

THE TRANSLITERACY OF
KENNETH PATCHEN'S
SLEEPERS AWAKE

Anonymous Quarterly Online #2

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Author's Note

This essay was first read at the West Virginia University Symposium on Literature and Film in September 1993. In those days I was new to the computer and could do word processing in only a rather primitive way. The computer was a glorified typewriter for me, letting me avoid the use of white-out but allowing me little else. I carried a copy of Patchen's *Sleepers Awake* with me to illustrate the points in the essay. Since then, as I have grown more skillful and comfortable with the computer, I have thought about how PowerPoint could have enhanced that presentation. For this second number of *Anonymous Quarterly Online*, I compromised between having a copy of the book for each reader (which really would be better) and a PowerPoint presentation. I scanned the pages used as examples in the essay. I also added an appendix of samples of other works by Kenneth Patchen. If you are not familiar with Patchen, these may help to introduce his work. Patchen's book was published by Padell Books in 1946 and printed by John Felsburg, Inc., in New York City.

THE TRANSLITERACY OF KENNETH PATCHEN'S *SLEEPERS AWAKE*

... when readers read as if the words on the page were only fleeting visual events, soon to be gone like flies, and not signs to be sung inside themselves -- so that the author's voice is stilled -- the author's hand must reach out into the space of the page and put a print upon it that will be unmistakable, uneradicable. With lipstick, perhaps. (Gass 151)

Although William Gass wrote this challenge in 1982 for a conference on postmodern fiction, his justification of writers expanding beyond the "invisible" type¹ into a transliterate package of typography, layout, textures, binding, and all other architectural features of the book may apply to the works of such pre-postmodern writers as Kenneth Patchen. In his progress from a voice of the proletariat in the 1930's to an avant-garde experimenter until his death in 1972, Patchen increasingly stretched the boundaries of both verbal and graphic arts. According to Larry Smith, Patchen's picture-poems are "an ultimate synthesis of

¹I use the term "*invisible*" type in reference to the title of Beatrice Warde's influential essay on typography, "Printing Should Be Invisible." The point of Warde's essay is discussed later in this paper.

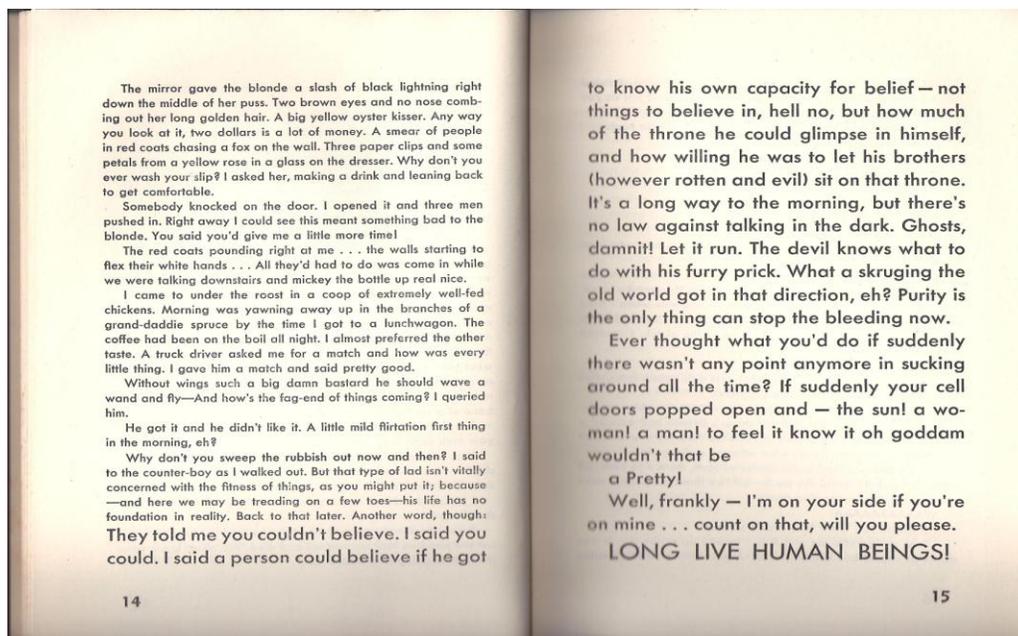
painting and poem and a culminating achievement of his ideals of the 'total artist' and the 'total book.'" These picture-poems are remarkable products of the final period of his creativity, especially when we consider that he was bedridden with chronic back problems. And we wonder what turns his work would have taken if he had been able to sustain longer works like his earlier novels from the 1940's, for such a novel as *Sleepers Awake* (1946) blends the author's literary fantasy with his graphic experimentation to create a protean form of book that helps to stretch the boundaries of fiction and expand the methodology of reading.

Patchen justified his new form much in the spirit of Gass's statement. For Patchen, the traditional reader and the conventional book were both products of the culture that had just displayed its corruption and barbarity in World War II and the birth of the atomic age. Patchen rages against the commercial literary world of these conventions:

I think the moaning outsounds the tinkle
of fat stickly little bards
who twang their navels in the orderly and
empty drawingrooms of "Our Literature" --
I am so full of rage!
I am so full of contempt for these smug lice!
I tell them to stay away from my books!
I want to stand outside their blood-drenched "culture"!
I want nothing to do with them! (*Sleepers* 291)

Earlier in *Sleepers Awake* he suggests the alternative to "Our Literature": A character asks the narrator-protagonist, "I thought you just said writing books was bad," to which the narrator answers, "--I've changed my mind. It is time that books be allowed to OPEN INTO THE UNKNOWN -- . . . --books must be allowed to get out of hand" (86). Patchen's book opens into the unknown or gets out of hand in both its narrative and its graphic presentation. First, the narrative is a phantasmagoria of popular genres and dream vision. It drags us into a surrealistic landscape in which at one point the birth of the book is swirled into an account of the birth of Jesus. As the readers jostle along the amorphous narrative, they are confronted with shifting typography and graphic alternatives to the verbal narration. The reader must use both verbal and visual literacy skills, not only as the narrative switches from words to graphics, but as words take on new graphic definition and as graphics seem to be coded more as words.

What purely graphic devices or elements beyond the normal punctuation, typography, and layout does Patchen use in *Sleepers Awake*? He uses five means of foregrounding the graphics over the strictly literary element, ranging from a simple change in type size and/or typeface to the inclusion of some of the primitive illustrations he was to develop more fully in his picture-poems. He also varies the norm of the layout, shifting from the dominant prose of his fictional narrative to poetic and even vertical layout. Combining the spirit of illustration and poetic layout, he includes concrete poetry. These devices have tonal and thematic consequences, but the last graphic variation -- the blocked signs or messages -- recurs like a motif and points very clearly to the book's themes.



(Change in type size: See first paragraph of page 4)

Probably the simplest and most common device is the change in type size or typeface. The norm is 12 pt. sans serif. When the size is shifted into gradations up to 108 pts., the face generally stays the same except for employment of bold and condensed variations at times. The change in type size normally signifies a change in intensity of either voice or narrative emphasis. Selection of other typefaces is not as common, since only three other styles are used on only six pages. Patchen varies the sizes and faces of the type in a number of ways, becoming more complex as the other graphic elements shift; but the graphics are still tied to the standard orthography and symbology of written narrative.

At the other extreme, Patchen seems to decide that words are not enough or are inadequate; therefore, he includes pictures. The illustrations range from printers dingbats to Patchen's own whimsical, primitive drawings or collages of both. A standard printer's star appears on a page to erupt into a galaxy a few pages later, or stars form a marquee-styled border for the title of a book within the book. His own illustrations resemble Rorschach tests that end a section of the book in which words, with the help of innovative typography, manifest significance visually as onomatopoeic words do auditorially (148-57).

[Sequence of pages from 148 to 157 on following pages]

a t o i n
 LOOK
 g r e n a o r f s, h o a n d
 b
 e
 c
 o
 m
 e
 OUT
 r i c
 h; in love, shows a sweetheart of an am-
 able disposition, that you will
 m a r r y well,
 BELOW THERE

have chil
 dr
 en, an' be very content; if the light disappe
 ars a l l
 WATERWATER
 i n
 EVERYWHERE
 a
 & NOTHING TO
 s u d
 DO BUT
 d e
 n, it b
 etokens a gr e
 at cha
 n
 SINK

ge
 in yo
 ur pre
 sent sit
 uation, mu
 ch for the worse;
 it portends im-
 prisonment and
 great loss of goods,
 with unexpected mis-
 fortunes. To dream of
 being in an inn, is a
 very unfavorable dream;
 it denotes poverty and
 want of success in under-
 takings; expect soon to be
 yourself or, some other of
 your family, committed
 to the Cross—To dream
 you are in a storm or
 tempest, shows that
 you will, after many
 difficulties, arrive at
 being very happy,
 that you will become
 rich, and marry well.
 For a lover to dream of
 being in a tempest denotes
 that you will have many
 rivals, who after caus-
 ing you a great

—“S
 trength of
 my strength I a
 round me, le
 st I sink,
 Place
 thine
 Almighty
 arm and be
 ar me up;
 Lest I sh
 ould
 fa
 int, and
 thus refuse
 to drink—
 When
 Thou,
 my Father,
 dust presen
 t the cup!
 This
 doub
 le trial of
 the heart and
 flesh, How
 shall I
 stand
 fill thou the
 power supply?
 This fearful op
 ening of the
 wound—”



The transliterate effect of receiving simultaneous input from the verbal and visual word results in part from the layout of the page. Patchen's page designs are a textbook of layout formats; the prose of the fictional narrative sets the norm, but poetic lineation and concrete poetry emphasize portions of the text. The orientation of the printing shifts to the vertical at times. Columnar layout and listing is mixed with the more conventional design. The shift to poetic layout makes the readers adjust expectations about the text, and the other experimentation changes the way we process the information of the text.

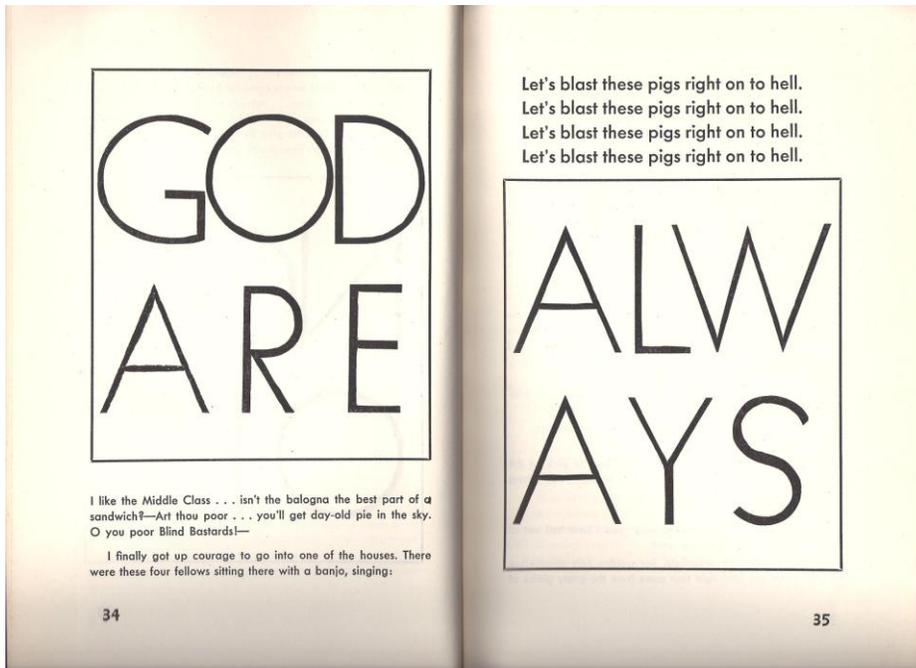
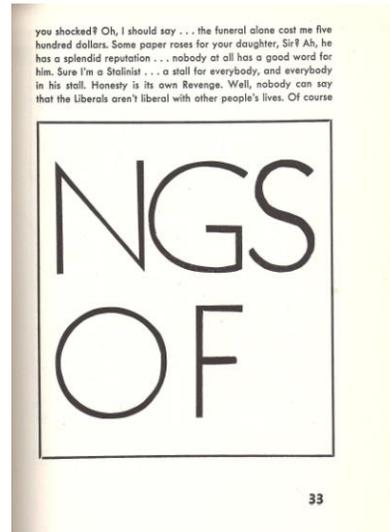
A distinct variation on page design is Patchen's concrete poetry, which is also an attempt to suggest the totality of experience. Other layout formats force us to read the text in ways that make us engage it in unconventional ways (or perhaps in new conventional ways), but the concrete poems are a Gestalt experience. Some are condensed to a word or two that graphically echo verbal meaning. For example, at one point the type enlarges to 24 pt., and three words dominant the page:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{DEA}^{\text{TH}} \\ \text{LO}^{\text{O}}\text{K}^{\text{I}}\text{N}^{\text{G}} \\ \text{D}^{\text{O}}\text{O}^{\text{N}} \end{array} \quad (148)$$

The *o*'s in *DOON* are like eyes performing the act the words designate, and their emptiness heightens the effect.

The last kind of graphic device used by Patchen is the blocked sign or

message. Most of these are parts of a full statement that is revealed after pages of reading the text that these signs landmark. Physically, they are in larger type (24 pt. to 108 pt.) and are separated from the rest of the text by borders. Depending on how the messages are read, there are approximately fifteen to twenty messages. The first one runs from page 29 to page 62 in nine blocks:



Perhaps something romantic—a view of life! Seen through the eyes of an Angel of your own imagining. To be rejected at death. Tattered body—the soul? Stone bees in Byzantium. Young clean golden

but it rots.

Does it? Does it rot? a) Spirit. b) Soul. c) Angel—(Of course

41

symbols always mean something else.) Rain—star—sea—goat's head looking vacantly up out of the urn—

But it comes in from a long way off. An odd experience—being alive.

42

Why do you suppose the blind man was so moved by the young soldier's story? she said.

Because he is hungry for sensation—to feel part of a stirring experience.

But that wasn't all of it.

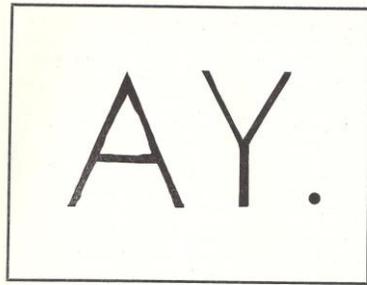
No. He was trying to convince himself of love for his brothers.

52

cupied by one army, then the other. The eagles had indeed known a sweet glee.

Now two opposing soldiers were advancing stealthily upon the inn. It was a night of bitter cold and they sought shelter there. For that moment, the battle had shifted to another sector.

61



The first man has opened a door. Now the other, from the opposite side, has opened a door. They face each other down the long room, which is fitfully lighted by distant flares.

They raise their rifles in one movement . . .

Then a great shell, landing somewhere near, shakes them down. As they lift slowly, dazed and sluggish with the shock, their eyes are drawn to it.

A face.

Then they realize that all the lights in the inn are on.

Stumbling to their feet, rifles hanging loosely in their hands, they walk toward it.

"The face of God!"

"It is the face of Christ!"

Together they sink to their knees, sobbing half in fear, half in wonderful joy.

62

[The things of God are always wondrous in a terrible way.]

Such statements direct us to the extra-textual themes of *Sleepers Awake*, and they have several effects on our reading. First, their visual separation from the narrative and from each other and their incompleteness isolate the letters so that we respond to them as symbols with unclear referents. Only as we progress gradually in the narrative do the messages become clear. Whereas most of Patchen's graphics are intended to help us grasp a linearly complex statement in a condensed, heightened moment, this seems to approximate the process of narrative in that it unfolds slowly over pages. At the same time, the isolated words or groups of letters create a fluctuating syntactical field in which possible combinations suggest multiple meanings much as intentional ambiguity in poetry does. For example, one sign reads:

DARK WING

S CARRY O

FF THE SKY

(79)

["Dark wings carry off the sky"]

The middle line may at first seem to suggest *scary*; of course, *s carry* should give us *scarry* (which it may also do), but the sound of *carry* which we recognize since the word is set off blends with the *s* to suggest *scary*, and perhaps even with the *o* to produce *scary-o*, adding another dimension to the idea of fright conjured by the dark wings. The possible meaning combinations of these messages increase with the reader's willingness to play with words, something that Patchen constantly does throughout the book. Another possible effect of these signs on the reader is what may be called the Burma Shave effect. The Burma Shave signs, still in their heyday when Patchen wrote *Sleepers Awake* in the 1940's, unfolded their messages portion by portion or verse by verse as we moved through another narrative (our car

journey). This analogy seems particularly pertinent to Patchen's work because the story revealed by his multiple method of discourse is that of a quest.

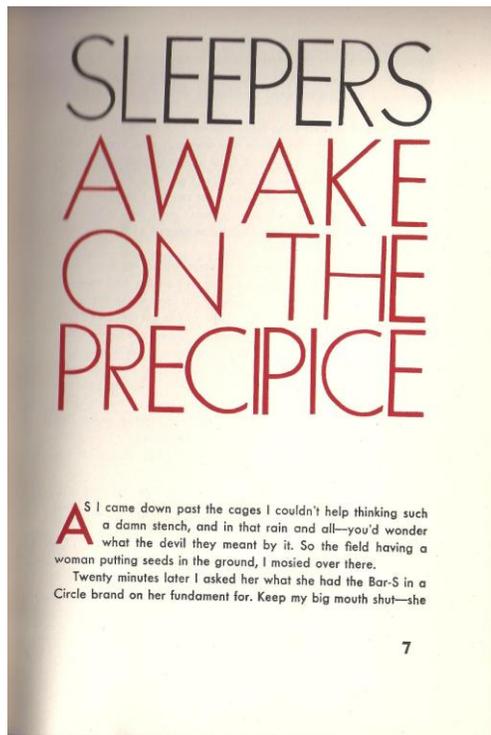
Before continuing to examine the reading process or methodology that Patchen's work teaches us to perform, that is our experience with the narrative, we should briefly look at the story of *Sleepers Awake*. Just as the graphic techniques vary and at times seem a random mixture of whims, the story is a shifting series of events characterized by surreal juxtapositions and associations. The narrator is Aloysius Best -- also known as Al Best, A. Best, and Louis Best -- who can truthfully say that he is writing "A. Best seller." Best transforms character throughout the book, starting as a farmhand and taking on the guise of a gangster, a guerilla, and Joseph, among others. Rather than a traditional, logical plot of event leading to event, scenes seem to repeat themselves in new settings with different characters and different tones. The constant feature is movement toward some vague destination; therefore, the quest motif informs the story. The reader has a sense of undirected or blind motion that must be performed but that threatens destruction.

In the typical quest, the protagonist returns with an answer (or the sacred elixir) or with a warning. Writing *Sleepers Awake* at the end of World War II with the threat of even more destruction from nuclear bombs the legacy of the war, Patchen sends his narrator on an apparently blind venture to issue a warning to civilization. Ambiguously, the title is expanded both at the beginning and end of the book to *Sleepers Awake on the Precipice*. "Awake on the Precipice" is either ad-

jectival or predicative, describing post-WW II humanity and the book's characters in their ominous situation or expressing as a fact a necessary action. Another possibility is that "Awake on the Precipice" is imperative. The cavalier treatment of punctuation conventions allows reading "Sleepers" as a nominative of address, in which case the title is the warning with which the questing narrator returns.

Perhaps by now, the synthesis of amorphous story with constantly shifting verbal and graphic discourse takes on the logic of the old artistic dictum of form equaling content. Certainly, Patchen uses typographic and graphic elements to comment on and to foreground certain features of the narrative. And we can safely say that emphasis of the graphic forms deliberately dissipates the illusion that most conventional

narratives seek to create. The multiple guises of Aloysius Best are really no disguise, so that the reader is very soon aware (AWAKE) that Kenneth Patchen is not so much telling a story as writing a book. The emphasis here is on writing, its physical experience. We are aware of the pencil or typewriter moving across the



paper and even the typesetter selecting the letters and devices of his craft for the book's printing.²

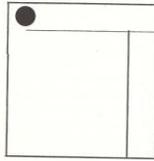
Beatrice Ward stated what may be called the crystal goblet theory of printing and book design in her influential essay, "Printing Should Be Invisible." The main point of the essay and the theory is that typography should not call attention to itself so that the literary message comes through in its pristine illusion. Writers like Patchen want to shatter illusion to finally enable readers to become writers or creators. To do so, printing must be quite visible; therefore, Patchen draws our attention to the craft.

One of Patchen's most sustained innovations will demonstrate how the reader is forced to change the unexpected into some familiar pattern. For twenty-six pages (236-62), five different narrative lines are woven together in varying orders. Each has its distinctive graphic form, aiding the reader to untangle the strands. The five strands are (1) an old Scotch-Irish ballad that changes into a pseudo-romantic poem about halfway through and that appears one stanza per page in 10 pt. type, (2) a statement in a tone similar to the ballad about a man meeting a woman that appears in three or four words per page in 12 pt. all caps, (3) another statement on the horrors of death that appears in three or four words per page in 24 pt. all caps, (4) a box with internal lines and a black dot, both lines and dot appearing in a different relation on each page, and (5) one free floating black dot on each page. These five strands shift position as we progress from page to page, sometimes even being split into two or more pieces on each page. For example, on the first page of this section, first appears a stanza of the ballad, next the box, then the first three words of the statement about the man meeting a woman ("TODAY I WALKED"), then the dot under the *A* in *WALKED*, and last the first three words of the statement about the horrors of death ("GRAY DEER IN"). On the second page the order is changed to, first, a continuation of the death statement ("THE SNOW"), then the ballad stanza with the floating dot beside it to the right, then the box flush left with another part of the death statement ("CROWS") beside it to the right, and last the continuation of the man meeting woman statement ("ACROSS A FIELD").

[First four pages of 26 page sequence on the following page]

²In *The Stuff of Literature*, E. A. Levenston questions the value of the typographical devices for a creative artist, concluding that there is no value "unless the writer becomes his own compositor and does his writing at the font!" (92). Although Patchen did not set his own type, he had control over the printing process.

"Gie corn to my horse, mither,
Gie meat unto my man;
For I maun gang to May Margaret's bower
Before the night come on."

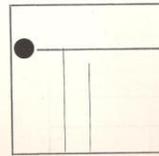


TODAY I WALKED

GRAY DEER IN

THE SNOW

"O stay at home now, my son Willie,
The wind blows cauld and stour;
The night will be baith mirk and wild,
Before ye reach her bower."



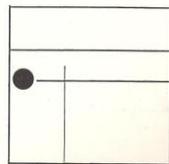
CROWS

ACROSS A FIELD

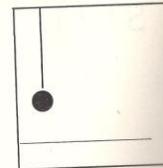
AND I MET

"O though the night were never sae dark,
Or the wind blew never sae cauld,
I will be in May Margaret's bower,
Before twa hours be tauld."

OF
TREES
SINGING



COLD



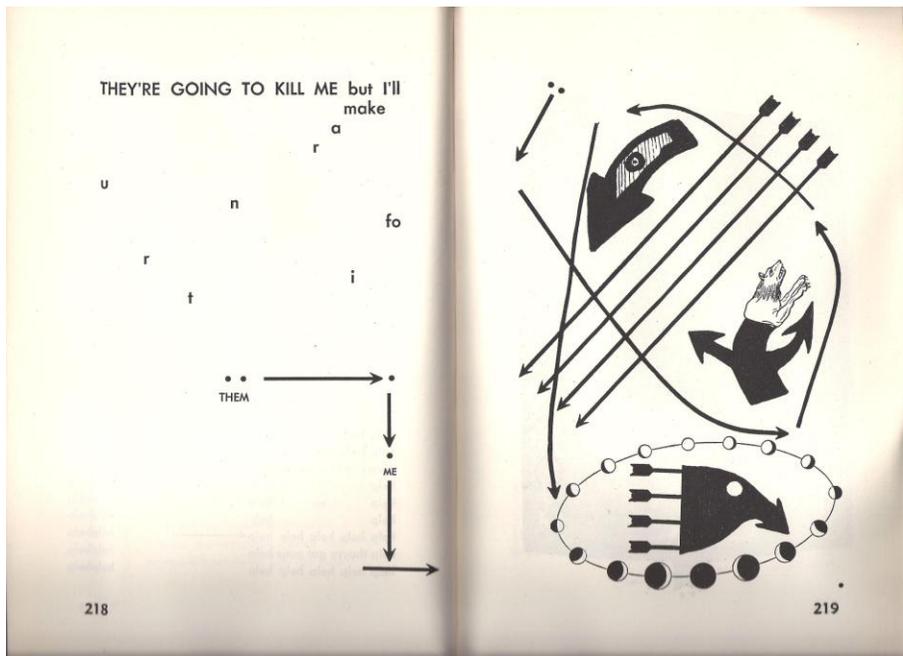
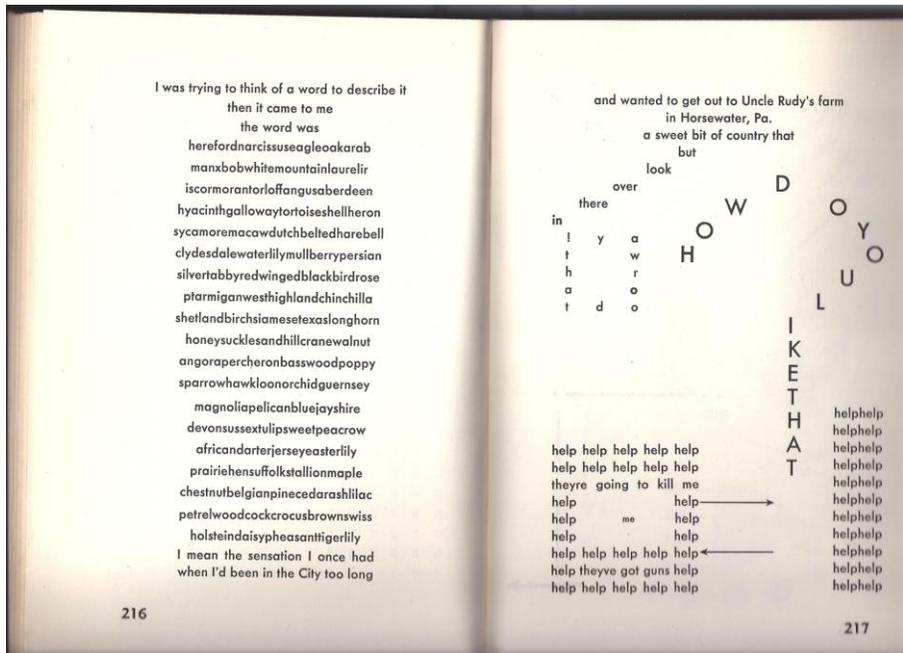
"O gin ye gang to May Margaret,
Without the leave o' me,
Clyde's waters are wide and deep enough,
My malison drown thee!"

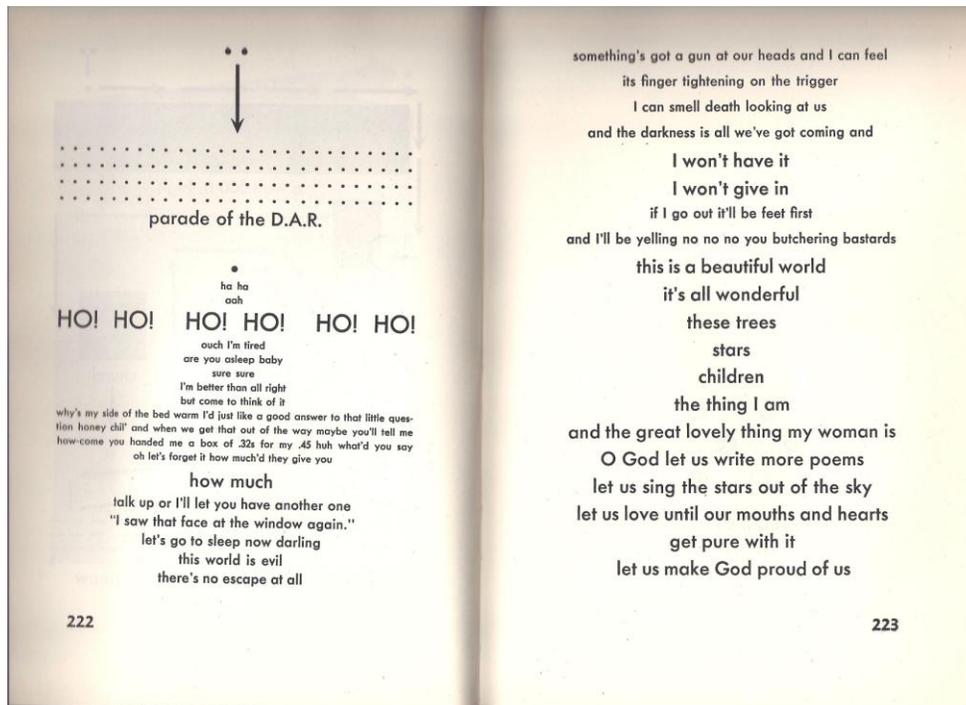
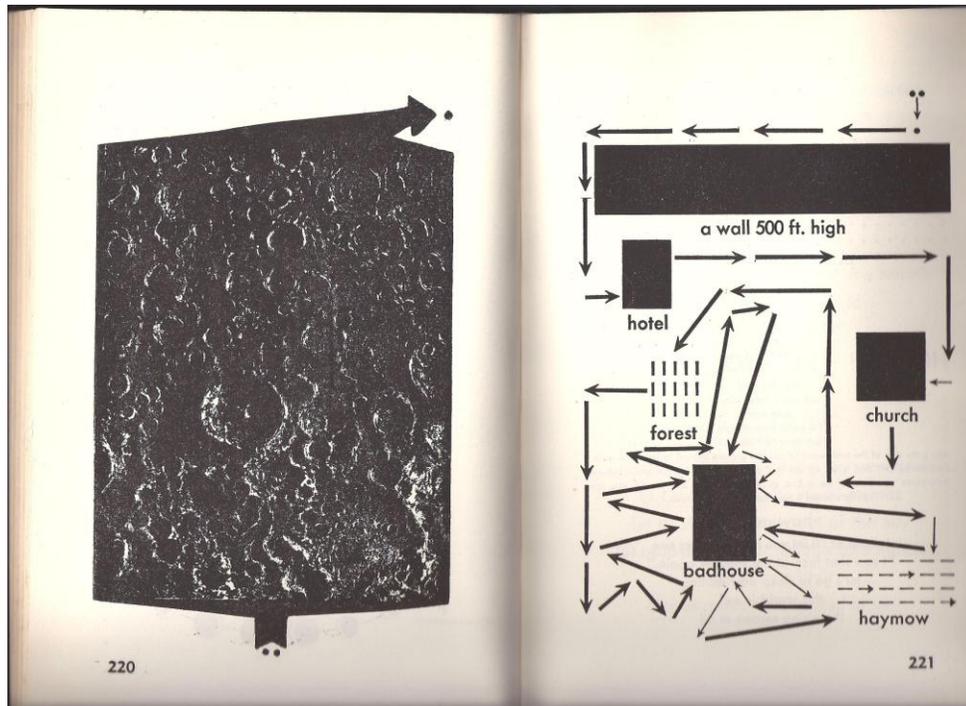
IN THE

A PRETTY YOUNG

As this segment continues, the reader has several options: read one strand, such as the ballad, all the way through and then follow another strand; read from top left to bottom right as normally done, keeping the different messages distinct; read as the graphic forms attract the eye (The larger type, of course, is most noticeable); or read as normally done, allowing the strands to blend together and retaining a synthesis. Whichever method or combination of methods the reader chooses will establish new expectations of patterns. Also, the reader begins to make linear fictional meaning from the purely graphic parts. The free dot works as an intermediary between the verbal strands and pure graphics by drawing our attention to the words to which it is close and suggesting the dot in the box which seems to be pursued and threatened by the lines.

Sleepers Awake evolved from the short story "Angel-Carver Blues" about the narrator Alf and his wife Honey, who created their own fantasy worlds, which happened to come true at times. In connection to *Sleepers Awake*, Alf was a soap carver who demonstrated his art, not to sell the carvings but to sell the tools. Also, Alf admits at the end that the fantasies that he and Honey recited were pure fabrications like the soap sculptures, shattering the illusion created in the short story but providing the tools for the audience to create its own. As Alf demonstrates his craft, Patchen demonstrates a writing technique; readers may not become writers themselves, but they must learn to read anew -- to create meaning anew -- by experiencing the unconventional elements in Patchen's book and readjusting how they read.





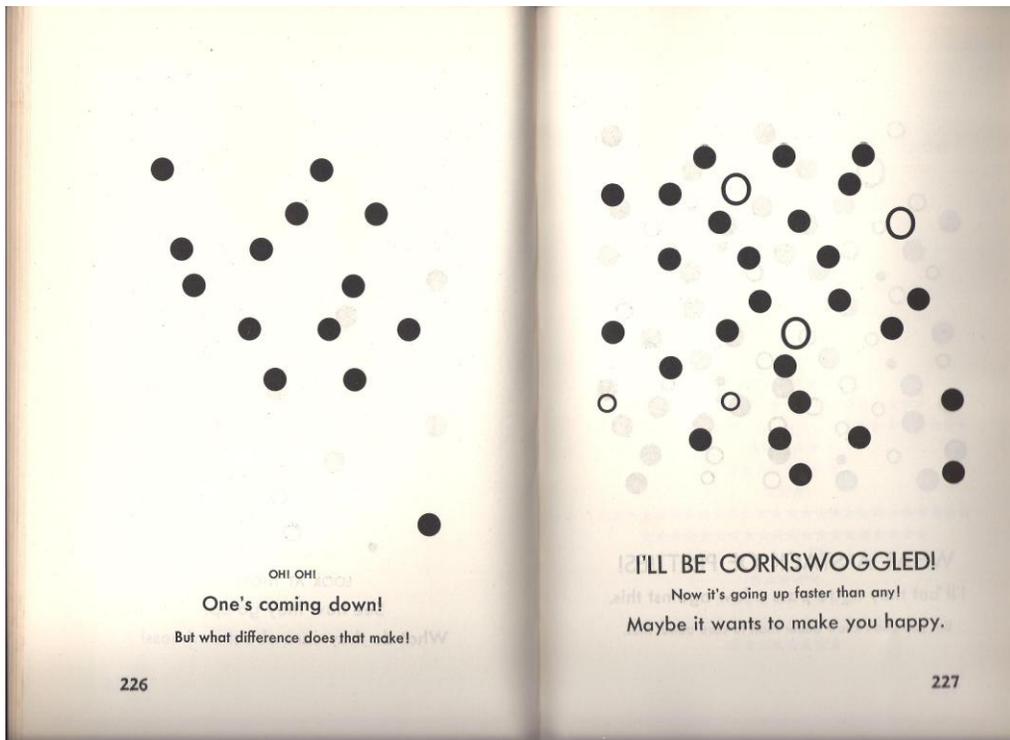
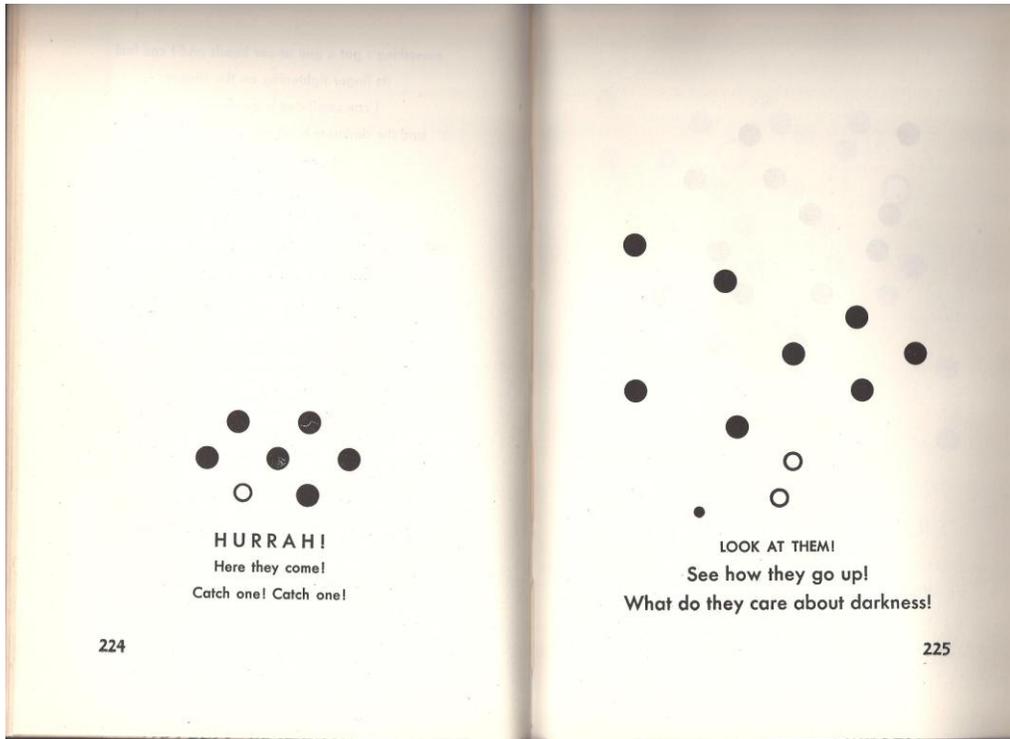
parade of the D.A.R.

HO! HO! HO! HO! HO! HO!

ouch I'm tired
 are you asleep baby
 sure sure
 I'm better than all right
 but come to think of it
 why's my side of the bed warm I'd just like a good answer to that little ques-
 tion honey chil' and when we get that out of the way maybe you'll tell me
 how-come you handed me a box of .32s for my .45 huh what'd you say
 oh let's forget it how much'd they give you

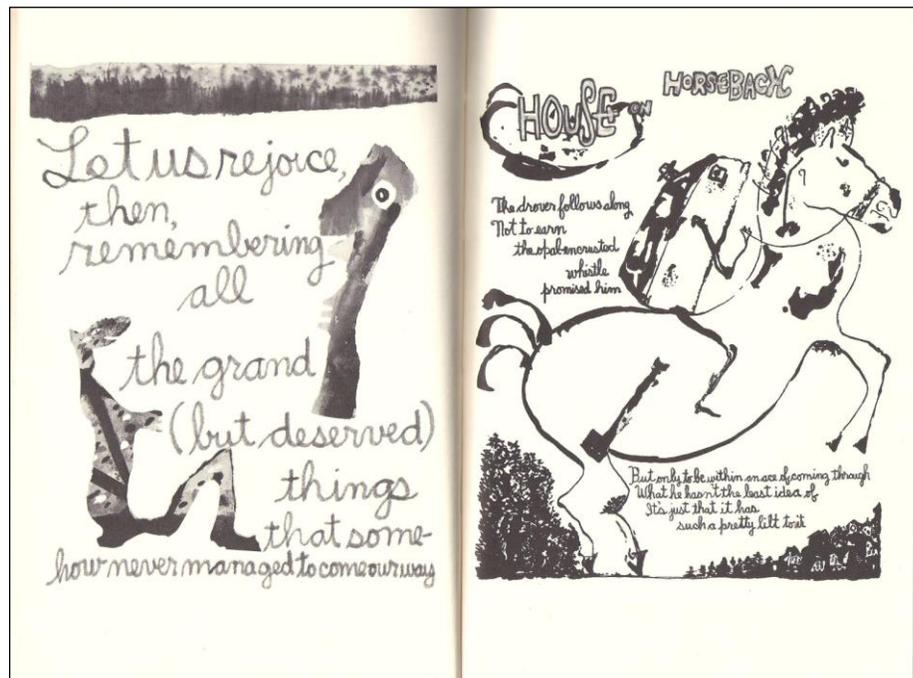
how much
 talk up or I'll let you have another one
 "I saw that face at the window again."
 let's go to sleep now darling
 this world is evil
 there's no escape at all

something's got a gun at our heads and I can feel
 its finger tightening on the trigger
 I can smell death looking at us
 and the darkness is all we've got coming and
 I won't have it
 I won't give in
 if I go out it'll be feet first
 and I'll be yelling no no no you butchering bastards
 this is a beautiful world
 it's all wonderful
 these trees
 stars
 children
 the thing I am
 and the great lovely thing my woman is
 O God let us write more poems
 let us sing the stars out of the sky
 let us love until our mouths and hearts
 get pure with it
 let us make God proud of us



[This sequence for several more pages.]

[From *Wonderings* (1971)]



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