

# QUESTIONS AND IMAGES

*P. K. Page*

**T**HE LAST TEN YEARS span three distinct places — and phases — in my life: Brazil, Mexico, Canada, in that order. All countries of the new world.

Brazil pelted me with images. Marmosets in the flowering jungle; bands of multi-colored birds moving among the branches of the kapok tree outside the bedroom verandah; orchids in the kapok tree, cucumbers in the kapok tree, the whole tree bursting into cotton candy. Flamboyantes in flaming flower against the sky as one lay on one's back in the swimming pool. Doric palms waving green plumage, growing antlers and beads. Cerise dragon flies. Butterflies as large as a flying hand and blue, bright blue.

Drums from the favelas beat like one's own blood, accompanied by the deep bass viol of frogs in the lotus pond; volleys of rockets shattered the black night air, air wet as a sheet and rank with the smell of decaying jackos. Insistent, less obtrusive, the tiny fret of tropical vegetation, the sibilance of bamboos.

Churches, golden as the eye of God, were so miraculously proportioned that one wondered if proportion alone might actually alter consciousness. Enormous quantities of gold leaf. Entire interiors of it, changing space, vibrating strangely; at one moment flashing to blind you, at another reverberating on and on like a golden gong. Moorish designs in tiles and lattices created infinities of intricate repetition.

My first foreign language — to live in, that is — and the personality changes that accompany it. One is a toy at first, a doll. Then a child. Gradually, as vocabulary increases, an adult again. But a different adult. Who am I, then, that language can so change me? What is personality, identity? And the deeper change, the profounder understanding — partial, at least — of what man is, devoid of words. Where could wordlessness lead? Shocks, insights, astounding and sudden walls. Equally astounding and sudden dematerializations; points of view shifting

and vanishing. Attitudes recognized for what they are: attitudes. The Word behind the word . . . but when there is no word . . . ?

(“Why did you stop writing?” “I didn’t. It stopped.” “Nonsense, you’re the master.” “Am I?”) Who would not, after all, be a poet, a good poet, if one could choose? If one could choose. Most of one’s life one has the illusion of choice. And when that is removed, when clearly one cannot choose. . . . Blank page after blank page. The thing I had feared most of all had happened at last. This time I never *would* write again. But by some combination of factors — co-incidence, serendipity — the pen that had written was now, most surprisingly, drawing. (“Why did you start drawing?” “I didn’t. It started.” “But why start something you know nothing about and chuck up all the techniques and skills. . . . ?”) Why, indeed, why?

What was that tiny fret, that wordless dizzying vibration, the whole molecular dance? Is that what Tobey’s white writing wrote? What was that golden shimmer, the bright pink shine on the anturias, the delicately and exactly drawn design of the macaw’s feathers? Why did I suddenly see with the eye of an ant? Or a fly? The golden — yes, there it was again — web spun by the spider among the leaves of the century plant? Surely the very purpose of a web demands invisibility? Yet this was a lure, a glistening small sun, jewelled already with opalescent victims. Victims of what?

The impotence of a marmoset in a rage, pitting itself against me, its fingers like the stems of violets, unable to break the skin of my hand. How quickly one learns about scale with a marmoset for companion. Man in a rage with his gods, or, equally superficially, pleased with them. The glorious macaw, the flesh of his Groucho Marx face wrinkled and soft, his crazy hilarious laughter and low seductive chuckles making him kin until one looked into his infinitely dilatable eye and was drawn through its vortex into a minute cosmos which contained all the staggering dimensions of outer space.

I wonder now if ‘brazil’ would have happened wherever I was? As to where it pointed I hadn’t the least idea, nor, I think, did I ask any questions beyond the immediate ones. But I drew as if my life depended on it — each tile of each house, each leaf of each tree, each blade of grass, each mote of sunlight — all things bright and beautiful. If I drew them all. . . . ? And I did. Compelled, propelled by the point of my pen. And in drawing them all I seemed to make them mine, or make peace with them, or they with me. And then, having drawn everything — each drop of water and grain of sand — the pen began dreaming. It began a life of its own.

Looking back with my purely psychological eye through the long clear topaz of that day, I appear as a mute observer, an inarticulate listener, occupying another part of myself.

If Brazil was day, then Mexico was night. All the images of darkness hovered for me in the Mexican sunlight. If Brazil was a change of place, then Mexico was a change of time. One was very close to the old gods here. Death and the old gods. Their great temples rose all around one. Temples to the Sun. Temples to the Moon.

Objects dissolved into their symbols. All the pyramids and stairs, plumed serpents in stone, masks of jade, obsidian knives, skulls of crystal — or sugar.

In the rain forest stood the bone-white ruins of buildings — tangible remains of a whole mythology. Buildings so intricate — (tarsal, metatarsal) — one was tempted to believe they were skeletons from which the flesh had long since rotted. Motionless. Beautiful. Great ivory kings and queens beneath their lacey cranial combs. Palaces and gardens of the Sleeping Beauty.

The villages seemed unchanged since the beginning of time. The same adobe huts, the same fields of maize, the same ancient languages of clicking consonants, and surely, the same gods. Gods hungry for human blood. (Too much Lowry and Lawrence?) The plazas of Catholic churches were stages for the old rituals of costumed dances, stamped out to the music of conch shell and drum.

In Oaxaca the women of Yalalag wear triple crosses which led Cortes' priests to the mistaken belief that Christian missionaries had preceded them. Oaxacans perhaps understand the symbolism of the cross: time passing, time eternal — “the intersection of this world with eternity.” In Chichen Itza the Caracol or Snail — an observatory dome from which the Mayans probed the heavens — has four small openings exactly pointing to the cardinal directions. Temples of the Cross. Temples of the Foliated Cross.

Coming as I do from a random or whim-oriented culture, this recurrence and interrelating of symbols into an ordered and significant pattern — prevalent too in the folk arts of pottery and weaving — was curiously illuminating. One did not feel restricted by the enclosed form of the ‘design’; rather, one was liberated into something life-giving and larger. I could now begin to understand how the “little world is created according to the prototype of the great world.”

Great or little, for me it was still a night world — one into which the pattern was pricked like a constellation — bright, twinkling, hard to grasp, harder still to hold. A dreaming world in which I continued to draw and to dream. How to

make a noumenal doll; how to fly; the man with one black and one white hand — (Hari-Hara?); Osiris — (The Seat of the Eye); the room with the invisible walls; the circular dance beside the sea — (Initiation? Into what? A non-religious Christian? A religious non-Christian?) Poetry was more than ever now in the perceiving. My only access to it was through the dream and the drawing.

I had my first two shows during this period. The age of my graphic innocence was past. I had acquired another mask, another label. Each additional one seemed to move me further from my own centre. I was now suddenly and sharply reminded of the young Rilke, bored on a rainy afternoon, coming upon the clothing and paraphernalia of disguise in the wardrobes of a spare room; and how, masked, turbaned and cloaked, he had struck a pose before a mirror. "I stared," he wrote, "at this great, terrifying unknown personage before me and it seemed appalling to me that I should be alone with him."

Which is the mask and which the self? How distinguish, let alone separate, two such seemingly interpenetrating matters? As if pursued by the Hound of Heaven I raced back and forth among the Collected Works of Jung, The Perennial Philosophy, The Doors of Perception, Zen, C. S. Lewis, St. John of the Cross.

"See how he who thinks himself one is not one, but seems to have as many personalities as he has moods."

"Understand that thou thyself art even another little world, and hast within thee the sun and the moon, and also the stars . . ."

I began to suspect, in what would once have been near-heresy, that drawing and writing were not only ends in themselves, as I had previously thought, but possibly the means to an end which I could barely imagine — a method, perhaps, of tracing the 'small design'. And the very emergence of these ideas began to clear a way, remove the furniture and provide a new space.

But when something one has thought opaque appears translucent, transparent even, one questions whether it might not ultimately become entirely invisible. Solid walls dissolved disconcertingly into scrim. For the moment I was uncertain where to lean.

The dark Mexican night had led me back into myself and I was startlingly aware of the six directions of space.

A day and a night had passed. My return to Canada, if the pattern continued, should be the start of a new day.

The culture shock of homecoming after many years abroad is even greater, I think, than the culture shock of entering a new country. One returns different, to a different place, misled by the belief that neither has changed. Yet I am

grateful for the shocks. The conditioning process which turns live tissue into fossil is arrested by the earthquake. Even buried strata may be exposed.

I had a small retrospective show shortly after coming home, followed by the publication of a book of 'retrospective' poetry. The shutting of twin doors. Not necessarily on drawings and poems but on *those* drawings and *those* poems.

The questions had now become more pressing than the images. Some of the questions were retrospective: had the move from writing to drawing been a return to the primitive in myself — to the 'first man' of Van der Post? Was it a psychological starting again from the pre-verbal state? If in the life of the individual and the life of the race, drawing precedes written literature, was this step back really a beginning? Certainly the varied scenes through which I had journeyed had provided no lack of subject matter.

More urgent however, were the questions raised by Alan McGlashan: "Who or what is the Dreamer within us? To whom is the Dreamer talking?" What, indeed, is this duologue, so like an effortless poem? Can projected images be manifested as dreams? Are all dreams projected? Or some? Is the Dreamer active or passive? Initiator or recipient? Sometimes one, sometimes the other? And what about the waking Dreamer? Are thoughts the invisible dreams of a daylight world? Projected by what, or whom? Jung's collective unconscious? Rumi's angels?

I don't know the answers to these questions but merely posing them moves more furniture. I begin to sense another realm — interrelated — the high doh of a scale in which we are the low. And in a sudden and momentary bouleversement, I realize that I have been upside down in life — like a tree on its head, roots exposed in the air.

The question of the mask which confronted me with such violence in Mexico has subtly shifted. In our popcorn packages when I was a child, along with the tin rings, jacks, marbles and other hidden surprises, one was occasionally lucky enough to find a small coloured picture complete with strips of transparent red and green celluloid. The picture, viewed alone, was of a boy with an umbrella and a dog. Seen through the green filter, the umbrella disappeared. The red filter demolished the dog. My subconscious evidently knew something about the tyranny of subjectivity years ago when it desired to go "through to the area behind the eyes/where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies". I didn't understand the image then but it arrived complete. It was not to be denied even though only half-glimpsed, enigmatic. It's pleasant now to know what I was talking about!

Whether or not the handful of poems written recently means that writing has 'started' again, I do not know; whether there is any advance over earlier work, I

shall have to let others decide. For the time being my primary concern is to remove the filters.

Meanwhile the images have begun again and the questions continue.

“What do I sing and what does my lute sing?”

