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"I believe that we are at a turning — one road leads into darkness, another into the light.... Those are stars up there. And this is a man down here."

— Kenneth Patchen, *Sleepers Awake*

Sleeping Through The World's End

Sleepers Awake

by Kenneth Patchen

New York: Padell, 1946.

Patricia Eakins

Kenneth Patchen's *Sleepers Awake* came to me as *samizdat*. A friend who loved the book but despaired of finding an affordable out-of-print copy had painstakingly made his own, photocopying all 389 pages of it. Certainly I was predisposed to love a book that had been such a labor of love. But long after I had taken a deep breath and shelled out for my own copy, I continued to be seduced by Patchen's perfect-pitch American vernacular tale talking. I loved the unity of graphic and text (even more striking in the book than in a photocopy), the explosions into concrete poetry, the prophecy, the shell-game narration, the genre echoes, the painterliness, the direct address, writer to reader. I loved the vivid interperfusion of world and dream. I was not at all put off by what some have called the book's "stridency," as I am a student of manifesto and more generally am fascinated by exaggeration, polemic, hyperbole, obsession and passionate statement of all kinds. I was puzzled by the rhetoric of continual frustration, the way the book kept, well, chastising my expectation that one thing would follow another. I had the modernist or pre-modernist predisposition to search for some residual arc of narrative within the book's interruptions of interruptions. Despite my attraction to *Sleepers*, it seemed to me, as it has to many other readers, dauntingly fragmented, even if taken as a work of precursor postmodernist juxtapositional poetics.

Although *Sleepers* is arguably Patchen's most ambitious work, it is not considered his masterpiece. That honor falls most frequently on *The Journal of Albion Moonlight*, another work of wonder and terror set in a moral universe as personal, as vivid, as lucent, as visionary as any of William Blake's. Like *Sleepers*, *Albion* is an "anti-novel," a novel of "the fragmented self," in the words of Anais Nin, "all the voices of the subconscious speaking simultaneously." (Cited in Smith, p. 94) It would be ludicrous to speak of plot in any prose fiction of Patchen, yet certain structural devices do help to create a sense of shapeliness in, say, *Albion*. Despite the breaks, the frustration of narrative expectation, there are dated journal entries; there is a clear sense of journey. *Sleepers* has been harder on readers who expect coherence. "A magnificent failure," says Larry R. Smith (whose profound appreciation of Patchen is not in question.) "Patchen's *Finnegans Wake* ." (Smith, p. 85)

The fragmentation and the huge ambition of *Sleepers Awake* might remind anyone of *Finnegan*. But *Finnegan* is a work of high-modernist language-referential ambition. *Sleepers Awake* is something quite other.

A DIRECT ATTACK ON THE PROBLEM OF MAKING THIS BOOK UNDERSTANDABLE AT ALL

1. A man
2. A world
3. A man
4. A world
5. A man
6. A world
7. A man

(*Sleepers Awake*, p. 235)

In its parts and as a whole, in its picaresque-mosaic way, *Sleepers* iterates and reiterates this basic man/world relationship, and seems to be written from the white-hot heart of it. Indeed, "Art is not to throw light but to be light....," said Patchen. "Nothing can happen from the outside." (*Sleepers*, 268) This direct address of the reader is related but peripherally to the "Dear Reader" addresses of 18th and 19th century fiction. The hot interiority (or personalism) of Patchen's prose is pervasive. There are no true asides and no boundaries between narrator, character, and reader. You might say that *Sleepers* is written from inside an obsession, its perceptual mode a furiously vatic

mystical surrealism — though Patchen refuted the philosophy of Surrealism: "There isn't a religious man among them." (*Albion* , 307)

Said Patchen to Henry Miller, "It is hard to imagine why God should 'think,' yet this 'thinking' is the material of the greatest art.... we don't wish to know ourselves, we wish to be lost in knowing, as a seed in a gust of wind." (Miller, pp 33-42) From the inside, then, a fully inhabited voice speaking directly to the reader, buttonholing him, touching him, trying however to awaken him, fracturing his resistance. Your resistance. My resistance. The characters come and go, as in a folk tale, emerging when the voice needs them. They have an outline quality, a generic quality, like the characters in epics and comic books, characters defined by action, not by overheard rumination.

Almar Gnunsn/Aloysius Best, the "author(s)" of *Sleepers* , and their avatars, are, like Albion Moonlight (and his avatars), a composite journey hero traversing a ravaged landscape where violence erupts from most human encounters. The signposts along the way, the narrative markers present in *Albion* seem to have been casualties of war in *Sleepers* . Most of what is left now is ruin and prophecy, though pockets of lyric, of story, of parody, of poetry, of love remain. The language of *Sleepers* does not represent war in the realistic, distanced language of social protest, it embodies it, from within, as if there were no escaping the desolation.

O Father
I cry out to Thee
I cannot find my way anymore
I hold out my bloody hands
Since all fall into this same grave
O Father Thou too shalt fail

(*Sleepers* , p. 272)

The Journal of Albion Moonlight was published in 1941, the year of Pearl Harbor and American entry into World War II, the year of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, three years after Kristalnacht. Already, said Kenneth Rexroth, the "conscience of mankind" had gone to school "to learn methods of compromising itself. The Moscow trials, the Kuo Min Tang street executions, the betrayal of Spain, the Hitler-Stalin Pact...." (Rexroth, p.22) *Sleepers* was published in 1946, a year after the liberation of Auschwitz, a year after the explosion of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

They're going to blow everything up next time — and I don't believe we have long. Always men have talked about THE END OF THE WORLD — it's nearly here. A few more straws in the wall...a loose brick or two replaced...then no stone left standing on another — and the long silence; really forever. What is there to struggle against? Nobody can put the stars back together again.

(Miller, p.36)

"For Patchen," says Ray Nelson (p. 245)" the Second World War was a culmination of the failure of history, and even when it is only obliquely mentioned...the war is intensely in the background of all his prose." In *Sleepers* , Patchen inscribes the "phantasmagoria of war; then he breaks into a prophetic chant, using capitals and large print to make his message emphatically plain.... What he hopes to do is to widen the boundaries of consciousness, sharpen our senses, rouse us out of sleep," says Charles Glicksberg. "This accounts for the interpolation of squares with letters either meaningful or meaningless [sic, pe], the broken skein of fantastic and melodramatic incidents, the counterpointing of the sacred and the profane, the holy and the vulgar, the mystical and the erotic. The circus of freaks... the various impersonations of the hero of the tale, the series of abductions, seductions, rapes, druggings, killings, are all forgotten as the author suddenly whispers that death is still with us, always present " (Glicksberg, 187)

A man
A world
A man
A world

A "direct attack" on the problem of understanding: the words distill the essence of a text that is an action, sign upon sign, like a beacon warning airplanes away from a radio tower. Like a rotating lamp in a lighthouse, flashing warning to endangered ships from a rocky point. (Warning to the reader in the here and now: there are no beacons, no airplanes, no radio towers, no lighthouse lamps, no endangered ships, and no rocky points in *Sleepers Awake* .)

Patchen was a radical pacifist, intolerant and intemperate in the face of apocalypse. He was a pacifist during a "just" war, a "good" war, when pacifism was not, as during the Vietnam War, a popular movement. Though as a young man he had come angry from the steel mills of Youngstown to speak with the Left during the thirties, when he was regarded as a proletarian Shelley, he alienated the Left by his failure to support the Republicans in the Spanish Civil

War. He alienated more intellectuals and artists with his outspoken belief that the bombing of German cities was no appropriate or effective response to The Holocaust. "I am the world-crier, and this is my dangerous career.... ("Early in the Morning," *Collected Poems*, 160-161.) He went to jail for his pacifism.

"For my money, poet and killer can't be used to describe the same person,"
the stranger said.

"Something along that line occurred to me in prison."

"How much'd you get?" I asked, watching the stranger disappear through a
small hole in the ceiling.

"Three years."

"Because you refused to break one of God's commandments."

"Yeh. So long....."

(*Sleepers Awake*, 74)

"It is not true, historically," said Patchen's friend Kenneth Rexroth, "that the poet is the unacknowledged legislator of mankind. On the contrary, poets seem to flourish under despotism.... It is hard to find a common ground for Isaiah and Richard Lovelace. Artist and prophet seem perpetually at war in Blake and D.H. Lawrence. But there comes a point when the minimum integrity necessary to the bare functioning of the artist is destroyed by social evil unless he rise and denounce it.... If the conscience remains awake, there comes a time when the practice of literature is intolerable dishonesty, the artist is overridden by the human being and is drafted into the role of Jeremiah." (Rexroth, 23)

Linear prose is a flawed medium if the end is upon us. Its deployment on the page suggests a perpetuity of next moments. Patchen deploys typography to force a holistic perception rather than a linear reading. Admirers of his "concrete poetry" would lift these perception bursts from the prose, surgically excising the shredded narrative that surrounds them. Admirers of Patchen's narrative, on the other hand, deplore his breaking into typography, as into some obscene dance, rather than letting narrative do the proper work of prose fiction, that ongoing movie which makes more sense — coheres better — than life, thus reassuring us. Patchen refuses to provide the narrative consolation so central to the novel's historic claim on its readers. *Sleepers*'s author, narrator, characters and reader will not transcend the chaos of the end time by any ordering that denies the danger: our attention and only our attention will bind up the world's wounds.

I weep.
I am afraid.
All of the songs are still.
The legends drip a black pus.
Dark beyond reaching is the pain in my heart.

(*Sleepers Awake*, p. 351)

"It takes a great deal of love to give a damn one way or another what happens from now on," Patchen told Henry Miller. "I still do. The situation for human beings is hopeless. For the while that's left, though, we can remember the Great and the gods." (Miller, p.37)

No cooled-out hipster, Patchen, though he was a truly superb jazz poet. For him, it was requisite that the artist provide a "personal model of engagement and wonder" (Smith, p. 65). And, like Blake in his wonder, Patchen sustained purity of vision in complete engagement not only with the music of language but also with the creation of the physical book, writing to printing, in service to an "enflamed adventure." (Smith, p.21)

Patchen's "enflamed adventure" is not *per se* the high modernist intersection of world and sensibility, though a man, the world, suggests that intersection. The enflamed adventure is at least as much in the repetition, a man a world a man a world, beating on the reader like that two-by-four with which, in the joke, the drover must get the attention of the donkey before the beast will move. *Sleepers* is like an action-painted encyclopedia of Zen in which the teacher hits the student again and again to awaken him. Old Zenalofsky. "Sleepers, awake on the precipice." (p. 235) "Be as children again." (p. 87) A man, a world, a man, a world. Pay attention! A desperate poet of love — and Patchen was, after all, arguably our century's greatest love poet — trying to save a world from disaster already present.

... if I ever got near an assured income, I'd write books along the order of great canvases, including everything in them — huge symphonies that would handle poetry and prose as they present themselves from day to day and from one aspect of my life and interests to another. But that's all over.....

(Miller, p. 36)

The great canvas of Modernist sensibility, the huge symphony, exploded, exploded, exploded again. Patchen destroyed the great canvas, a deliberate sacrifice, like a forest ranger setting a fire to prevent a much larger fire. What other response was there, or is there, to the horrors culminating in The Holocaust and in Hiroshima and Nagasaki? What other response was there or is there to the end time? We have forgotten.

... the paradox of this society is that you cannot even die in it any more since you are already dead... And it is not simply an effect of living in the nuclear age, but derives from the ease with which we now live, which makes survivors of us all. If the bomb drops, we shall neither have the time to die nor any awareness of dying. But already in our hyper-protected society we no longer have any awareness of death, since we have subtly passed over into a state where life is excessively easy.

.... The explosions and the extermination (Auschwitz and Hiroshima) still go on, though they have simply taken on a purulent, endemic form. The chain reaction continues nonetheless, the contagion, the unfolding of the viral and bacteriological process. The end of history was precisely the inauguration of this chain reaction.

(Baudrillard, pp. 42-43)

There is nothing easy about Patchen. He is not a televisionated persona, cool and porous, nor is he a cyberpersonality, endlessly and effortlessly morphing. Now, in 2000, 54 years after *Sleepers Awake* was published, Patchen's obsessive stridency is foreign to us. We read *Sleepers* as an oddly prescient postmodern precursor or even as vintage mysticism, as if he were Rumi manqué. "Man of anger and light," Henry Miller characterized Patchen. There is no way to separate the anger from the light. And the apocalyptic danger that urged Patchen to act has not been defused, only hidden in layers of affluent normalcy. Bosnia, Rwanda, *c'est nous*. Killing and killed in a Gulf War buried under layers of television, already dead, as we who no longer feel.

Patchen endured many years of persistent pain toward the end of his life, his spine permanently injured by a slip from the operating table onto the floor during surgery. Yet he continued to write, to perform jazz poetry, and to paint: a total artist, a great and a brave "spokesman of God" (*Sleepers*, p. 317), a singular, magnificent seer. It is a shocking shame that Patchen's most challenging book, *Sleepers Awake*, is out of print. In our "excessively easy lives," we need this book. We need Patchen's "model of engagement and wonder" (Smith, p. 65) his model of a man who still gives a damn, and never more of a damn than in the powerfully sacrificial anti-novel *Sleepers Awake*.

"If through indifference and inertia we can create human as well as atomic bombs," said Henry Miller in giving the argument for Patchen's art, "then...the poet has the right to explode in his own fashion at his own appointed time. If all is hopelessly given over to destruction, why should the poet not lead the way? Why should he remain amid the ruins like a crazed beast? If we deny our Maker, why should we preserve the maker of words and images? Are the forms and symbols he spins to be put above Creation itself?" (Miller, p. 39)

In defining the canon without *Sleepers Awake*, we have written the Bible of our culture without The Book of Jeremiah, without The Book of Revelation. It is time that *Sleepers Awake* were back in print.

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