nothing can exist except what’s there.”

JOHN ASHBERY, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”

**W**hen P.K. Page arrived in Brazil with her ambassador husband, Arthur Irwin, in 1957, Elizabeth Bishop had been living there for approximately six years. Both women wrote and painted in Brazil, and while they never met, both found it a strangely beautiful and also an alienating place. Their ways of coping with artistic and personal crises varied as widely as their poetics; nevertheless, an examination of P.K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil reveals how travel poets write against a foreign surface. In what I will identify as their ekphrastic poems (and ekphrasis is always written in code) Bishop and Page attempted to write “visual art,” that is, they tried to articulate a “foreign” perception of Brazil which could not be copied into words.

In his 1958 book, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry From Dryden to Gray*, Jean H. Hagstrum defines the term “ekphrasis” more narrowly than critics who have followed him:

I use the noun “ekphrasis” and the adjective “ekphrastic” . . . to refer to that special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object. . . . My usage is etymologically sound since the Greek noun and adjective come from *ekphrazein* . . . which means “to speak out,” “to tell in full” (18).

Hagstrum uses the term “iconic poetry” to describe what has come to be known as ekphrasis:

In [iconic] poetry the poet contemplates a real or imaginary work of art that he describes or responds to in some other way (18).

Recent definitions concentrate on representation and refer less frequently to the requirement that the poem give voice to a silent object. In “Ekphrasis and Representation,” James A.W. Heffernan defines ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of graphic representation” (299). (See also his 1993 book *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*.) Many critics remain preoccupied, however, with the binaries inherited from Lessing’s *Laokoön*: time/space and movement/stillness. Murray Krieger, for example, in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, observes:

Ekphrastic ambition gives to the language art the extraordinary assignment of seeking to represent the literally unrepresentable. Yet every tendency in the verbal sequence to freeze itself into a shape—or can we use “form” or “pattern” or some other metaphor borrowed from the spatial arts—is inevitably accompanied by a counter-tendency for that sequence to free itself from the limited enclosure of the frozen, sensible image into an unbounded temporal flow (9-10).

John Hollander has coined the term “notional ekphrasis” (209) to describe poems about *imagined* works of art—exactly what occurs in Bishop and Page. Hollander’s is a useful term because it recognizes many poems that might otherwise be ignored in a discussion of rhetorical strategies and the problem of visual/verbal representation.

Ekphrasis is a particularly important strategy when it is employed in travel literature, for it acts as an intervention—and an intercession—between traveller/poet and place, the viewer and the subject of the gaze. For the poet/observer ekphrasis is a way of ordering experience. When a foreign place is turned into a painting, a double distancing occurs: the real scene is reimagined as a painting but one that has life only in terms of the poem. The poem, particularly in creating a notional ekphrasis, paints the visual art. If the poet actually creates the art about which she talks, then she has managed to take over the role of painter, bridging the gap between the sister arts and making, crucially, visual image depend upon word. And if a visual

image, particularly an unfamiliar one, depends upon the poet's own words, then it is sufficiently contained, reined in, and made comprehensible to a viewer who is made to feel "other" by it.

**B**onnie Costello suggests that Elizabeth Bishop's "Arrival at Santos" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502" examine the persistence and self-defeat of the colonial mentality" (129). These poems also suggest Bishop's ambivalence about her own position in Brazil.

In "Arrival at Santos" a blandness and a depression overtake the tourist:

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;  
here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:  
impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains  
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,  
  
with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,  
some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,  
and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,  
is this how this country is going to answer you  
(*Complete Poems* 89)

Victoria Harrison points out that, in this poem, the tourist can't see:

Folded into the tourist's babble in "Arrival at Santos," these voice-over lines of self-judgment reveal her "suspension" between the expectations of home and the details of here, the not-home that she cannot really see, except in the irrelevant terms of home (147).

Bishop uses clichéd language and the understatement that is her trademark in "Arrival at Santos" to show that the tourist is without appropriate words and cannot adequately represent what she sees. Harrison reminds us that the "s" at the top of the eighth stanza is a diagram of the need for order in the mind of the tourist; the "s" is omitted from "Glens Fall[s]" so that "Fall" is forced to rhyme perfectly with "tall" (148).

In "Brazil, January 1, 1502," Bishop turns the landscape into a tapestry, ostensibly in response to Brazil's beauty:

. . . embroidered nature. . . tapestried landscape.  
—*Landscape into Art*, by Sir Kenneth Clark<sup>1</sup>  
  
Januaries, Nature greets our eyes  
exactly as she must have greeted theirs:  
every square inch filling in with foliage—  
big leaves,  
little leaves, and giant leaves,  
blue, blue-green, and olive,  
(CP 91)

In these opening lines, Bishop records Brazil's lushness in terms of size and colour, preparing the reader for the painterly metaphors that give the scene shape. The first hint of visual art occurs when Bishop uses the term "relief" in line nine: "or a satin underleaf turned over / monster ferns / in silver-gray relief" (CP 91). A few lines later Bishop sets the tone for her central visual metaphor when she presents Brazil's flowers, which are "like giant water lilies," in a string of colours suggestive of the visual artist choosing a palette:

purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,  
rust red and greenish white;  
solid but airy; fresh as if just finished  
and taken off the frame.

(CP 91)

The word "frame" at the end of this first verse paragraph indicates that the scene is a tapestry, but it also alludes to the poet's containment of the scene, and, because the word presents itself at the very end of the line, hints at a self-consciousness in the poet, an awareness that she is composing. The second verse paragraph continues to sketch the scene, its modifiers doing double service: they describe an actual scene but also create the sense of artifice that is essential to the reader's "seeing" a tapestry. The "feathery detail," the palms "perching there in profile," the "big symbolic birds," and "Sin" in "the foreground" all speak of visual composition. The speaker's admiration for the skill of the piece is rhetorically the cleverest device in the poem—and perhaps also the subtlest—and is certainly important to Bishop's creation of the ekphrasis:

The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts  
splattered and overlapping,  
threatened from underneath by moss  
in lovely hell-green flames,  
attacked above  
by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat,

(CP 91)

The words "lovely" and "neat" communicate in their brevity, and in the colloquial tone they produce, the speaker's awareness of her position as "foreigner" in a new land. She realizes that she admires the landscape as she would merchandise or an artifact in a museum.

Bishop is, she acknowledges, by virtue of her cultural education, the inheritor of the conquerors' art, represented in this poem by the tapestry. No surprise, then, that she uses it to "see" Brazil:

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,  
tiny as nails, and glinting,  
in creaking armor, came and found it all,  
not unfamiliar:  
no lovers' walks, no bowers,  
no cherries to be picked, no lute music,  
but corresponding, nevertheless,  
to an old dream of wealth and luxury

Structurally, the ideas in this poem form interlocking boxes: Bishop looks at Brazil's new beauty and nicely contains it in a one-dimensional tapestry (now it is seeable)—the tapestry the conquerors wove when *they* landed at Brazil; ultimately, they destroy it:

Directly after Mass, humming perhaps  
*L'Homme armé* or some such tune,  
they ripped away into the hanging fabric,  
each out to catch an Indian for himself—  
those maddening little women who kept calling,  
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)  
and retreating, always retreating, behind it.  
(CP 92)

When Bishop wrote to friends about the metaphor of the tapestry in “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” she referred to it as a cliché. As Victoria Harrison quotes her, a 1956 letter to the Barkers from Brazil declares that

. . . the mountains really look amazing, like a tapestry—sorry to be so unoriginal but they do, a brand new tapestry, maybe. . . (160).

The second, more explicit reference to cliché occurs in a famous letter to Lowell (quoted by Harrison, Lorrie Goldensohn, and others):

I am so glad you liked the New Year's poem—I think it is a bit artificial, but I finally had to do something with the cliché about the landscape looking like a tapestry, I suppose—And it does now in February, too. . . (Harrison 161).

Bishop finds herself invoking a visual cliché because she can't seem to find the precise words; language is failing to refer. The landscape, functioning as tapestry, expresses Bishop's anxiety over the new land, an anxiety immediately evident in “Arrival at Santos.”

In a 1970 letter to James Merrill, Bishop uses another painterly metaphor, again to describe mountains: “You fly from Lima straight to Rio—I've done it by day and by night—the Andes are frightening, but the day flight is worth it, I think. You'll see how exactly like some of Klee's paintings they look

(rather a worn comparison now, but it is striking)” (*One Art* 521). This self-consciousness about using visual art as metaphor (evident in the words “worn comparison”) suggests that Bishop feels somewhat uneasy or insecure about the relationship between visual art and language that relies on visual images.

The tapestry is an analogue of the map in Bishop’s poetry; both are pictures, after all. The one-dimensional tapestry traces the contours of place in a way similar to a map. If “the map” in Bishop is “the poem,” as Helen Vendler suggests (828), then the tapestry-poem is the map-poem reconfigured through ekphrasis. Like a map, however, the tapestry is finally only “hanging fabric.”

The ekphrastic gesture involved in turning a poem into visual art is a distancing device; the ekphrasis, a rhetorical tool, operates like a cliché—it intervenes on behalf of the speechless (and directionless?) writer. The tapestry, as Goldensohn points out, has its limitations:

But the perspective [on the halved birds] can also be seen as an instance of Bishop’s insistence, as a sophisticated picture lover, on the limits of the pictorial, as she draws attention implicitly to the baffling nature of visual phenomena. Somewhere between the top and bottom of the second stanza both Bishop as tapestry-maker and Christians as tapestry-makers give way, under the aegis of the sexual, to an unworkable pattern in which flatness, no matter how lovely and fresh, can’t quite tell us about everything (201).

Ultimately the tapestry is torn, the semiosis destroyed. The “maddening little women” are forever “retreating” from the Christian conquerors and, the implication is, from readers as well. Creating what is almost a kinship with the conquerors (guilt by association?) in the first few lines of the poem—”Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs”—Bishop subsequently severs any ties with them through the surrealism of the closing images. The poet, having created the tapestry, watches the men tear through it. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” art is not in the least transcendent. Bishop expresses her disgust with the raging conquerors and by implication with the imperial mentality. She is neither colonizer nor Brazilian, and her sense of estrangement as a visitor underlies her use of cliché.

Bishop’s recognition of the visual cliché implicitly acknowledges her impulse to idealize. Perhaps more importantly, Bishop knows that her poem cannot recreate Brazil’s natural beauty; any attempt to do so would be repetitive and would mirror the invaders’ containment of the new world in their art—and through their violence. The torn tapestry at the end of the poem may be as much a self-reprimand as a metaphor for the colonizers’

destruction of the indigenous: “The poems in the Brazil section of *Questions of Travel* all deal with the ironic quest for a new Eden by forms of culture and consciousness that inherently defeat that ideal” (Costello 139).

Brazil’s beauty—what P.K. Page sees as its exoticism in *Brazilian Journal*—will not answer, finally, for Bishop. If Bishop engaged herself in Brazil “with the colors of exile” (Goldensohn 194), they are very clearly American colours, especially the “blue-green,” “two yellows,” and “greenish white” in “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” The simple modifiers, “big,” “little,” and “giant” also function to emphasize the ordinariness of the observer’s language. This language is quite unlike the bolder, richer metaphors that Page uses, metaphors that, paradoxically, show a greater tentativeness than Bishop’s bluish-greens because they express their insecurity by overreaching.

The deliberately simplified repetitions in Bishop’s modifiers are meant to be self-referential. The disingenuous little words of this poem exercise a good deal of control. Bishop’s “monosyllables [as Vendler remarks, are] . . . a legacy from [her] dissenting Protestantism . . .” (831), and her language at once catalogues the beauty and suppresses it lest it exceed the viewer’s experience. While Bishop’s simple words indicate a refusal of metaphor, the restraint they convey is, oddly enough, itself a kind of trope.

The reader is invited, by Bishop’s colloquial language, to see American. Colours such as “greenish white” have a local, you-know-what-I-mean feel to them. Importantly, they also suggest a refusal to name and a disavowal of representation. It’s as though this articulate speaker doesn’t have in her North American vocabulary the right words to describe what she hasn’t seen before. The control over the landscape implied in the construction of the ekphrasis is echoed in the poem’s tone and diction; word and image are working in unison. The mixed message to the reader: *I can’t represent what I am seeing adequately, so I will recast it in my own verbal/visual experience; I can’t properly express the beauty of this place, so I will suppress it; anyway, I am an intruder.* When the conquerors tear through the hanging fabric, the illusion of the tapestry—and therefore the ekphrasis—is destroyed. Leaving us with action and words, and no “picture,” the poem moves into a different mode. By the end, although it protests against the “Christians” “old dream of wealth and luxury,” the poem does resist “a too-insistently framed ideology: an identifiable, controlling perspective, coming from a speaker clearly and continuously in command of the poem’s opinions seems to be missing” (Goldensohn 199).

Bishop's search for her own position in the world is, by 1994, a firmly established literary topos. Bonnie Costello sees Bishop's travel poems as a kind of personal stock-taking:

Bishop's travel poems, dominated by catalogues of things seen, include moments of reflection and retrospection, acts of tentative summing up and taking stock, assessments of the relation between process and goal. These end-of-the-line moments arise when the tolerance for plurality and particularity wears down; they do not mark a mastery over the world's variety" (159).

Bishop's ekphrasis is not, as Grant F. Scott suggests in his discussion of this term, a "cunning attempt to transform and master the image by inscribing it" (302). It is rather an admission of the impossibility of achieving the same.

Brazil leads, unexpectedly, to Nova Scotia; the character of these two places couldn't be more different, but Vendler points to what they share for Bishop:

Bishop was both fully at home in, and fully estranged from, Nova Scotia and Brazil. In Nova Scotia, after Bishop's father died, her mother went insane; Bishop lived there with her grandparents from the age of three to the age of six. She then left to be raised by an aunt in Massachusetts. . . Nova Scotia represented a harsh pastoral to which, though she was rooted in it, she could not return. Brazil. . . was yet another pastoral, harsh in a different, tropical way—a pastoral exotic enough to interest her noticing eye but one barred to her by language and culture. . . (828).

Vendler argues that the traumatized childhood displaced Bishop permanently and meant that she felt foreign wherever she went:

Bishop could taste for herself, each time she found another environment, her own chilling difference from it. Into no territory could she subside gratefully and grip down into native soil (829).

Bishop's sense of exclusion in Brazil led to the source of it in her Canadian childhood. To understand Brazil, then, readers must hold in their minds the circular relationship with Nova Scotia. Ekphrasis, because it creates a layer of artifice between the speaker and the subject, allows Bishop to confront an alienated past through a hierarchy of signs that will serve as protection from too bold an encounter. A poem about painting called "Poem" immediately signals a highly self-conscious rendering.<sup>2</sup> In "Poem," the speaker describes a painting, examining it, in part, for its accuracy in depicting a long-ago-familiar Nova Scotian landscape. A series of questions structures the poem: "Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?"; "Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?" (C.P. 176-177). To paraphrase, Bishop asks: *Was I sufficiently part of this past to recognize it? Do I really know its codes? And, more importantly, can*



*I articulate them?* The apparently innocuous questions in the poem signify the crucial one:

Our visions coincided—"visions" is  
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:  
art "copying life" and life itself,  
life and the memory of it so compressed  
they've turned into each other. Which is which? (177)

Through reference to the painting Bishop alludes to the constructedness of the poem; "art" in "art 'copying life'" suggests poetry as well as painting. The questions of "Poem" are relevant to Bishop's Brazilian poems because they signify her sense of the problems intrinsic to representing "place."

**P**.K. Page shares with Bishop a sense of displacement and a need to turn inward. The political language of Bishop's Brazilian poems, however, does not appear in Page's work. Page's Brazilian poems derive directly from the prose she wrote during the late 1950s and published in *Brazilian Journal* in 1987. The Foreword to this book explains that the text "is based, mainly, on letters . . . and extracts from [Page's] journal, written during the privileged years, 1957-1959." Her deliberate refusal of subjects both intimate and political was, she has indicated in conversations with me, part of a wish not to offend or worry her mother or stepchildren, to whom she was writing.

In any case, critics do not generally categorize Page with Canadian protest/political poets, even though her canon is framed, at its beginning and now in her recent work, by poems of social protest. In the 1940s, under the influence of Patrick Anderson and the *Preview* poets, Page published many poems that revealed an active social conscience: "The Stenographers" may be the most famous. And recently, as in "Address at Simon Fraser" (*The Glass Air*, 1991), or "Planet Earth" (*The Malahat Review* Fall, 1993), Page has turned her attention to the environment. But in the 1950s in Brazil, Page was overwhelmed by the new landscape's natural beauty, and she was preoccupied with tracing surfaces:

tremendous lengths of sand, blinding white in the sun; the facades of white buildings which, for all their contemporary design, look somehow like the ruins in a John Piper painting; pedlars with eagle-shaped kites under a barrage of bright balloons on the boulevard by the sea; black-eyed children in pony carts with coloured nurses in starched white; the faded patchwork of the houses in the *favelas*; women balancing parcels on their heads (BJ 15).

From early on in *Brazilian Journal* Page “sees” the country in terms of modernist art. The juxtapositions in the foregoing passage are typical in Page’s text: the colours, smells, and heat of Brazil jockey for position beside subtextual references to social problems or conditions. Many scenes are shaped and made memorable by the invocation of a painting; in this way Brazil is fictionalized.

In June of 1957, Page, mysteriously unable to write poetry in Brazil, begins to paint. She refers to painting in *Brazilian Journal* even before she reports taking up this hobby: “I wish I knew how to describe the vegetation, or indeed how to paint it” (15). At first Page draws and paints exactly what she sees, using representational conventions; she works from models (of the landscape, that is; her subjects were rarely people). But her eye is interpreting Brazil through a whole cast of modern painters, many of them cubist, expressionist, or non-figurative. Her modernist aesthetic, apparent in her poetry even before she experienced Brazil, determines that she will see the “new,” which is the old, baroque Brazil, metaphorically, the metaphor in her visual art finding its expression through stylized figuration.

Page reports more than once in *Brazilian Journal* (e.g., the journal entry for Aug. 1957, p.75) that she paints because words fail her. But attempts to paint from models soon frustrate Page, and by the end of her stay in Brazil she is moving away from the Dufy-influenced figuration of the work reproduced in *Brazilian Journal*. Page’s non-figurative works of post-1958-59 signify Brazil only through synecdoche: “Labyrinth” (the 1958 drawing, not the work of the same title that appears in *The Glass Air*), stored in The National Gallery of Canada, features a discrete palm tree in an otherwise largely (deliberately) unreadable study of lineation and movement; in it there is no other indication that it might be “about” Brazil. As Page grew less dependent on models, she began to focus on the surface of her canvas, and under the influence of Paul Klee’s work, lineation became central, and drawing took over from painting. The late works cease any attempt at representation, and by tracing often labyrinthine constructions (e.g., those reproduced in *The Glass Air*), they seem to rebuke the very possibility of mimesis. This frustration with representing Brazil is, I believe, evident even in the excess of metaphoric language in *Brazilian Journal*. Page indulges in making images because she can’t find the words to express what she sees in Brazil. The painterly language intervenes for her and allows her to frame Brazil with modernist icons and thereby contain it.

Page complains often in *Brazilian Journal* of an inability to write, speculating that this has happened because she is living in Portuguese. But she did write a few poems (now in the National Archives of Canada) that until their appearance in this essay remained unpublished.<sup>3</sup> These poems are crucial for the insight they provide into Page's sense of the relationship between visual and verbal art in her work. The first is titled "Could I Write a Poem Now?"

Or am I so  
sold to the devil  
that a hard frost locks  
those lovely waters?

No, scarcely a matter of ice,  
but a matter of guilt  
having believed  
(and pledged my troth)  
art is the highest loyalty  
and to let  
a talent lie about unused  
is to break faith.

But how do you write a Chagall?  
It boils down to that.

The conundrum of the penultimate line conveys the incongruity, for Page, of expressing through one art form what is clearly meant for another. Chagall is obviously on Page's mind in Brazil; in a 1958 entry in *Brazilian Journal* she writes that a gathering of musicians is "like a Chagall painting" (153). (In "Another Space," *The Glass Air*, p. 123, Page also enlists Chagall ekphrastically in a central conceit.) Indeed, to write a Chagall is a particularly difficult, peculiarly modern problem; to write Breughel as Auden did in "Musée des Beaux Arts" is perhaps a less daunting project because one has conventional iconography to work with. Chagall, like other modernists, cannot be easily paraphrased.

Page invoked the modern painters often to express what she saw in Brazil because they were the artists who experimented with colour, arrangement, and plane, and it was these elements of the baroque "surface" of Brazil that most enthralled and disconcerted her. Through reference to modern artists Page supplants a conventional iconography of mimetic figures with the new iconography of the modern age: line, colour, and form. The words "a Chagall" capture in the poem that which cannot be expressed any other

way. Consequently, when Page writes “Chagall” in this poem, it is not to write *about* his work or to represent it, but to invoke it as a sign for its own absence in the poem, and for the impossibility of its presence.

In a second poem, “Some Paintings by Portinari,” Page reveals a persona unavailable in her published work, which may be why this poem never saw print. Whereas Page describes Cândido Portinari’s paintings as “flat,” “strange,” and “grey” in the prose of *Brazilian Journal*, the “composition” of her metaphors in “Some Paintings by Portinari” reveals a more powerful verbal parallel for Portinari’s expressionism:

With the first lot flat  
it was as if he’d cut off my breasts  
and levelled my nose  
like the side of a barn  
I walked  
and met them flat  
flat on and one  
up-tilted my chin.  
  
with the others lord all the colours gone  
strange but I wore  
red when I came and green  
and he made them grey  
and painted the grey all over my skin  
and the pain  
pulled all the muscles and cords.

This is a remarkable poem from a poet who normally would not refer to her body in her work. The lacerated breasts and nose convey the shock and the power of Portinari’s paintings and are themselves expressionist metaphors. Through “levelled,” “flat,” “cut off,” and “up-tilted,” Page “writes” the acute angles, the jaggedness of an expressionist work. The pain Portinari portrays in his visual art becomes the poet’s pain: the “I’s” colours turn to grey; even her skin absorbs the grey of anguish, and her “muscles and cords” pull taut in sympathy with the pain of the portrait. Portinari paints *her*.

This is one of the few poems in which Page identifies a specifically female response in her persona. Here it is her femaleness that is startled and disturbed by the art. Even in poems like “After Rain,” where Page writes of “a woman’s wardrobe of the mind,” the speaker manages to remain aloof from her own gender. The damaged body in the Portinari poem further suggests a more compelling distress, which had everything to do with Page’s inability to write

poetry in Brazil, complicated by a new sensitivity to visual art. Page is unable to find in Portinari a beautiful surface; in him she is forced to confront a narrative of deep psychic torture, a catalogue of Brazil's social problems.

In *Brazilian Journal*, Page acknowledges that her seeing is informed by the library and the museum: "In fact, I think much of my pleasure is a literary pleasure. Had I read nothing and seen no pictures, what *would I see?* (72). Page is troubled and self-conscious about the way her mind makes images, and she seems to realize that metaphor defers and masks this problem.

The way out? In her painting Page produced an increasingly metaphysical rendering of Brazil, abstracting the landscape—and also the problem of representation. In her poetry the answer, for a while, was silence, for Brazilian poems did not start to appear until the late 1960s. A few of these poems are ekphrastic but not conventionally so, in that they do not address a painting or give voice to a silent object; but they invoke visual art in a way that results in a reader being able to envision the scene described as though it were a painting. "Chimney Fire" will serve to illustrate. This poem draws on a scene from a 1957 entry in *Brazilian Journal* which refers to motorcycle troops. Impressed by the vivid colours of their uniforms, Page notes, "they might have been a painting by Rousseau the *douanier*, known to me alone" (BJ 13). This passage is a study in self-consciousness; the "painting" in this notional ekphrasis is available to no one except Page.<sup>4</sup>

In "Chimney Fire" the house is "orderly and quiet as a painting / of a house." The men are configured much as they are in Page's imagined painting in *Brazilian Journal*: "in an abandonment of blue and gold / that Rousseau the Douanier might have set / meticulously upon a canvas—those red brick / faces, vacant, those bright axes / and the weltering dark serge angles of arms and legs" (*The Glass Air* 85).

The incongruity of the original scene in Brazil—fiercely aligned troops against lush backdrop of landscape—obviously appealed to Page; this incongruity finds its expression in the poem: the fearless firemen are too much for the job, and the "puny" fire is not nearly big enough for them. Rousseau's tropical paintings capture just this sense of incongruity: rigour vs. dream. His lineation and composition are studied, clear, at times almost rigid, often apparently belying the metaphysical concerns of the painting.

Page focuses on the arrangement of colour and form in the scene she describes in her poem, for example, "the weltering dark serge *angles* of arms and legs" (emphasis mine). Artifice, signified through dream and the delib-

erate invocation of unreality, prevails in Rousseau's paintings as in most modernist art, where the painter still believes that the limitations of descriptive art, and importantly, therefore, of the finite world, can be overcome. And artifice prevails in Page's poem when the "tidy silence," only *likened* to "a lily on a green stem" in the second stanza, *becomes* the lily ("No tendril of silence grew in the green room") in the last—metaphor replaces simile. Page transforms the firemen into nearly mythic beings at the end of the poem. Their quest, their "dream," is for "beautiful conflagration."

Page communicates the exaggerated and incongruous effect of the over-drawn "firemen" through the metricality of her lines. The dactyls, spondees, and strong-stress endings create a certain crispness in the language that contradicts the languor of the Brazilian backdrop and emphasizes the firemen's seriousness about their mission. But the tone is mocking and lighthearted, a tone achieved partly through a deliberate over-emphasis on initial metrical stresses. The suddenly regular dactyls in lines four and five, for example, create a kind of emphasis that can be read only as ironic and humorous: "Ready and royal for crisis and climax / shining and stalwart and valiant— for *this*?" As is quite often the case in Page's poems, the more even meter at the end of the poem signals closure and moves the scene into a dreamy unreality, nudging an interpretation of the poem toward the metaphysical.

Page's ekphrastic poems are particularly revealing of how the "I" sees itself in relation to the world; the poet is always, in her painterly poems, witnessing a mystical transformation in her subject, undergoing some internal change herself, or observing the transformative powers of art. The link between visual art and mysticism is evident in even her earliest ekphrases and runs through all of her poems about art. What is perhaps more subtly articulated in these poems is the role of the speaker vis-à-vis the art object.

Quite often this speaker, even though she invokes the name of a famous painter, is herself taking on the role of the painter and is painting the scene, much as Bishop creates the tapestry in "Brazil, January 1, 1502." The reader's attention is very much directed to the single point of view, the "pressuring gaze" (Handa 19). This stems, at least initially, from Page's and Bishop's roles as travellers and observers in Brazil. Even if they are very different poets (Page's "ceruleans" are fundamentally incompatible with Bishop's "two yellows"), they surely have this much in common: Brazil confronted them with the inadequacies of language, requiring them both to respond by re-visioning their art.

## NOTES

- 1 Lorrie Goldensohn notes that “only the words ‘embroidered nature’ correspond to Clark’s book. . . . The apposition of ‘embroidered nature’ against a ‘tapestried landscape’ applies only roughly to Clark’s discussion of either embroidery and tapestry, or nature and landscape (200).”
- 2 Costello acknowledges that “Poem” is ekphrastic, but an empty landscape seems to her an unusual subject for ekphrasis because the stillness/movement binary cannot pertain. An already motionless landscape cannot represent a stilled moment that is granted temporality in a poem. The constrictions implicit in this view of ekphrasis may explain why she fails to mention “Brazil, January 1, 1502” in her discussion of Bishop’s ekphrases (214 ff.). For the travel poet, however, who is forever encountering new landscapes that require definition, ekphrasis is an obvious strategy of containment, and the time/space binary is beside the point.
- 3 I publish these Brazilian poems in this essay with written permission from P.K. Page.
- 4 In Bishop’s *One Art*, James Merrill imagines Bishop “in a ‘Rousseau jungle’” (303), and more than once Bishop herself compares Brazil to Rousseau. In his *TLS* review of *One Art*, Tom Paulin, remarking on one of Bishop’s references to Rousseau, cites her interest in primitive art, calling this art “one of the most important values in her humane aesthetic” (4). Page, Bishop, and Merrill, in their mention of Rousseau, perfectly illustrate how their training gives them the same frame in which to compose Brazil. Their sense of the “primitive” in Brazil is aestheticized through Rousseau.

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