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## Kenneth Patchen's Poetics of Pain

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David Morris (1991), the eminent theorist of pain's historical and cultural life, has argued that chronic pain may well be the "characteristic malady of our time" (pp. 65-66), as leprosy and plague were for the medieval world, madness for the Renaissance, and tuberculosis for the Romantic era.<sup>1</sup> If this is the case, then American poet Kenneth Patchen, long consigned to the dustbin of literary history, may well be one of our representative or defining poets. Patchen's last poems, issued from the bed of the disabled poet and collected in three volumes, *Hallelujah Anyway* (1967), *But Even So* (1968), and *Wonderings* (1971), shape a provocative visual language for the chronic pain that framed his life and silently ravaged his body. This essay is a journey into what I will call Patchen's "poetics of pain," that is, the productive literary and visual strategies that allowed the artist to give voice to his own suffering and at the same time to open a window on what Morris calls the "representative illness" (p. 65) of our era.

John Bonica, the father of the modern interdisciplinary pain clinic, was among the first to understand chronic pain as a distinct medical condition, separate from (though connected to) acute pain. While acute pain arises suddenly as the result of a specific injury and disappears after a period of treatment and healing, chronic pain persists after normal recovery should have occurred. Chronic pain is intractable, often inexplicable, and seems to serve no useful function (such as the protection from further harm that acute pain provides). Rather than a symptom of injury, chronic pain is a syndrome—a complex, multilayered condition that the interdisciplinary pain clinic was organized to address on its various levels (physiological, psychological, and sociological). In their classic study, *The Challenge of Pain*, pioneers Ronald Melzack and Patrick Wall (1983) began looking beyond the physiological to the psychological and metaphysical costs of pain: “Patients are beset with a sense of helplessness, hopelessness and meaninglessness,” they write of chronic pain sufferers. “Pain becomes evil—it is intolerable and serves no useful function” (p. 55).

One of the most pernicious qualities of chronic pain, philosopher and theorist Elaine Scarry (1985) argues in *The Body in Pain*, is its inexpressibility—its capacity not only to resist but to actively destroy language, “bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (p. 4). Both doctors and writers have reflected on the problem of pain’s unshareability, the supreme difficulty of articulating, measuring, or giving it form. As Virginia Woolf (2002) reflected in *On Being Ill*, “English,

which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache. ... The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry” (pp. 6–7). In response to this “poverty of the language” that Woolf wrote against or back to in *On Being Ill*, physician Ronald Melzack developed one of the key tools in the study of pain, the McGill-Melzack Pain Questionnaire. This rating scale, developed in 1975 and still routinely used as a diagnostic tool, presents sufferers with a series of adjectives designed to give voice or form to an experience that can be most dreadful in its silent formlessness. This dearth of language, and indeed pain’s fundamental resistance to language, is why Scarry and other theorists emphasize the high stakes involved in the project of expressing or objectifying pain—since making pain visible, they argue, is the first essential step in controlling and even eliminating it.

Although little critical attention has been paid to his work since his death, Kenneth Patchen was one of the most popular and prolific poets of the 1940s and 1950s, well known as a writer of proletarian verse and protest poetry, a visual experimentalist, and an important precursor to the Beats.<sup>2</sup> Born in 1911 in the industrial Ohio valley, Patchen came from a blue-collar family of coal miners and steel workers. His early poetry clearly reflects his proletarian roots and one of his main subjects is the chronic pains of industrial poverty, as decried, for example, in the 1943 “May I Ask you a Question, Mr. Youngstown Sheet & Tube?”:

Mean grimy houses, shades drawn  
Against the yellow-brown smoke  
That blows in  
Every minute of every day. And  
Every minute of every night. To bake a  
cake or have a baby,  
With the taste of tar in your mouth. To  
wash clothes or fix supper,  
With the taste of tar in your mouth.  
Ah, but the grand funerals ...  
Rain hitting down  
On the shiny hearses ...  
(Patchen, 1968, pp. 6–7)

The shiny hearses streaming out of the Youngstown Sheet & Tube steel factory, where Patchen’s father and the poet himself briefly worked, are an image of the human cost of industrial capitalism (what Patchen [1968] would later call “the rent we have to pay to live in us” [p. 281]).<sup>3</sup> Poems like this express Patchen’s (1968) early sense of pain as something unconfined to individual bodies or sites, but rather as a phenomenon that is social, shared, and ultimately politically and economically structured. Consider “The Orange Bears: Childhood in an Ohio Milltown”:

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 ...  
(p. 384)

The orange bears get their sickly colour from the ore and polluted smoke that, like the tar-expressed daily from Youngstown factories, engulfs everyone and everything. The melodramatic political language of these poems no doubt has had much to do with Patchen's critical neglect, since, as Cary Nelson (1989) argues in *Repression and Recovery*, critics and historians of Modernism have tended to ignore overtly political poets in favor of those more inclined to aesthetic experimentation.

Given Patchen's steady descent into obscurity since the 1960s, few have noted the terrible irony that one of the most vocal and mobile poets of the 1940s and 50s, the man who pioneered the Jazz and Poetry movement and traveled across the United States and Canada performing with jazz combos, spent the last decade of his life isolated, bedridden, and in chronic pain. A disabling back injury of 1937, misdiagnosed as arthritis for 12 years, initiated a long history of pain, periodic immobility, and ineffectual and inappropriate treatment. Though spinal fusions gave him some relief, a 1959 "surgical mishap"—where Patchen was apparently dropped from the surgical cart (Smith, 2000, pp. 247–248)<sup>4</sup>—left him nearly incapacitated until his death from a heart attack in 1972.

It was during these final years of immobility, living in poverty in Palo Alto, that Patchen (2008) began producing his poem-paintings, a series of hand-painted and drawn poems and images which embody “The words that speak up / from the mangled bodies / of human beings” (p. 51), (as one untitled visual poem puts it) in direct and startling ways. The work’s magnetic charge, like that of the best “outsider art,” comes from its odd combination of the terrifying and the whimsical. As Kenneth Rexroth once described Patchen’s vision, “It is as if ... the Owl and the Pussycat were writing up Hiroshima” (Morgan, p. 20). Devoting his limited daily energy to his art, Patchen worked from his bed on a pulley desktop rigged to rest against his knees. His crude materials (part of what give the work its rough vitality) included whatever was close at hand. Besides brushes, he used tree sprigs, kitchen utensils, and garden tools. Besides paint and pastel, he used crayon, magic marker, coffee, tea, Easter egg dye, and cornstarch. Patchen’s “painful rejoicings,” as he called an earlier group of visual poems in *Hurrah for Anything* (1957), like the artwork of Frida Kahlo or Sylvia Plath, provide a fascinating and potentially useful window onto the experience of chronic pain outside of the biomedical purview in which it is usually studied. By reading Patchen’s unique poetics of pain, we may recover some of pain’s potential meanings—perspectives, David Morris has argued, that we’ve lost in our cultural fixation on the medical meaning of pain.

In *The Culture of Pain*, Morris argues that with the great scientific breakthroughs in anatomy and physiology of the late nineteenth century, our culture turned over the complex, age-old problems of pain and suffering—problems that were previously the concern of philosophers, theologians, politicians, mystics, and artists—almost completely to the medical profession. In our current “biomedical worldview” (which Morris contrasts to a biocultural worldview), pain is seen as a symptom, to be treated by doctors. On this reading, pain is purely a problem of “nerves and neurotransmitters:” as Morris writes, “When we think about pain [today], we almost instantly conjure up a scene that includes doctors, drugs, ointments, surgery, hospitals, laboratories, and insurance forms” (Morris, 1991, p. 2). Following the work of medical pioneers in the field of pain studies, Morris treats pain as a perception, rather than a sensation, having as much to do with the mind as with the body. Thus, different people may experience and understand the same injury or pain in different ways. While we normally think of pain as localizable and related to a particular stimulus, the puzzling cases of pain without injury (as in Lesch-Nyhan disease) [see Melzak & Wall, 1983, p. 20]<sup>5</sup> or the well-documented phenomenon of phantom limbs, wherein individuals may experience great pain in an extremity that no longer exists, all support the idea that pain is much more than a physical symptom. Patchen’s work continually reflects on the multiple dimensions of pain—its physical, psychological,

and cultural scope. From his early work on the collective pains of industrial capitalism, through the *Journal of Albion Moonlight* (1941/1961) and hundreds of individual poems that witness the suffering caused by militarization and war, to his final poems where his own body becomes a site for the world's affliction, Patchen's work is a continuing meditation on David Morris's claim that pain "emerges only at the intersection of bodies, minds, and cultures" (Morris, 1991, p. 3).

When we restore this fuller sense of pain as perception or emotion, pain as a subjective experience, we also re-open a host of crucial questions about pain and meaning. Pain continually raises the question of meaning and the need to interpret, as the great tragedies keep re-teaching us, and as individual sufferers know on a daily basis as they ponder the question: *Why? Why is this happening to me?* While we've turned pain over to the medical profession, there are just too many questions that medical technologies alone cannot answer (Morris, 1991, pp. 18, 31–34). It is in this devastating and often inexpressible world of chronic pain that a "poetics of pain" can be so crucial. Art, and particularly poetry, has evolved some of the most sophisticated and subtle methods for addressing questions of meaning, when, as one Patchen poem-painting records, "the world is nothing that can be known" (Figure 1) (Patchen, 2008, p. 98). Though we cannot finally know another's pain, we may begin a process of empathy by reading its embodiment in artistic forms. Patchen's work (like Frida Kahlo's painted diaries) demonstrates how

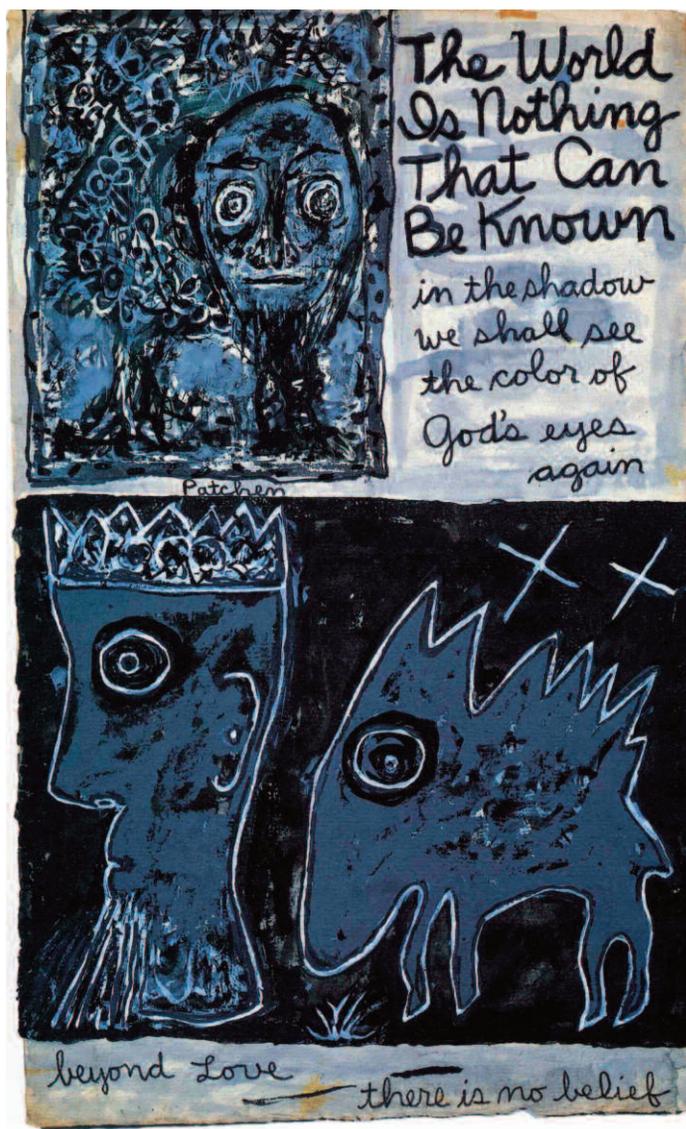


Figure 1

poetic and visual forms are particularly suited to the task of expressing inexpressible pain. Both use language to push beyond language—into a region of empathetic experience Patchen calls “the shadow,” where, according to the poem-painting in Figure 1, “we shall see the color of God’s eyes again.”

In this image, “God’s eyes” are the eyes of many creatures: human and animal in the bottom frame, and vegetative in the top frame, where eyes issue from the trees in a form half human and half flower. Eyes themselves are the overwhelming focus of the image, repeated in the accented pupils of each creature, in the staring, starry X’s of the bottom frame, as well as in the assonant music of the poem’s repeated O’s (world, nothing, known, shadow, color, God, love, no), where shape and sound coalesce. If “God’s eyes” have a colour here in their blue, black, and grey shades, it is the colour of sympathetic vacancy, a staring speech for the speechlessness void of pain that only love, the poem suggests, can articulate.

“Beyond love — there is no belief” and beyond representation—there is no speech. Patchen’s poem-paintings assume the burden of such painful articulation as their final task. His work (“a gift, a love gift / Utterly unasked for / By a sky / Palely and flamily / Igniting its carbon monoxides” [Plath, 1981, p. 240]) is dedicated to giving form to the formless, to translating the blank landscape of pain into a vibrant wordscape of colour and life. The poet’s landscapes and figures inhabit a borderland between tragedy and comedy, where the

unimaginable is commonplace, and where the viewer's bearings on the scene are always uncertain. What are we to make, for example, of the slightly disturbing circus colours of "Hallelujah" (Figure 2)? Here, we have the figure of the clown or fool (often a vehicle for comedy, pain, and insight) turning into a kind of fragmented cubist body, a body that becomes landscape, and which whimsically celebrates some kind of absurd horror. The text reads: "Hallelujah is my name and what's goin' on around here I find almost as captivating as the thought of a lipless hyena announcing the next after the last train" (Patchen, 2008, p. 156).

This poem-painting (Figure 2) gives body to a state that is simultaneously rejoicing (Hallelujah—praise to the Lord) and bewailing (in the voice of the hyena—a nocturnal, carnivorous scavenger with a disturbing, human-like howl or "laugh"). The work occupies both a visual space and a lexical time. It creates a multivalent "here," a space that is both situated and ephemeral, presence and dream—the ghostly turning wheels of "the next after the last train." Though I am loath to draw symbolic equivalencies, because I don't believe these texts are directly allegorical, "Hallelujah" can be seen as embodying a landscape of chronic pain. This is a state that seems to have no beginning and no end, that infects body and world simultaneously, that is both hideous and absurd (on the level of the cosmic joke). For the sufferer, pain often seems devoid of meaning other than itself. It is what it is: a presence that doesn't change, an eye

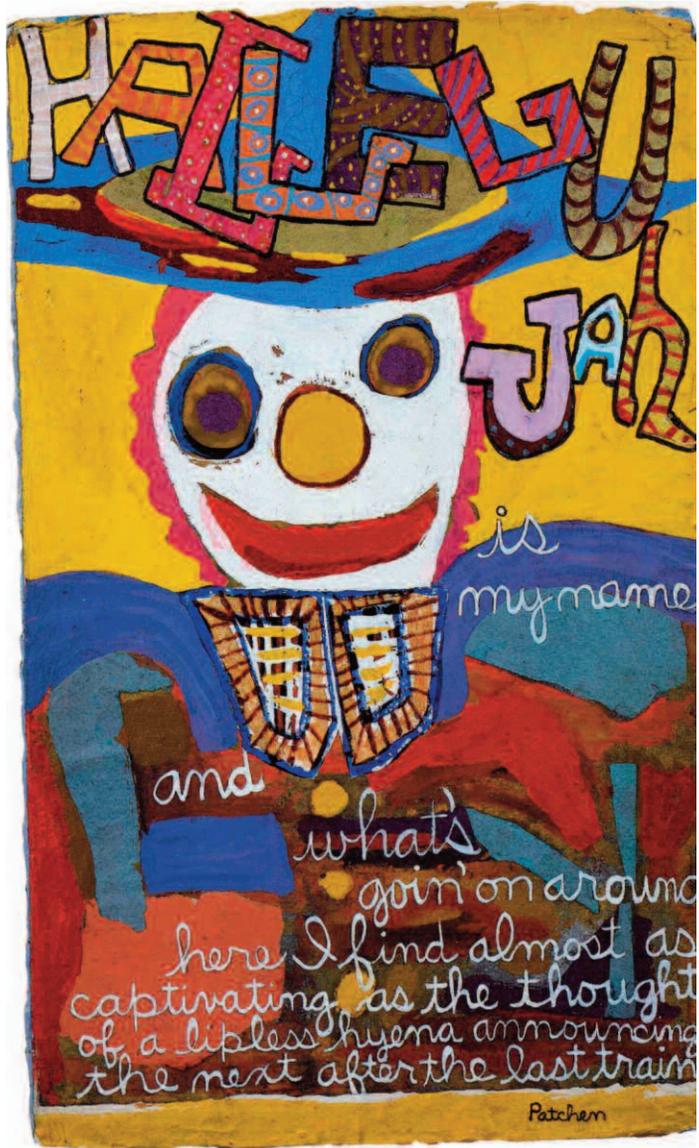


Figure 2

that doesn't shut, as Emily Dickinson (1960) reflected:

Pain — has an Element of Blank —  
It cannot recollect  
When it begun — or if there were  
A time when it was not —  
It has no Future — but itself —  
Its Infinite contain  
Its Past — enlightened to perceive  
New Periods — of Pain. (p. 323)

Chronic pain's *blankness* (its refusal of past and future, its infinite message that nothing will change) calls for interpretation, embodiment, voice—and while voice does not necessarily resolve pain, it does give it form, it puts some borders on pain's "Infinite." Dickinson's poem embodies pain's power (in its commanding capital letters, its potentially threatening gaps, and its relentless circularity from start to finish, Pain to Pain), but at the same time, her tightly controlled quatrains also organize that power—making it in part her own. Framing pain in words, images, sounds, or movements may be an extremely powerful way of reigning its "Circumference," to use another Dickinsonian word:

Pain — expands the Time —  
Ages coil within  
The minute Circumference  
Of a single Brain —  
Pain contracts — the Time —

Occupied with Shot  
Gamuts of Eternities  
Are as they were not — (p. 452)

Perhaps because of pain's resistance to spoken and written language, artists like Patchen and Kahlo discovered that a particularly effective way framing pain was by supplementing the verbal with the visual. As Figures 3 and 4 illustrate, Patchen's visual images allow his words to speak in new ways. In Figure 3, "My god the sorrow of it," the visual component allows for an excess of verbal meaning" (Patchen, 2008).

The handwritten text lends an extra sense of thickness, decay, or affliction to the letters. We notice the pitting and stress given to the "m" and "g," as if these impasto letters are both fully present and simultaneously being eaten up, eroded, or put under erasure. The image embodies the words or letters, giving a new kind of signified to the signifier, a physical, painterly body to thought. In the same way, the expressive colour and application (the red outlining, yellow highlighting, black and grey overlays, alterations between defined lines and washes) give form both to the message and to the creatures (the Kafkaesque insect, the five-legged dog) who inhabit this world.

Patchen's ambiguous "it" opens "the sorrow" up to many sites. The uncertainty about the source or meaning of pain in this piece is highlighted by what is perhaps Patchen's most recurring figure: the eye. Like the blank staring rings in "The World is Nothing That Can Be Known" (Figure 1), the



Figure 3

oval eyes of “my god” heighten both our voyeuristic sense of watching, of overlooking a scene of dreadful privacy, and our sense of being watched—since the eyes seem to be reading us as much as we are reading them. In this painting, the interior eye, outlined in white and yellow (which seems to refer out to a larger eye, outlined in red) is likely the first thing to catch the viewer’s eye. But the more we look, the more the eyes proliferate, including those thickly painted, eye-like letters, “g,” “o,” and “d”—the lexical body of the painting’s other eye, god.

While Figure 3 builds a sense of the thickness of language and experience, Figure 4 creates a sense of its thinness—the transience of flesh. Here, the use of white space, washes, fading script, and light application all add to the hesitant language of dashes and ellipses:

Which of us is not flesh? Last and first, in  
that common cause. Beyond this—I would  
like to be able to say ... to say more.  
(Patchen, 2008, p. 68)

Seen together, Patchen’s poem-paintings present a counter-world to our own, an iconographic place of uncanny creatures and words. David Morris speaks about how a bio-medical world-view encourages us to see pain as a puzzle—something that can be solved, cured, eradicated if we only find and put together the missing pieces. Against this progressivist view, Morris (1991) suggests an alternative: that we view pain not as a puzzle but as a mystery:



Figure 4

Mysteries—if we reinvest the concept with something of its ancient prestige—designate a truth necessarily closed off from full understanding. They remain always partly veiled in silence ... Mysteries ... refuse to yield up every quantum of their darkness to research or to bright ideas. Instead, they introduce us to unusual states of being which, for a time, we enter into and dwell within ... As patients, we dwell within mysteries like pain not because we lack a crucial piece of information—although crucial information is always lacking—but because we have no choice. A mystery is an experience life thrusts upon us ... Willingly or unwillingly, we enter into a realm that is somehow set apart, where our familiar modes of thought and experience simply do not suffice. (pp. 23–24)

This is exactly what Patchen is so good at creating or re-creating: a provocative, enticing, uncanny world of mysterious pain. The poems are messages or emblems from this world, delivered in a familiar language by vaguely familiar, half-human creatures. We might see them all as cousins of “Hallelujah,” the prophet-fool who suffers and rejoices simultaneously. The creature on the bottom right of Figure 5 appears to be such a cousin: part clown, part death mask, with a body filled with scars and eyes. The body reveals its wounds through a layered-painting effect that seems to breach the exterior and expose the interior. The



Figure 5

poem-paintings invite us not to solve them, but to “dwell within” them, to inhabit their frames and bodies. In this sense, we become one of Patchen’s creatures in our experience of their world, a transformation that “I have a funny feeling ...” (Figure 5) embodies.

Like us, Patchen’s creatures come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Their most striking common feature, however, as noted previously, is their prominent, penetrating eyes. This gaze is undoubtedly part of their uncanniness: they seem to be watching us watch them. In fact, “I have a funny feeling that some very peculiar-looking creatures out there are watching us” (Figure 5) is explicitly about the odd congruence of gazes between figure and viewer (Patchen, 2008, p. 122). Readers can situate themselves in either position: on one hand, they may be outside, observing this odd world of scarified creatures and entombed birds. In this case, the voice comes from within the painting and the viewers themselves become the “peculiar-looking creatures.” On the other hand, viewers may position themselves inside, identified with Patchen’s “peculiar-looking” creatures as the object of the gaze. Patchen’s text divides us from ourselves, so that we cannot be quite sure if we are watching or being watched. This effect is heightened by the proliferation of eyes: not only in the incisive gazes of creatures, but all over the frame. In this image, the trees have eyes, the stones are eyes, and even the figures’ bodies seem to include extra eyes. The whole scene, in fact, may be lit by two eye-like suns in the upper right corner. This multiplication

of eyes is a common feature of Patchen's poem-paintings. In other works, eyes appear on hands and feet. These marks are reminiscent of stigmata—the eye-like wounds of Christ and other saints, which both see and express pain. Patchen's world stresses vision as well as the visionary. The visionary is that which connects two realms—the earthly (to which his figures are often firmly attached) and the divine, or otherworldly (to which they so often point). The “visionary” in Patchen is a large topic, beyond the scope of this present work, but it is worthwhile to recall that the visionary is often linked to and achieved by pain—as in the Passion re-enacted by self-flagellating medieval Christian mystics.

The eyes of vision, interrogation, and sympathy are all over Patchen's work. They are one of the many ways he draws us in and creates a community of shared feeling—and ultimately, a shared sense of the comedy and tragedy of human life. As Figure 6 indicates, the message of so much of Patchen's (2008) work—from the overtly political early poems to the subtler, bittersweet irony of the poem-paintings—is about the collective necessity of recovery, healing, or acceptance for all. His art moves between the poles of peace and pain, reflecting on the ways we've chosen to structure this “w o r l d,” the image and word stretched out across the middle of Figure 6, and the middle of the body of his work (p. 143).

In over two hundred poem-paintings, Patchen rarely represents a solitary figure. While chronic pain can be the most isolating of afflictions

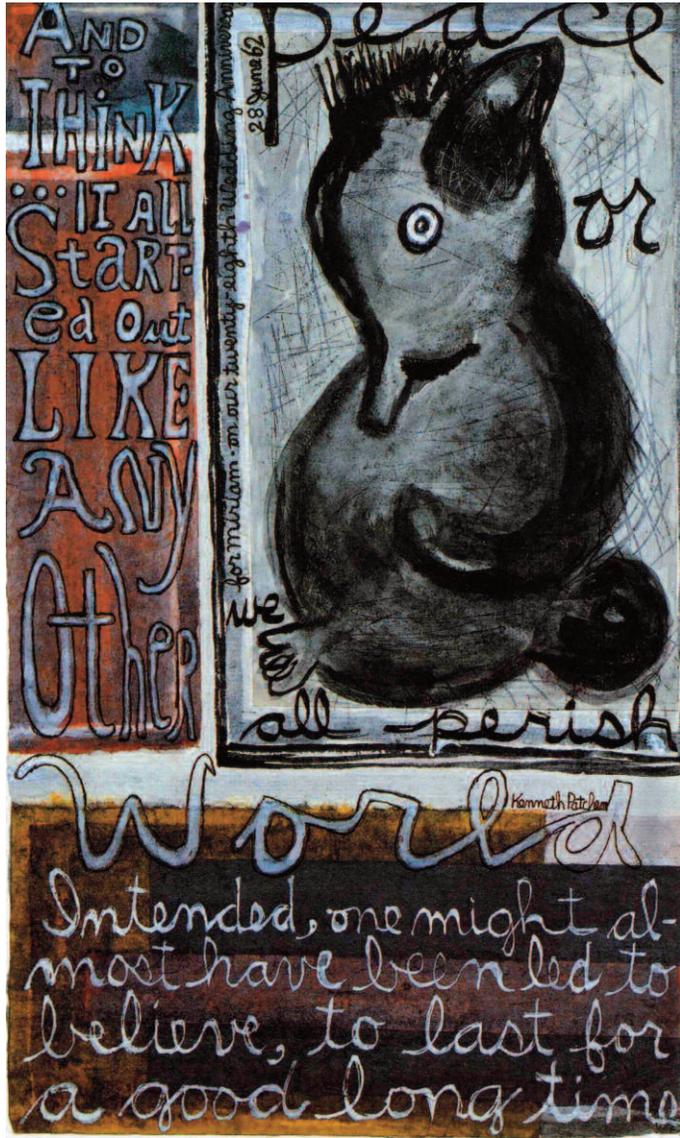


Figure 6

(Morris calls it “the quintessential solitary experience” [1991, p. 37]) given the unshareability of pain, Patchen continually makes pain and suffering into a communal issue. It’s no coincidence that there are so many animal or half-animal figures in his work, since, for Patchen, their peace or suffering is intimately tied to our own. This communal focus also helps to explain Patchen’s repeated and odd use of the pronoun “us,” as in Figure 7, “What Shall We do Without Us?” (2008, p. 271) This image, with its personified mushroom cloud centrepiece, seems to be a figuration of saying goodbye to the world, an enactment of not just an individual but also a collective sense of loss—human, animal, vegetable, mineral.

Figure 8 once again presents an image of conjoined comedy and tragedy. A smiling, tombstone-like face broods greyly over what seems to be an actual tombstone, meditating on the collective cost of being human, “the kind of rent we have to pay to live in us” (Patchen, 2008, p. 106). Pain is that rent, whether it is physical, emotional, or spiritual. And whether the world is really enough is a question that all sufferers face on a daily basis.

To answer this most basic existential question, one needs a form—a religious, intellectual, or artistic medium to give substance and shape to whatever it is that makes life bearable. This is what Patchen’s poem-paintings do—like Frida Kahlo’s representations of her terrible pain; or Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*; or Bob Flanagan’s sado-masochistic performance art, which he understood as a stay against his incurable illness, a way to



Figure 7

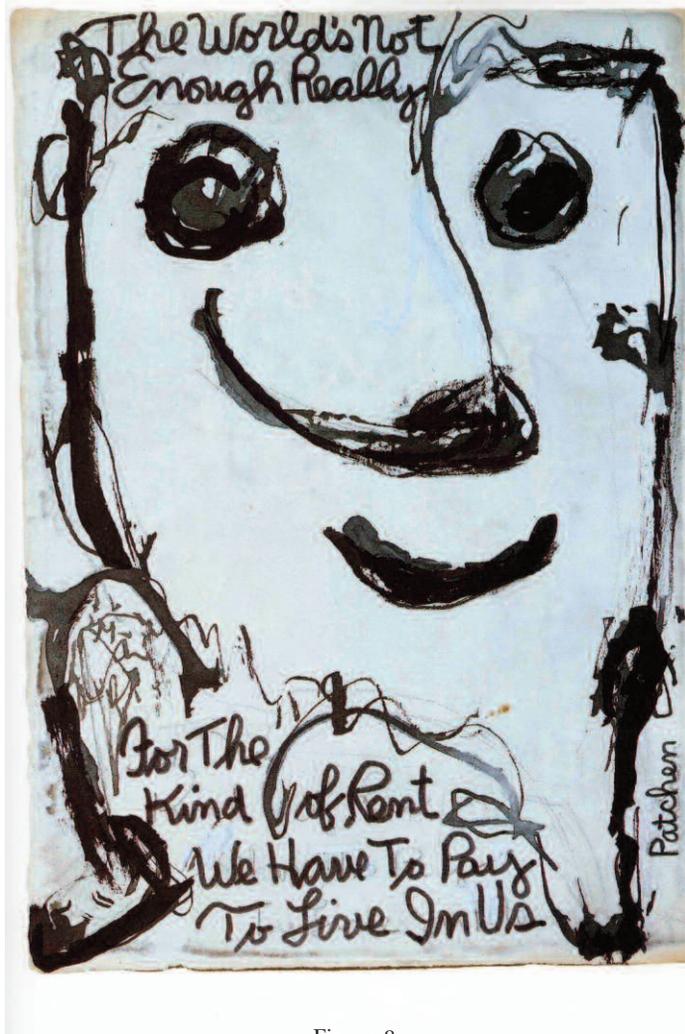


Figure 8

“fight pain with pain” (Lorde, 1995).<sup>6</sup> All these artists create forms which both validate and give meaning to what often seem like the meaningless “rents” (cystic fibrosis, cancer, natural disaster, depression, AIDS, poverty, chronic pain) we have to pay to live in us.

This article represents a very preliminary investigation into the poetics of pain. There is still much to be done, but I want to leave this piece with the final thought that pain need not always be seen as catastrophe. Indeed, a survey of our past—of the kind Morris undertakes in *The Culture of Pain*—shows us that pain has often and perhaps necessarily attended growth, achievement, and vision. When we consider the pain that so frequently accompanies initiation rites all over the world (circumcision, tattooing, fasting, and other physical challenges), or the visionary pain of religious mystics of many traditions; when we contemplate the poetry of painful transformation in Emily Dickinson or Sylvia Plath, or the stories of the redemptive pain of Oedipus or Jesus—what we see is the way pain opens us up to a truth that seems to both connect and transcend physical bodies.

### Notes

1. Morris provides some shocking statistics: 90 million Americans suffering from chronic pain, 60 million either partially or totally disabled, at a cost of 750 million workdays, and somewhere between 60 and 90 billion dollars annually (19).
2. Patchen is perhaps best known as a proto-Beat poet, a “rebel poet in America” as Larry Smith titles his biography, or as Patchen’s close friend and supporter Henry Miller put it “a living symbol of protest ... a fizzing human bomb ever threatening to explode in our midst” (Morgan, p. 33). What has not been frequently noted is the fact that

- Patchen was perhaps the first American concrete poet (producing visual poems in *The Teeth of the Lion* [1942] and *Cloth of the Tempest* [1943] a decade before Eugene Gombinger who is often considered the progenitor of concrete poetry began his experiments).
3. Patchen's biographer, Larry Smith, provides a vivid example of the link between industrial capitalism and generalized pain and suffering. He describes a poster produced by the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Mill depicting an actual severed hand nailed to a board. "Below the hand is a company admonition to the works not to slow progress with such 'carelessness,' a graphic example of management's first punishing their workers with an unsafe workplace, then blaming the victim." See Larry Smith, *Kenneth Patchen: Rebel Poet in America* (Huron, Ohio: Bottom Dog Press, 2000), 23.
  4. This was Patchen's twilight memory several days after the surgery of 13 July 1959. Patchen initiated a long and unsuccessful malpractice suit that revealed that the hospital records of the surgery had mysteriously vanished.
  5. A rare and mysterious congenital disorder in children who engage in self-mutilating acts as if trying to destroy some part of their body that is causing intolerable pain.
  6. See Audre Lorde, 1995. Performance artist and poet Bob Flanagan, one of the longest living survivors of cystic fibrosis, attributed his relative longevity (he died at age 43) to an artistic practice that took control of his suffering through ritualized acts of sadomasochism. For a disturbing but enlightening introduction to his work see Kirby Dick's film *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*.

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