MARIA ANITA STEFANELLI

Power and Poetry: Kenneth Patchen's Critique of Classicism

classical [...] of or relating to the ancient Greek and Roman world, esp. to its literature, art, architecture, or ideals «the strong influence of civilization upon the western world»
classicism [...] the principles or the style of classical literature, art, or architecture [...] adherence to or practice of the virtues thought to be characteristic of classical art, literature, and in modern times music or to be universally and enduringly valid (as formal elegance and correctness, simplicity, dignity, restraint, order, proportion)
(*Webster's Third New International Dictionary,* 1971)

Rome was th' whole world and all the world was Rome
(Edmund Spenser, *Ruins of Rome)*

Kenneth Patchen never travelled to Italy. Yet, he allowed details from its ancient and contemporary history to suffuse his imagination and subsequently emerge in poetic form. He was attracted to places, people, and events with an Italian connection; specifically, in the first decade of his literary career that coincided with the climax of Benito Mussolini's prestige and his later inevitable fall, he provided a portrayal of fascism as a negative and destructive force crossing national boundaries and spreading diffusely beyond the Atlantic. This force the American poet equated with the concept of 'power' that he recognized as central to the fascist rhetorical discourse on the Roman Empire and of which he provided a personal critique. Patchen's analysis, of course, couldn't but reflect the ideological framework within which it arose: its interest, however, does not lie (exclusively) in the manifestation of political engagement, commitment, and dissent. Instead it springs out of the necessity for the modernist writer to revise the historical narrative by deconstructing it, thus expressing a politics of culture

opposed to the philosophy of order and rule fostered by classicism, and reaching out towards a utopian space characterized by a new ecology where center and margin are subverted. The unified and totalising knowledge promoted by the Romans and assumed by the regime as an ideological paradigm for the twentieth century is fragmented, parcelled and then accumulated in a new random-like pattern that reflects its own absurdity.

Eager to affirm the identity of the doctrine he was promulgating, the Italian dictator had proclaimed:

> Rome is our point of departure and point of reference; it is our symbol and, if you like, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, an Italy that is wise and strong, disciplined and imperial. Much of the spirit of Ancient Rome is being born again in Fascism; the Lictorian fasces are Roman, our war machine is Roman, our pride and our courage are Roman too. [1]

The Roman fascis—composed of a bundle of *virgae* (elms, or birch rods) and a *securis* (scythe) bound together by a strap, with a projecting axe head at its center to make it hard as well as providing a handle—was called by Titus Livius *insignia imperii*, and was linked with the idea of power (the power of the Roman lawmakers, consuls and magistrates), which, in its turn, was inherent in the political discourses of the hegemonic group as well as in the texts of tradition and history books." The classical Roman conception of grandeur became pervasive, and the attention of the world focussed on the "fated hills of Rome," where the Empire had reappeared: "[T]he cult of Rome and being Roman, one of the values enshrined in Fascist rhetoric from the start," writes one commentator, "grew to astonishing proportions, assuming external signs and rituals that were increasingly formal."[3]

Mussolini's initially inspired classical 'mythic' model soon turned into the repressive norm dictated by his nationalistic and imperialistic aims. A *condottiero*-like figure, he came to power in 1922 and proclaimed Italy a dictatorship in 1925.[4] The Roman model, however, was never in question: the present regime was—as has been described—"the revolutionary continuation of the original 'Roman revolution' of the first century B.C., with the imperial Roman state considered the predecessor of the totalitarian

Fascist state."[5] Hence, the objective: promoting classicism while aiming at expansion. The military action in Ethiopia, which led to the proclamation of the empire, was just the beginning;[6] later aggressive measures would almost always be accompanied by proud declarations of Roman heritage.

To the pacifist Patchen the connection between Mussolini's Italy and ancient Rome must have been quite disturbing. The classical tradition (which had inspired William Shakespeare and from which James Joyce had drawn, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams were drawing) could not be simply rejected on account of Roman imperialism and pretended universalism, just as bourgeois culture could not be demolished in favour of its proletarian counterpart. Despite leftist appeals for commitment in art and for a class-partisan literature which would oppose liberal tendencies, Marxist intellectuals would be cautious and, along the lines promoted by people like Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, would recognize the values of previous bourgeois art, which they anticipated would be absorbed by socialist culture.[7] As far as Patchen's position was concerned, the publication of poems such as "Lenin" (in *The Rebel Poet,* 1932) and "Joe Hill Listens to the Praying" (in *New Masses,* 1934) signalled his political engagement, the latter also earning him a reputation as a proletarian poet that was probably beyond Patchen's own intentions.[8] His objective, in fact, was not that of showing his explicit commitment to the Left, even if he felt the need to problematize the historical and concrete aspects of contemporary reality (something he did, in his best poems, less with passionate revolutionary tones than allowing the ideology to emerge from the juxtaposition, or dramatization, of situations). Historical and political references, in Patchen's poetic language, occur as nodes establishing dialectical links between past and present. Those elements, among a multitude of others, are placed in contexts that prove both socially meaningful and aesthetically suggestive, while their interrelationship—working effectively against the received interpretation of texts and signs—produces a new synthesis.

As Terry Eagleton remarked in his reappraisal of Marxist literary theory: "Marxism alone has sustained the eminently

dialectic belief, inimical at once to romantic nostalgia and modernizing triumphalism, that modern history has been inseparably civilization and barbarism."[9] The history of Rome and the creation of the Roman Empire, Patchen would have agreed, are no exceptions: they were not unaffected by such play. The very notion of *romanitas*—namely that "of belonging politically and emotionally (or both) to a universal order and culture associated in one way or another with the Roman Empire"—originatcd from bloodshed and coercion, and then came to define, conventionally, a single political entity, in which the ruling élite and the subject peoples "came to share for the most part a common symbolic universe variously expressed in material, cultural and political terms, and enforced by the power of the army, pacts of alliance, and the authority of the emperor, all founded on the principle of law."[10] The question is whether, vis-à-vis the very visible spectacularization of power that fascism set up, an enforcement of the positive notion of *romanitas* could not be provided by the individual's interaction with its cultural (and artistic) artefacts that would ensure a redefinition (and reabsorption) of the past in terms of cultural progress. If one worked to recapture the original meanings, one could open up avenues for new, until then unseen, possibilities that might re-direct one's interpretation of the past and reach—because of the possibilities for distortion intrinsic in language—different and de-centered representations. Within the argument about the supposed modernist rejection of the past, the interest in an alternative appreciation of history would be revived.

Patchen's major effort to penetrate into the gaps of past times to recapture broken, discarded and discontinuous language fragments (from journalistic snippets to short passages drawn from historical or literary documents), which he re-used with an increased awareness of their cultural significance is at the basis of his early poetic experiments. His understanding of history and culture led him to penetrate the recesses of language to discover its germ and possible projections. In keeping with both Trotsky's claim that artistic creation is "a deflection, a changing and a transformation of reality, in accordance with the peculiar laws of art"[11] and the modernist exploitment of tradition as something to be

manipulated, dismantled, and ironically reassembled, Patchen engaged in the alchemical processing of stale linguistic forms that he reorganized into new arrangements, thus transforming (i.e. deforming, refracting, dissolving, to use Eagleton's lexicon)[12] the [classical] static object into a dynamic model. This essay will show how Patchen first offered—by means of decoupage, disarrangement, and displacement—a deformed and parodic version of the fascist cult of *romanitas* based upon a manipulation of Italy's past classical tradition; then—by experimenting with modern phenomena such as speed and flight—proceeded towards a radical innovation in representation; and finally presented a re-interpretation, in cultural terms, of the past. By deconstructing the textual material in which the greatness of Rome was recorded, he supplied his own post-heroic and post-humanist view of Rome's power, thereby inscribing a new way of representing classicism. The result of his creative intervention will now be evaluated through a discussion of four poems from *Cloth of the Tempest.*

* * *

Among the earliest collections selected by the author for inclusion in the New Directions 1968 edition of *Collected Poems* are: *Before the Brave* (1936), *First Will and Testament* (1939), and *Cloth of the Tempest* (1943), each of them venting Patchen's anger at manifest or ambiguous forms of fascism. While, however, the tone of the earlier poems is often polemical and sarcastic, in the third collection Patchen supplies a cultural evaluation of the classical language of imperialism as displayed in the enterprises of the Greeks and Romans. Through the *Roman* ("The Destruction of Carthage", "Egypt", "The Appian Way", and "Attila") and *Greek* ("The Age of Pericles" and "The Empire of Persia") poems, Patchen annihilates the deadly fixed language of the winners, and promotes, by lending them his own voice, alongside the actions of the resisters, the inarticulate cries and dynamic silence of the victims, thereby anticipating the discovery of the sound of silence later exploited by the artists of the sixties. Besides he supplies the model of a politics of culture opposed to centralisms or mainstreams

as offspring of classicism and favouring instead the decentering of man in the universe.

In *Before the Brave* and *First Will and Testament* Italian names echoing tragically contemporary facts are evoked: Mussolini and blackshirt leader Italo Balbo (1896-1940), the dictator's dashing and charismatic confidant who exemplified the ideals of fascist Italy during the 1920s and '30s; Palazzo Venezia (where Mussolini's state apartments had been installed in 1929) overlooking the piazza that opened on the triumphal way called "via dell'Impero"; Lauro de Bosis, poet and activist who dropped anti-Fascist manifestoes from his aircraft over Rome before finding his death when his plane plunged into the sea off-Corsica; Ignazio Silane (1900-1978), a politically active intellectual and writer forced into exile by the fascists in 1927. Those names Patchen traced, read about, and researched: names he found interwoven with the rhetoric of power and that would lead him to develop a strategy of resistance to the classical notion of imperialism.

Rome as a historical-political knot—without considering, that is, its creative achievements in the field of the arts—is, to Patchen, not an exotic location, but an alarmingly near one. The poet proclaims it with bitterness in the opening lines, where the connection of the Italian city with the political power is emphasized by its coupling with the German one:

> I shall be with you when the hollow faces
> on Time's screen stare at you leaning forward
> leaving no distance from here to Berlin or Rome
> ("Loyalty Is the Life You Are," *Before the Brave, CP,* p. 20)

Patchen recaptures the images of the empty effigies of T.S. Eliot's "hollow men," conceived in the first half of the '20s after World War I, and replaces—at the eve of a new war, a decade later—their unfitness to live within time (history) with the unfitness to live within space (geography), paradoxically annulling the [political] distance between Europe and America. Patchen's perspective reverses Eliot's religious optimism that had led to the filling of the abyss of history with the mysterious Shadow of God, and posits the future as an ambiguous play between depravity and

honesty, hate and pity, agnosticism and belief, madness and sanity. With the same spirit William Carlos Williams, through the game of ascent and descent, creation and destruction, order and disorder, disjunction and conjunction had subverted the canons and traditions of the European literary culture towards which Eliot had turned. Not animated, like Williams, by the combativeness of the well-established writer, Patchen was nevertheless stimulated by an antiacademic and antiliterary spirit that has led one critic to see, in his discharge of the conventional in favour of a re-definition and re-orientation in space and time, an affinity with the Surrealists.[13]

Fascism in Germany or Italy, Patchen is convinced, is a pathological form emerging from within and spreading freely to other directions, towards the assimilation of other societies, leading to the triumph of treason and hate.[14] The proximity of the United States and the Europe of the dictators announced here comes up again in another poem of the collection, through the a-syntagmatic relationship of adjectives and nouns ("British American Japanese/French Italian battleships cruisers submarines torpedo-boats", *CP,* p. 40) and proper names ("Morgan Hoover Mussolini", *CP,* p. 40) as well as through the juxtaposition of sentences ("We present gas/Hitler offers/Death Death", *CP,* p. 40). In this short poem—one eighteen-line long sentence, clear of punctuation and sustained by strained syntax—Patchen anticipates the absurdity of war by creating, with linguistic means, a panorama of frightfulness reflected in a mad design.

The leaders of Italy and Germany—the Roman *dux* and the German *Führer*—come to life in the sketch that of them was given by former British MP W.E.D. Allen: a rhetorical description of the physical force triumphant, printed as epigraph to the poem "Leaflet (Two)" *(Before the Brave, CP,* pp. 29-30). Shadows acquire a body; thus the universal Warrior Hero takes shape as Mussolini or Hitler preceding their *condottieri* (which translates the Latin *duces),*[15] merciless Footmen like Balbo and Goering. The picture contextualizes, through suggestion, a dramatic historic date: March 23, 1933, when Hitler was granted dictatorial power. By way of contrast, the poem opens with a memento of the dead comrades, who, having failed to reach agreement with Schleicher, were dispatched into prisons and camps on account of their active engagement as union leaders.

It is a brief, sympathetic recording of unheard voices and suffocated suffering, as well as a homage to those who have reached the quietness of death. A flash follows: Adolf Hitler pictured as an air-man, coming back from Italy (probably from Venice, where the first meeting with Mussolini took place in 1934) and landing to enter the Kroll Opera House, where the Reichstag (the members of the government doomed to lose all significant power after passing Hitler's 1934 Enabling Act) had its seat after the burning of the Reichstag building (February 27, 1933). The massive amount of political intrigues, rumors and disorder that framed Hitler's seizure of power are evoked by the proper names recurring in the newspapers and documents of the Nazi years. Besides mentioning Hermann Goering, whose *Aufbau Einer Nation* (1934) declared the Communists enemies of the State that had to be dealt with ruthlessly, references are made to: Engbert Dollfuss (1822-1934), Chancellor of Austria, who, pressing for union with Germany, outlawed both the Communist and the Austrian Nazi party, and was later assassinated in a Nazi uprising; former army officer Kurt von Schleicher, then Chancellor of Germany as Hitler's predecessor for 57 days; Ernst Rohm, the leader of the Nazi storm troopers called SA, also murdered by the Nazis; Karl Ernst, SA leader of Berlin, and Heines, SA leader of Silesia. For the Nazi criminals the same sarcastic tone that signals Patchen's contempt is used; as a matter of fact the poet mentions Hitler's "ridiculous moustache," "little Dollfuss," and the "brood of ugly ducks" in which Schleicher, Rohm, Ernst, and Heines are grouped. The rhythmic pace of the italicised couplet and the three successive lines creates a tragic contrast:

> *Oh land alive with hypocrites and harlots:*
> *hang wreaths upon the butchered West.*
> And the orator blew into his hands, pulling
> a pamphlet "Pledge of Peace" from out his pocket,
> he neatly shot a thousand pacifists and two nations.
> (*CP,* p. 29)

The lines, regularly stressed, echo the heavy stride of the reborn class of *condottieri,* often treacherous and corrupt members of the aristocracy in Renaissance Italy—second-rate rulers whose

leadership would prove fatal, i.e. would lead people to their ruin and that of others. Paradoxically and absurdly, the "Pledge of Peace" is contradicted by the guarantee of prevarication and murder.

Another contemporary context for Rome is supplied by "Class of 1934" that—against a historical patchwork reflected through a juxtaposition of declaratives, questions, commands, and exclamations interspersed with quotations from not always immediately recognizable texts —[16] mentions the involvement of "British American Japanese/French Italian battleships cruisers submarines, torpedo-boats" in World War I. The reference is to the batteries that evolved, after the war, into more powerful instruments for attacks against the enemy ('torpedoes', for instance, were upgraded into destroyers). The 'earth' as 'a bitch gone crazy'—a development of Ezra Pound's 'old bitch gone in the teeth'—is the subject of a speech some *persona* is supposedly going to pronounce. The quotation from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) is carefully chosen as echoing a text that, in a controlled style pregnant with literary allusions and employing the Greek script rigorously apropos, cries out disparagement for an age that demands the sacrifice of life to honor, a tradition based upon classicism. Pound had written:

> There died a myriad,
> And of the best, among them,
> For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
> For a botched civilization,
>
> Charms, smiling at the good mouth
> Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,
>
> For two gross of broken statues,
> For a few thousand battered books.

The sense of 'bankruptcy' and 'futility' that F.R. Leavis recognized as promoting the 'pressure of experience' one feels in *Mauberley,* was not verified by Patchen, as it was later by Pound in the *Cantos,* against the paradoxical structure of an ideal/classical order;[17] it instead entered a system that has horror as its foundation

and that only madness can validate, both in terms of content and formally.

A seal is impressed in the middle of the poem: '1929 October 24', the infamous date of the Wall Street Crash, that introduces a complex ironic context in which the set of stairs leading to the Italian dictator's Roman residence becomes—via the evocation of St. Augustine's creation of the city of Man and the city of God—a grim counterpart of the stairs leading to Heaven:

> *This is*
> *the strain the eternal strain the Lord of all things loves* Billy bully Billy Hearst barbed wire a crown of homos sharpshooters
> "though
> I cannot be a soldier, I can encourage them by dying" Shanghai's Big Sword Corps proves the cheering 1929 October 24 in every pot a chicken a pot in every belly Morgan Hoover Mussolini come to bury them not to Down on your knees Palazzo Venezia watch the stairs I'm coming up Watch that guy in the gray suit thou dearest Augustine all is gone gone gone. What did they say when you told them *Where bright angel feet have trod* They said O.
> *(CP,* p. 40)

Here religious, comic, and sinister references mix, while the tapestry Patchen is weaving results in a rough texture that may have been modelled on some of the most political of Pound's *Cantos.* The Depression period was far from gone, and Patchen's mood was imbued with anger at the socio-economic system; the experimental quality of his writing, however, was that of the modernist collage forms, releasing original sparks of engagement, protest, and rebellion accompanied by glows of love for mankind, religious emotion, and respect, beside devotion, for art.

Another poem of the collection, "Poem in the Form of a Letter: to Lauro de Bosis", (*CP,* pp. 30-4), is devoted to a victim of fascism whose political enterprise was strangely linked with his art.[18] On October 3, 1931 de Bosis, author of the poetic drama *Icaro,* flew over Rome, to scatter thousands of leaflets over the city with the purpose of appealing to its citizens to rise against the despotic fascist government; but he never returned from his journey.[19] By interweaving dream images with contemporary war

images, and by interspersing those with the fragments of a prayer (*Our Father*), Patchen transformed the event into poetry:

> Fire and wings, De Bosis, soaring above
> Rome and Mussolini into the night
> in a clear flame over the cities
> and the waters; into the hands
> of those who walk with heads high
> down lanes of men through the jeers
> and bayonets. Head, quick and laurelscarred
> from the trodden dust into the ages
> while motors drone in prayer our father
> which art Mussolini fascist airmen take off
> in pursuit chanting
> hail and hallowed be they name from loss
> of sleep the blood warm
> drenching an appleblossom-sleep
> through the skull
> the spiders of death
> welling into the throat machine guns
> exultantly thy kingdom come
> over the poet's head bent in a moment.
> (*CP,* pp. 30-1)

In keeping with the modernist formula, Patchen breaks the logics of syntax and organizes his poem on the simultaneous juxtaposition of fragments dynamically structured on the page and rhythmically cadenced within the flow of verse as to suggest the mechanical movement of technology's contemporary products. The flight myth—also a *tapas* in Italian avant-garde poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's imagery—is embodied in the figure of the Italian intellectual activist as man and artist. Ironically, de Bosis succumbs to the very regime that promoted flight by merging it with the myth of modernism and futurism. Patchen, playing with light, speed, colour, and perspective from the air, subverts the classical myth and transforms Icarus into a contemporary hero taking off aboard an aeroplane to encounter his death. The white leaflets addressed to the people and the King coming down from the sky over Villa Borghese, Pincio, Piazza di Spagna, and the Quirinale gardens are themselves evocative of the positive role of

chance and disorder, as opposed to the fixed, rigorous order of classicism.

First Will and Testament—published when all Europe was at war again—reaffirms that all forms of fascism are to be banned; so Patchen calls on Silone to testify it in the epigraph to "The Executions in Moscow" (*CP,* pp. 134-37). Using the sculpting power of poetry, he transcribes a historical date, in italics, at the end of his poem. *'October 1937'* marks the peak of repression and terror in the period of Joseph Stalin's rule as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union. In the course of the poem a woman's voice, insisting, unrepressed, not hushed, vainly wonders over the nature of war. Men like Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini are embodiments of the leader as envisaged by the classical myth of grandeur: the *dux,* a modern Caesar, the restorer of the Augustan age.[20]

Patchen's appreciation for the rulers of the world is persistently biting. In "I DON'T WANT TO STARTLE YOU, *but they are going to kill most of us"* the reference is to a sinister "immense hall protected by barbed wire/And machine guns" where a company of friends is consuming a cannibalistic meal:

> [...] Hitler, Benny Mussolini, Roosevelt, and all
> The big and little wigs were at the table, F.D.'s arm around Adolf,
> Chiang Kai-shek's around the Pope, all laughing fit to kill.
> As soon as a treaty was signed, out of the window it went;
> But how they fumbled at each other under the table!
> I snatched up a menu:
> Grilled Japanese Soldier on Toast
> Fried revolutionaries à la Dirty Joe
> Roast Worker Free Style
> Hamstrung Colonial Stew, British Special
> Gassed Child's Breast, International Favorite
> Wine list—Blood 1914, '15, '17, '23, '34, '36, '40, etc.
> (*CP,* pp. 155-56)

Colloquial idiom, quick pace, and suggested small-time conversation are set in a context of horror, where a universal, large-scale destruction of humanity is anticipated. The turgid style in which Patchen lists the items on the macabre menu clearly reflects the rhetoric of Marinetti's *futurist cookbook,* where a group

of soldiers who "will have to get into a lorry to enter the line of fire at four, or go up in an aeroplane to bomb cities or counter-attack enemy flights", instead of finding comfort in "the grieving kisses of a mother, of a wife, of children" sit around a table where they are served a "Drum Roll of Colonial Fish", then some "Raw Meat Torn by Trumpet Blasts" and, before leaving, the 'Throat Explosion, a solid liquid consisting of a pellet of parmesan cheese steeped in Marsala.'[21] Patchen's sarcastic tone and mood are even closer to Marinetti's "official dinner", where the Futurist "Aeropoet" supplies three recipes:

1) "The Cannibals sign up at Geneva": a plate of various raw meats from which the guests cut what they want, seasoning the pieces by dipping them into little bowls of oil, vinegar, honey, red pepper, ginger, sugar, butter, saffron risotto or old barolo wine.
2) "The League of Nations": little black salami sausages and tiny pastries filled with chocolate custard, floating in a cream of milk, eggs and vanilla. (While this dish is being tasted, a twelve-year old Negro boy, hidden under the table, will tickle the ladies' legs and pinch their ankles.)
3) "The Solid Treaty": a multi-colored castle of nougat with, inside, very tiny nitro-glicerine bombs which explode now and then perfuming the room with the typical smell of battle.[22]

Marinetti's wish to free words from stale contexts and promote anti-bourgeois ideas in art appealed to Patchen who, at 27, was gathering his materials to experiment with representation. It is worth noting that in the same poem Mussolini's name, for all his fascist love of classicism and Rome, is reduced to an Anglo-Saxon vernacular diminutive: "Benny".

* * *

In the late thirties—when Patchen was presumably working on *Cloth of the Tempest*—Mussolini and Hitler ventured into war,

with ensuing disaster. Patchen's reading into history was his "voyage to Pagany", the only trip he could undertake considering his lack of health and means. Paved with words and figures, the itinerary he covered came alive in the destiny of the vast numbers of victims: 250,000 Hasdrubal's subjects killed by Scipio's army at Carthage in 146 B.C.; 1,600 Egyptian slaves who probably met their death in the days of hard labour, before an end was put to Mark Antony's surreptitious ambitions; 6,000 followers of would-be gladiator Spartacus who led a rebellion of slaves against Rome in 73 B.C. In his encounter with the historical past Patchen detects Roman traces in three different continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe, each spot marked by the triumph of power. Yet, each site—whether Carthage, Thermopylae, the Nile plains, the Appian Way, Aquileia, Troyes, or Padua—suggests a revision of the words handed down by history. Patchen discards the imperialistic aspects and, through poetic labour, transforms the materials from historic books into a fresh product. Fragmentary and discontinuous linguistic effects are the result.

Facing the question of representation, Patchen realised that cultural codes are often transmitted through writing, and that, to revise the concept of writing, one had to rely on its same methods. The documents (from history, chronicles, newspapers, etc.) led him to focus on the central ideological function of the meanings produced that he recognized as power. "Considered in social terms", writes Brian Wallis, "representation stands for the interests of power: consciously or unconsciously, all institutionalised forms of representation certify corresponding institutions of power."[23] From a similar premise—intuitively captured if not openly expressed—Patchen set out to present the historical data gathered as a heap of broken images on the stage of writing.

The earliest event recalled is the destruction of Carthage, an historical account of which recites:

> The city was captured, but the struggle was still by no means at an end. The assailants occupied the market-place contiguous to the small harbour, and slowly pushed their way along the three narrow streets leading from this to the citadel—slowly, for the huge houses of six stories in height had

> to be taken one by one; on the roofs or on beams laid over the street the soldiers penetrated from one of these fortress-like buildings to that which was adjoining or opposite, and cut down whoever they encountered there. Thus six days elapsed, terrible for the inhabitants of the city and full of difficulty and danger also for the assailants; at length they arrived in front of the steep citadel-rock, whither Hasdrubal and the forces still surviving had retreated. To procure a wider approach, Scipio gave orders to set fire to the captured streets and to level the ruins; on which occasion a number of persons unable to fight, who were concealed in the houses, miserably perished. Then at last the remnant of the population, crowded together in the citadel, besought for mercy. Bare life was conceded to them, and they appeared before the victor, 30,000 men and 25,000 women, not the tenth part of the former population.[24]

Patchen ironically associates the lurid mixture of blood, fire and smoke evoked by the historian to the slaughterhouse and the fishmonger bench where animals are dissected and their entrails removed. In the short period of six days—a span ironically respecting, in the extension of Roman history, the classic unit of time—power is staged as a *crude* spectacle of rape (i.e., the *love performed* on the Carthaginian women) *(CP,* p. 252), suggestively evoking Antonin Artaud's contemporary experimental writings on theatre.[25] It is death that is performed on a twice-secluded spot ("Walls/Around walls") in accordance with the law of the strongest, in the respect of the rules regulating the community:

> What was law.
> What men did.
> *(CP,* p. 252)

The stress is on the spectacle of power as a reflection of man's [cruel] action interpreted as law or norm. That is the story recorded by history. But if one re-starts from the beginning (see the repetition: "Six days out of all the days") one can supply a different narrative: no longer the objective fact of the bloodshed, but the full significance of the *horse excitement.* This change opens the way to a new critique of the past: if different narratives are available for the same episode, then history is open to as much horror as we can imagine with today's awareness. Somebody might tell a

different story about the pain and rebuke, but Patchen makes his own construction by using generalizations that belong to his own tirnes.[26] By "slicing into a culture through texts, pictures and artifacts"[27] Patchen's approach becomes anthropological.

In the second part of "The Destruction of Carthage" Patchen performs his revision of the past by digging out the old words:

> Six days out of all the days.
> The way a great city dies ...
> Bodies floating through the red churning
> Of excited horses.
> Perhaps the most horrible thing
> was the excitement of the horses.
> That may have an importance
> Which will destroy all of us.
> (*CP,* p. 252)

The mention of real, *excited horses* coming out alive from a historical event leads to a reflection on the derived abstract noun—the *excitement* of the *horses*—that begs the question on similar, tragically present, events. *Excitement,* then, equals terror, and, as such, will lead once more to destruction.

The next place in Africa on Patchen's classical-historical trail is "Egypt." There the poet finds, among its ruins, only fragments of names *(Cle—, Croco—, Cae—) (CP,* p. 260) peopling a devastated territory. The historian recounts its *finis:*

> Egypt, itself, the splendid inheritance of the Ptolomies, was formally annexed as a province to the dominions of the Roman people, while, as if to mark the fact that the sceptre of Alexander had passed finally into Roman hands, Octavius had the head of Alexander engraved upon his signet ring, and in imitation of the great Macedonian, founded near Canopus a new city to commemorate his victory. [28]

Patchen's presentation is that of *death* happening as an inevitable (urgent, necessary, *exact)* event on the universal scene of historic determination. This is what is attempted in "Egypt", where the meaning of the objects of nature making up the environment in the ancient times (*tree, leaves, stars*), or the souls of men that had once lived there (*slaves* that died, probably, from lack of strength

or excessive demands on them) is challenged by a series of questions filling the emptiness *(silver nudity)* of the night:

> Where are the leaves
> of that time? Why can't I think
> these stars the same stars?
> Where do the souls of men have their spaces?
>
> Shall I be obedient in that silver nudity?
> (*CP,* p. 260)

Patchen's discourse as narrative is being constructed laboriously using the remnants of the past stripped of their associations.

Rome is finally reached, at the Appian Way, which signals the majesty of the Roman empire. Translated from the Latin *Appia via,* it denotes the ancient road that Censor (312-308) Appius Claudius Caecus started to build in 312 B. C. to connect the *urbs* to Capua, in the south, near Naples. When the Romans extended their power, the road led as far as Brundisium (today's Brindisi), to link up with the eastern coast, on the Adriatic sea, at which merchandise from Africa, Egypt, Greece, and the Far East arrived. The *Regina viarum* (Queen of all ways) was flanked by splendid funeral monuments, statues, and advanced works produced by Roman engineering. By recalling the power of the Romans who, by the second century, had expanded to establish their hegemony in the Hellenistic world, thus reducing important Greek cities to Roman provinces, Patchen evokes the innumerable inhuman executions committed in Roman times. Specifically, he refers to the episode of the Thracian gladiator Spartacus' rebellion, which ended with the crucifixion of six thousand prisoners by Marcus Licinius Crassus along the magnificent road (72-71 B. C.).[29] Here follows the historical account:

> At least the disgracefully lost eagles were recovered-after the victory over the Celts alone five of them were brought in; and along the road from Capua to Rome the six thousand crosses bearing captured slaves testified to the reestablishment of order, and to the renewed victory of acknowledged law over its living property that had rebelled.[30]

Their shadows, as much as their cries, Patchen reflects, are not recorded by history. Books transmit, instead, the names of the leaders: Marius, who defeated the Cimbri and Teutones in 103-102 B. C: and, with his rival Sulla, led Rome to the civil war; Sulla, who slaughtered more than five thousand people to take revenge over Marius (82 B. C.); Lucullus, supporter of Sulla, who was hampered by his own troops' mutiny caused by his strict discipline in the war against Mithridates; and Crassus himself. Their names are mentioned in the history books:

> In Italy, on the other hand, when the elections for 71 were announced, there was a scarcity of candidates, so terrified was everyone at the idea of having to take the field against the dreaded leader of the slaves. Such a shameful situation had never been seen in Rome. In order to put an end to the scandal the Senate entrusted the command to the praetor of the current year. This was M. Licinius Crassus, who had distinguished himself in the civil war by saving Sulla at the battle of the Colline Gate, and who was, perhaps, the richest man in the Senate. While Lucullus was conquering one by one the great cities of Pontus—Amasia, Amisus, Sinope—Crassus succeeded in crushing Spartacus, and crucified 6000 of the prisoners he took along the Appian Way between Capua and Rome. Five thousand of Spartacus' followers escaped and tried to fly beyond the Alps.[31]

The spectacle of "the Roman/Might", in inverted commas in the poem, signifies the connotation for which the icon (the *Appian Way*) stands. The representation of historical reality is, to Patchen, by no means as fixed and unchangeable as tradition has taught; it becomes, instead, discontinuous and transformable when one reflects critically on the modes of representation. "Power," within the canons of classicism, corresponds to the concept of "power over", and involves a social relation between two (or more) sets of actors, whereby one set is subject (given his own intransigent will and his freedom to choose) to the control or dependence of the other set.[32] This concept—as Patchen represents it—involves conflict, which brings about the dramatic consequences for people as he, on the basis of history, brings to the fore. His critique is directed at transforming the concept of "power over" into something that refers to "the ability of an actor to bring about or help to bring about outcomes," namely: the concept of "power to". [33]

This operation is clear in "The Appian Way", where the introductory lines emphasize the central feature in the pattern of Rome's imperial culture, adopted hundreds of years later by fascism to assert its own identity and existence in history:

> *The power*
> *The power alone!*
> *(CP,* p. 262)

Patchen's attention, however, shifts from the historical records to the unrecorded reality of the crucified bodies, and the raw material used to construct the road. Those who worked to lay the stones were the very legionaries who had undertaken the conquest of the world through wars and massacres, and whom the Roman Senate wanted to keep off the path of idleness. Those were the people who shaped the raw material by finishing it. Amongst the cries of its martyrs, the voices of its builders, the 'howling' of Roman might, the Appian way was treaded by the silent figure of "a man ... [who] bent down to touch the stones": that was, to Patchen, *a man of power.* Here begins the critique, which, in Edward Said's words, fosters a "fortified need for links and connections" leading on to an ecological change.[34] Stripped of their myths as power symbols, objects can return to themselves, to their own matrix, wherefrom to start a new narrative.

The spectacle of power is grafted on the portrait of ferocious leader Attila ('the ruthless one/Butcher of the weak'), a protagonist in the strategy of power relations. "Wonderful feasts" and "singing" are the sinister background to his enterprises: the battle of Chalons, near Troyes, where the Huns were forced to retreat, in 451, by the combined Roman and Visigoth armies prepared the way, the following year, for the devastating campaign into Italy to reach Ravenna, western capital of the Roman Empire, during which Aquileia was destroyed and Padua burnt. The historian explains:

> Eleven years later (451 A.D.) Attila invaded Gaul, but this Hunnish movement was in a variety of ways different from those of Visigoths and Vandals. Nearly a century had passed since the Huns first appeared in Europe, and drove the Goths to seek shelter within the Roman power as

> an equal; and in marked contrast to the Gothic and Vandal chieftains, he treated with the emperors of East and West as an independent sovereign.[35]

Death is paradoxically presented as an animated creature in the poem, by means of a double metaphor: its *harnessing* (whereby a horse is fastened to a cart) is undertaken by men (presumably soldiers) to their own *scarred arms,* which thus come to partake of the characteristics of horses, of which they should be leaders. As to their own leader, Attila, there is an undercurrent, suggested association (revealed by parallel contexts) between the food he consumes ("the juice of thick roasts") and the *butchering*[36] of people he undertakes. The reference to the "beautiful woman" brings a different narrative into focus, actually a mini-narrative that history, in its effort to oppose the Romans to the Barbarians, has ignored. Patchen seems to think—in a very up-to-date perspective—that a myth can crumble if the model according to which it is understood crumbles too. His re-construction of history is not a limited one; it is pluralistic and multicultural.

The two *Greek* poems refer to events of the 5th century B.C. "The Age of Pericles" designates the 31 years of Pericles' rule (460-429 B.C.) leading to Athens' primacy over Sparta and, eventually, the civil war, while "The Empire of Persia" presents Leonidas' death at Thermopylae as that of a "common man" (*CP,* p. 257). History keeps a record of the famous resistance:

> Xerses, son of Darius, decided to attack Greece marching from Asia Minor north, cross the Hellespont and proceed through Thracia to Macedonia and Greece. In 480 B.C. the Persian attack began. An army of one and a half million men invaded Greece. The Greeks had decided to check the advance at the Pass of Thermopylae, a narrow pass with mountains to the west and the sea to the east. The defence of the pass was in the hands of 300 Spartans under their King, Leonidas. Owing to a Greek traitor, the 300 Spartans were surrounded and fought to the last man. Xerses captured Athens which he destroyed by fire.[37]

That is the historical account; but the concluding final image of "the famous Spartan/idiot/which sat smiling at a blue angel" (*CP,* p. 257) is not historical; it responds to Patchen's need to weave his

own alternative reality into his *cloth of the tempest,* a web where the subject of otherness is not excluded and where a variety of elements blending and clashing provide a "new narrative of equality and human community."[38]

* * *

These fragments—interspersed by Patchen among the hundreds of references in his poems from the middle thirties to the very early forties—were among the foundations of the American poet's mature engagement. They made up a new rhetoric to include not only the awareness of the problem of writing and reading history, but also to allow space for other possible points of view. His rhetoric is not an instrument for falsehood (as in the superficial meaning of myth as fiction or illusion), but an instrument of truth: facts to be interpreted, material to be organized, details to be selected, events to be reconstructed, and words to be matched to deeds. Rhetoric is an instrument to raise questions about the past.

1 A. Munoz, *Roma di Mussolini* (Milano, 1935), pp. 481-82, in Ester Coen, "Against Dreary Conformism," *Art and Power. Europe under the Dictators 1930-1945* (London, Hayward Gallery, 1995), p. 179. Here follows the original version: "Roma è il nostro punta di partenza e di riferimento: è il nostro simbolo, o, se si vuole, il nostro mito. Noi sogniamo l'Italia romana, cioe saggia e forte, disciplinata e imperiale. Molto di quello che fu lo spirito immortale di Roma risorge nel Fascismo: romano è il Littorio, romana e la nostra organizzazione di combattenti, romano e il nostro orgoglio e il nostro coraggio."

2 Liv., I, 8,3. The source of information is Giulio Quirino Giglioli, ed., *Il fascio littorio* (La Libreria dello Stato, 1932), p. 11.

3 Coen, "Against Dreary Conformism", *cit.,* p.179.

4 *Condottieri*—or *capitani di ventura*—were mercenary army leaders who gathered soldiers to act on behalf of *signori* and princes in XIV-XVI century Italian and European territories. For an exhaustive account of Mussolini's expansionistic policy, see Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London, Longman, 1976).

5 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London & New York, Routledge, 1991), p. 217. The beginning of the Roman Empire was marked by the battle of Actium (31 B.C.), when Octavius-after defeating Mark Antony-became the sale ruler of Rome, and was hailed by the senate as 'Augustus' *(exalted)* (H.A. Clement,

The Story of the Ancient World. From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome [London, George Harrap & Co.l, 1936).

6 Miriam Patchen recently recalled her husband's interest in Ethiopian events in the early thirties, and mentioned a book that I am trying to trace (see Maria Anita Stefanelli and Barbara Read, eds. *Miriam & Us. A Talk on Kenneth Patchen* (Roma, Dipartimento Studi Americani, 2000), p. 23.

7 My statement on the left writers' critical views on literature is founded on Terry Eagleton's survey of the committed writer's engagement in the thirties *(Marxism and Literary Criticism* [London, Methuen, 1976]).

8 Patchen would never adhere to a political creed, nor-as his biographers and critics have often maintained—belong officially to any Communist or Socialist organization. Quotations are from *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Patchen* (New York, New Directions, 1967), abbr. *CP.*

9 Terry Eagleton, "Introduction Part I," *Marxist Literary Theory. A Reader,* eds. Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996), p. 6.

10 D. R. Turner, "Ruminations on Romanisation in the East: Or the Metanarrative in History," 1998: http://www.shef.ac.uk/~assem/4/4turner.html

11 Cit. in Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism,* cit., pp. 50-1.

12 *Ibidem,* p. 51.

13 Raymond J. Nelson, *Kenneth Patchen and American Mysticism* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina P., 1984), p. 69.

14 Michel Foucault considers both fascism and stalinism as two pathological forms using the ideas and devices of political rationality within their internal madness ("The Subject and Power", in Brian Wallis, ed. and intro., *Art after Modernism. Rethinking Representation.* Foreword by Marcia Tucker (New York, The New York Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., Boston, 1984), p. 418). In this regard, see Patchen's elaboration of the concept of madness in his experimental *Journal of Albion Moonlight.*

15 Actually, followers were called *lictores,* who were people serving the dux: *qui ei [Caesari] adparent,* they were called, therefore, *adparitores* (Aulo Gellio, X 3, 19 and Festo, *Ep.,* p. 31).

16 Among these a *quote—"Once the weight and fate of Europe hung"* —from Alfred Lord Tennyson's "On the death of the Duke of Wellington" (1852) and another *one—"Where bright angelfeet have trod*"—from Robert Lowry's folkesong "Shall we gather at the river" (1866), besides passages from prayers and hymns (such as the line *This is/the strain the eternal strain the Lord of all things loves,* taken from the hymn "All Thy W*orks praise Thee, O Lord,"* where the context reads: "This is the strain, the eternal strain,/the Lord Almighty loves").

17 F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1932).

18 I have dealt with this poem extensively in "Objects Lost and Found: Kenneth Patchen's Poetics of the Letter", to appear.

Somewhat in keeping with the mood of the thirties, Amos N. Wilder reports, when he went to see him in Boston in 1934, Kenneth was lying flat on his

back in a dismal bedroom with the shades drawn; on a table were the books of Conrad Aiken, Hart Crane and Lauro de Bosis, "and a litter of yellow sheets of his own verse" *(Sagetrieb* 5. 3 [Winter 1986], p. 111).

19 Before dying, however, he had left a letter to be published in case of unsuccess. The letter appeared on October 14 as "L'histoire de ma mort" in Brussels *Le Soir* and as "The Story of My Death" in *The Times.*

20 Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism* 1914-1945 (London, D.C.L. Press, 1995), p. 74. The bimillennium of Caesar Augustus was celebrated in the Mostra Augustea della Romanità, a major exhibition organized in Rome.

21 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "[H]eroic winter dinner", *The Futurist Cookbook,* ed. Lesley Chamberlain, tr. Suzanne Brill (London, Trefoil Publications, 1989), p. 102. Marinetti's relationship with Mussolini and fascism was always ambiguous.

22 *Ibidem,* p. 110.

23 Wallis, ed. and intro., *Art after Modernism. Rethinking Representation,* cit., p. xv.

24 Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome,* tr. William Purdie Dickinson (London, Macmillan, 1913), p. 256. This classic book on Roman history is among the many that Patchen may have used to build up his knowledge of the Roman world. Among other books that he may have read at the time, are: J. Wells, *A Short History of Rome to the Death of Augustus* (London, Methuen, 1928); Ciryl E. Robinson, *A History of Rome. From 735 B.C. to A.D. 410* (London, Methuen, 1935); Clement, *The Story of the Ancient World. From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome,* cit., Tenney Frank, ed., *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins D. P., 1933-1940), Vols I-V; or Guglielmo Ferrero and Corrado Barbagallo, *A Short History of Rome* (New York & London, G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1918), 2 Vols.

25 Antonin Artaud, The *Theater and its Double* (New York, Grove Press, 1958).

26 For an understanding of explanatory vs. interpretive generalizations, see Peter Munz, "The Historical Narrative", in Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography* (London, Routledge, 1997), pp. 851-72.

27 Natalie Z. Davies, "The Possibilities of the Past", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12 (1981), p. 272.

28 H. F. Pelham, *Outlines of Roman History* (London: Rivingtons, 1905), p. 363.

29 It is plausible to think of a slip on Patchen's part and take the "soldiers of Sparta" (a city that was absorbed, in the 2nd century B.C., by Rome's legions) to actually mean the "soldiers of Spartacus".

30 Mommsen, *The History of Rome,* cit., p. 364.

31 Ferrero and Barbagallo, *A Short History of Rome. The Monarchy and the Republic from the Foundation of the City to the Death of Julius Caesar* 754 *B.C. 44 B.C.,* Vol. I, cit., pp. 372-73.

32 See Foucault, "The Subject and Power", in Wallis, *Art after Modernism. Rethinking Representation,* cit., pp. 417-32. For a discussion of the concept of "power over" and "power to", see Keith Dowding, *Power* (Buckingham, Open D.P., 1996).

33 Dowding, *Power, cit.,* p. 5.

34 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1994), p. xxi.

35 Pelham, *Outline of Roman History,* cit., p. 545.

36 The image is connected both with the already mentioned banqueting of world leaders and with the poem "The First Crusades" in *First Will and Testament* (*CP, p.* 263).

37 Clement, *The Story of the Ancient World. From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome,* cit., pp. 125-26.

38 Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* cit., p. xiii.