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THEMES AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE POETRY OF KENNETH PATCHEN

By

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245

THEMES AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE POETRY OF KENNETH PATCHEN

- I. Biographical data
- II. Themes
 - A. Protest and antiwar theme
 - B. Love poetry
 - C. Prophetic, mystic communication
- III. Personal view of Patchen

THEMES AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE POETRY OF KENNETH PATCHEN

Kenneth Patchen has been, and continues to be, one of the most influential and controversial figures in contemporary American literature; very few people who read Patchen come away unchanged or uninfluenced by his poetry, and few, if any, of his readers are of mixed emotions about the value of his work: It is either sheer magic and of tremendous artistic merit or it is rough, emotional garbage, a judgment often dependent upon the courage of the reader. Patchen is not held in high esteem publicly by many poets and critics. The American poet Kenneth Rexroth was once advised by an anonymous friend to avoid dealing with Patchen "because it might damage his promising career."¹ Many poets privately acknowledge a great respect for Patchen, but hardly any of them state their feelings publicly or in their work.² (From a purely personal standpoint, I have often wanted to ask "Why does one man's artistry make another man so unsure of his own work unless he doubts his own ability?") Patchen, like perhaps no other American poet, "tells it like it is."

In any attempt at understanding Kenneth Patchen's work, one inevitably comes across several facts about Patchen's life. He

¹The Bird in the Bush, and Other Obvious Essays, Kenneth Rexroth (New York: 1959), pp. 61-2.

²The Outsider, Book Issue 4/5, "Homage to Kenneth Patchen," David Meltzer (Tucson: 1968), pp. 146-7.

worked in the steel mills of Ohio in his youth, an experience which naturally served to strengthen his natural distaste for the rapacious, materialistic society which seems bent upon literally eating itself out of food and raw materials and raping what is left of its natural beauty for a quick dollar. One of his better poems, and one of his most bitter ones, "The Orange Bears," is quite pointed (and literal) in expressing Patchen's disgust with the "Robber Baron" tradition in American industry, itself one of Patchen's major themes.

Patchen is probably most well-known as the poet of the American Depression of the 1930's. He attended the radical Commonwealth College in Arkansas during the mid-Thirties and spent years in Greenwich Village in New York and in San Francisco and Chicago during the war years (He was disqualified for military service because of a severe back injury sustained while playing football at the University of Wisconsin). Patchen has for years been virtually bedridden with incurable spinal arthritis and (because he will take no pain-relieving drugs) is in physical agony during most of his waking hours. Almost every writer in the edition of The Outsider quoted before agreed that Patchen's personality and physical appearance are radically different from the ordinary person's conception of a poet. He is physically large and powerfully-built (a former football player), with a deep, resonant voice and almost uncomfortably piercing eyes. As in his poetry, the immediate impression gained from a meeting with Patchen seems to be "This is a man!"

Patchen's main themes seem to be divided into three major categories, with some overlapping; it is necessary to view Patchen's work as a whole to really appreciate it, but generally his poems may be classed as (1) poems of choking rage at war and the materialistic, self-destructive society which breeds it; (2) Love poetry, as surprisingly gentle and innocent as his "protest" poems are vindictive and horrified; and (3) poetry of mystical, almost transcendental, vision and contemplation; almost prophetic utterances of a truly magical perception. ³

The antiwar aspect of the "protest poetry" is one of the most relevant of Patchen's themes to me. My own favorite is "The Fox," in which the senselessness and hatred for life inherent in war is expressed in the imagery of a wounded fox, pursued by dogs with "hangmen's legs" and hunters with guns across a snow-covered, purified landscape; "she can't afford to die/killing the young in her belly." Patchen cannot understand why soldiers must die and kill: "I don't know what to say of a soldier's dying/because there are no proportions in death." To Patchen, all living things, even the ugliest and lowest, have value as part of the total life experience. For this (and other) reasons, he has been compared to Walt Whitman, who himself gained an understanding of death as the accomplishment of the life-experience in the death of the female of a pair of sea gulls in "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking." The comparison

³Frederich Eckman, "The Comic Apocalypse of Kenneth Patchen," Poetry, September, 1958, pp. 54-5.

is not unwarranted. Patchen realizes much about renewal that Whitman realized in this poem; he realizes also the lateness of the hour if man is to continue the renewal of life. His mystical perception in "The Stars Go to Sleep so Peacefully" is an excellent example of his hope: The world's soul may be dead, and truth may rot "in a bloodyditch" while "love is impaled on a million bayonets," but "great God! the stars go to sleep so peacefully." I believe that Patchen sees almost what Whitman saw in the endless cycle of the sea in the calm truth and beauty of the "peacefully-sleeping" stars. "I Don't Want To Startle You" and "One of Several Little Christs" (Page ten and Page thirty-eight of Selected Poems by Patchen) perhaps state his antiwar sentiments as well, but are more concerned with the "rape of America" theme which is the next important aspect of this category of Patchen's poetry.

A more concise statement of Patchen's concern for the insensitivity of man toward his fellow men and toward the real beauty of the world is found in "The Wolf of Winter." Again a snow-image is used, but instead of the purifying snow of death as in "The Fox," this is a hungry, gnawing, vicious and all-encompassing annihilation; it is at once death which "sticks his paw into the city's rancid pot, / wanly stirring its soup of whores and suicides," and the unfeeling apathy of men toward men that "Crunches on the bones of the poor / In his chill white cave." Yet strangely this wolf is a beautiful beast, "The grim, the cold, the white / Beautiful winter wolf / That feeds on our world." It is death, beautiful to Patchen as it was "delicious" to Whitman, with somewhat more bitterness added, a mood expressed in "I Feel

Drunk All the Time," because "it's too damn beautiful for anybody to die." There is, perhaps, a double meaning in this line; it is at once a statement of fact and a prophecy: Part of the beauty of life is its seemingly infinite renewal, a renewal in which personal death and its accompanying sadness for those left behind is only the final expression of the individual life.

Much of the criticism leveled at Kenneth Patchen's work is directed at his love poetry, which has been described as "merely sentimental" and, like most of his other poetry, "formless." One writer, Michael Benedikt, has said that Patchen writes only love poems or political poems of the same depth as the love poems, rather harshly criticizing Patchen on the grounds that love is an "ideal realm of irresponsibility, but government is not."⁴

I do not feel personally that this is a valid criticism. The whole point of Patchen's "irresponsible" attitude about love is that real love, whether erotic or otherwise, is characterized by an overwhelming responsibility between people for communication and concern, a responsibility that transcends ordinary connotations of the word and which may be a hint of what responsibility actually means. Patchen's so-called "political" poetry is not political at all: It merely reflects (as in "Street Corner College") the hostility of the social environment to the majority of men: "Cold stars watch us, chum,/ Cold stars and the whores," or it indicts the system which, regardless of its name--capitalism,

⁴Michael Benidikt, "Kenneth Patchen," Poetry, February, 1965

communism, fascism--has bred war for profit at the expense of mankind. In the face of such an indictment against irresponsible government, I fail to see how anyone could level such a charge against Patchen.

Patchen's love poetry varies, in my opinion, between merely good and truly beautiful. My favorite, perhaps his shortest, is "Of the Same Beauty Were Stars Made:"

Of the same beauty were stars made
That they might guide their earthly sister
When she undertook the white still journey
Into the country of His gentle keeping.

This is, of course, more than a love poem. It speaks at once of the hope of a lover for the immortality after death of his dying or dead love and of the renewal of truth and beauty in the world because there are things that are simply true and beautiful and as such are eternal. I especially like Patchen's recurring use of snow-imagery as symbolic of death, purification for renewal. It is used again in "The Snow Is Deep on the Ground:"

"This is a good world./ The war has failed./ God shall not forget us./ Who made the snow waits where love is." In this world, the "lights of heaven" always "glow softly down on the hair of my beloved."

Patchen as a prophet or seer is probably Patchen at his best. Patchen himself sees the ancient druidic concept of "poet as priest;" his work with painting and poetry is reminiscent of the ancient Keltic Illuminated Manuscripts, according to Margaret Rigg.⁵ Patchen is, in my opinion, a magician of sorts, a magician because he is in fact a poet-priest. His sense of transcendent renewal is expressed in "As She Was Thus Alone

⁵The Outsider, pp. 151-2.

In the Clear Moonlight" and **"Do the Dead Know What Time It Is?"**. **"As She Was Thus Alone"** is superficially a love poem, but it also describes the position of the creative man: "standing between rock and sky, and scarcely seeming to touch the earth, her dark locks and loose garments scattered by the wind, she looked like some giant spirit of the older time, preparing to ascend into the mighty cloud which singly hung from this poor heaven." When the true mystical communication and perception of beauty is present, "when she lay beside me/ sleep's town went round her/ and wondering children pressed against the high windows/ of the room where we had been;" when the poet has known this mystical quality, then his work is artistry, the truest of communication, but when "we were too proud to answer, too tired to care about designs/ 'of tents and books and swords and birds'" and the poet has lost touch with the beauty of life, "thus does the circle pull upon itself/ and all the gadding angels draw us in/ until I can join her in that soft town where the bells/ split apples on their tongues/ and bring sleep down like a fish's shadow." When the poet's communion with life is over, it is time for the "circle" of renewal to begin again and for death to complete the ultimate loveliness of life.

"Do the Dead Know What Time It Is?" is not quite as easy to interpret: Its theme seems to be "communication failure" set up in parallel symbolism. I am not sure if Patchen is referring to the physically dead or to the vast "silent majority" of humanity

or to the (if not dead) seriously ill religious institutions of the world. The "old guy's" message, "You can stop crying now!" is lost on the young man, who is intently trying to find the same message by picking up a prostitute. Few people, mainly poets, ever get the message; most of us are, like the young man intent on finding out "What we can talk about that will take all night" and" and replying to ourselves, "I don't know." The artist, even if he does not have direct answers to all the absurdities of life, knows that life is beautiful and that there is no need for tears of anything but joy, a message totally lost on "the dead"--mankind; us.

It is impossible to do justice to Kenneth Patchen in a paper of this nature (or of any other nature that I can think of at the moment). Patchen's artistry speaks for itself. It requires reading of a different sort than does ordinary poetry; the reader must forget just about all he thinks he knows about poetic explication and listen to the poet, an experience which, with some contemporary poets, is often a waste of time, but in understanding Kenneth Patchen, is a necessity.

I have included copies of several of the poems quoted before, and one attempt at copying a Patchen "picture-poem." In my opinion, Patchen is second only to Whitman as the best poet in American literature and has had by far the greater influence of the two on me and on my ideas about poetry.

THE ORANGE BEARS

The orange bears with soft friendly eyes
Who played with me when I was ten,
Christ, before I left home they'd had
Their paws smashed in the rolls, their backs
Seared by hot slag, their soft trusting
Bellies kicked in, their tongues ripped
Out, and I went down through the woods
To the smelly crick with Whitman
In the Haldeman-Julius edition,
And I just sat there worrying my thumbnail
into the cover--What did he know about
Orange bears with their coats all stunk up with soft coal
And the National Guard coming over
From Wheeling to stand in front of the millgates
With drawn bayonets jeering at the strikers?

I remember you could put daisies
On the windowsill at night and in
The morning they'd be so covered with soot
You couldn't tell what they were anymore.

A hell of a fat chance my orange bears had!

THE FOX

Because the snow is deep
Without spot that white falling through white air

Because she limps a little--bleeds
Where they shot her

Because hunters have guns
And dogs have hangmen's legs

Because I'd like to take her in my arms
And tend her wound

Because she can't afford to die
Killing the young in her belly

I don't know what to say of a soldier's dying
Because there are no proportions in death.

THE STARS GO TO SLEEP SO PEACEFULLY

The stars go to sleep so peacefully . . .
Their high gentle eyes closing like white flowers
In a child's dream of paradise.

With the morning, in haste after grim house,
In a haste of money, proper to kiss their war,
These noble little fools awake.

O the soul of the world is dead . . .
Truth rots in a bloody ditch;
And love is impaled on a million bayonets

But great God! the stars go to sleep so peacefully

THE WOLF OF WINTER

The wolf of winter
Devours roads and towns
In his white hunger.

The wolf of winter
sticks his paw into the city's rancid pot,
Wanly stirring its soup of whores and suicides.

O the wolf of winter
Crunches on the bones of the poor
In his chill white cave.

The wolf of winter . . .
The grim, the cold, the white
Beautiful winter wolf
That feeds on our world.

The sea is awash with roses O they blow
Upon the land

The still hills fill with their scent
O the hills flow on their sweetness
As on God's hand

O love, it is so little we know of pleasure
Pleasure that lasts as the snow

But the sea is awash with roses O they blow
Upon the land.

(Not quoted, but one of my favorites!)

She knows it's
raining and my
room is warm



but she is proud
and beautiful
and I have
no money

SOURCES

- I. The Bird in the Bush, and Other Obvious Essays, Kenneth Rexroth (New York: 1959), pp. 61-2.
- II. The Outsider, Book Issue 4/5, "Homage to Kenneth Patchen," (Tucson: 1968) pp. 146-7, 152-68.
- III. Frederich Eckman, "The Comic Apocalypse of Kenneth Patchen," Poetry, September, 1958, pp. 54-5.
- IV. Michael Benidikt, "Kenneth Patchen," Poetry, February, 1965.
- V. Selected Poems, Kenneth Patchen, (New York: 1957).