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Essay: Popular Modernism And The American Prose Poem: From Sherwood Anderson To Kenneth Patchen

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ESSAY

Popular Modernism and the American Prose Poem: From Sherwood Anderson to Kenneth Patchen

PERSONALITY

Musings of a Police Reporter in the Identification Bureau

You have loved forty women, but you have only one thumb.
You have led a hundred secret lives, but you mark only one thumb.
You go round the world and fight in a thousand wars and win all the
world's honors, but when you come back home the print of the one
thumb your mother gave you is the same print of thumb you had in
the old home when your mother kissed you and said good-by.
Out of the whirling womb of time come millions of men and their feet
crowd the earth and they cut one another's throats for room to stand
and among them all are not two thumbs alike.
Somewhere is a Great God of Thumbs who can tell the inside story of this.

On a strictly formal level, "Personality," one of Carl Sandburg's famous *Chicago Poems* (1916), signals an interesting move away from the Whitmanesque long line which results in a mixed form halfway between free verse and the prose poem. By forsaking Whitman's endlessly paratactic flow (including the usual comma at the end of each line) and choosing the full-length sentence as his basic rhythmic and compositional unit, Sandburg reworked the traditional indented line into a more extended whole which comes as close as anything to a syntactically self-contained prose paragraph.

Sandburg's transformation of the Whitmanian line into a hybrid sentence-paragraph (a form which remained a major formal premise of Sandburg's work from the early years of *Chicago Poems* to the later prose-poetic experiments of *The People, Yes* [1936]) was not an altogether unprecedented phenomenon. Two years before the appearance of his *Chicago Poems*, Italian-American poet and social activist Arturo Giovannitti (1884-1959) had already used the sentence-paragraph to convert a similar mixture of lyric fervor and prosaic sobriety into a poetic expression of his socialist convictions. "The Walker," one of the most powerful poems of Giovannitti's *Arrows in the Gale* (1914), is a remarkable example of such a synthesis of personal feeling and political commitment. The poem was inspired by Giovannitti's own time in prison awaiting trial for leading the famous Lawrence, Massachusetts strike of textile workers in 1912. Typically, "The Walker" displays an

acute sense of individual experience endowed with a collective significance by the author's penchant for consciousness-raising discursiveness:

Wonderful is the supreme wisdom of the jail that makes all think the same thought.

Marvelous is the providence of the law that equalizes all, even in mind and sentiment. Fallen is the last barrier of privilege, the aristocracy of the intellect. The democracy of reason has leveled all the two hundred minds to the common surface of the same thought.

I, who have never killed, think like the murderer;

I, who have never stolen, reason like the thief;

I think, reason, wish, hope, doubt, wait like the hired assassin, the embezzler, the forger, the counterfeiter, the incestuous, the raper, the drunkard, the prostitute, the pimp, I, I who used to think of love and life and flowers and song and beauty and the ideal.

(151)

Giovannitti's predilection for the prose poem form can also be put down to his tendency to secularize the rhetorical energy and the didactic potential of popular religious genres, like the parable or the sermon, and put them at the service of his socialist convictions. Similar strategies of poetic *détournement* are also apparent in "The Sermon of the Common," in which Giovannitti parodies the Sermon on the Mount in order to turn the conservative rhetoric of the Beatitudes into an exhortation to social revolt ("Blessed are the strong in freedom's spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of the earth. Blessed are they that mourn their martyred dead: for they shall avenge them upon their murderers and be comforted. Blessed are the rebels: for they shall reconquer the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after equality: for they shall eat the fruit of their labor" [193]).

More generally, the issue at stake in Giovannitti's "The Walker" is that of poetry's cultural and political role and its critical engagement with society itself, for the main subject matter of "The Walker" is a principle of social exclusion and confinement of the individual which is an integral part of the workings of modern democracy. The poem's mode, however, remains consistently lyrical, in that it is concerned, above all, with the individual consciousness and its attempts to deal with the social and intellectual equalizing brought about by the "wisdom of the jail" and its "democracy of reason." In the context of poetic practice, the aesthetic and ideological values grudgingly dismissed by the pris-

oner (“love and life and flowers and song and beauty and the ideal”) are precisely those which were promulgated by the cultural Establishment as being the privileged subject of poetry—a genre then understood not as a place to comment on the subject’s position in social life but, rather, as an idealized and self-contained domain in which the lyric “I” could break away from the contingencies of society by surrendering to the gentle, decorative and sentimental power of song.

By reading the political consciousness of the lyric self through the lens of its social and historical environment, Giovannitti had already anticipated Sherwood Anderson’s early experiments with the prose poem form. Out of the forty-nine pieces included in Anderson’s *Mid-American Chants* (1918), eighteen are written in prose. Like Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems* and Giovannitti’s *Arrows in the Gale*, Anderson’s prose poems, a stylistic alternative to Whitman’s long, unrhymed, declamatory line, owe as much to the declamatory conversationalism of the latter as to the prosodic techniques of the King James Bible. The Biblical rhythms and turns of style in the opening poem of the collection, “The Cornfields,” include a limited lexicon, a stark but repetitious diction, a fondness for syntactic and thematic parallelisms and an austere explicitness which often has the effect of moderating the author’s occasionally over-sententious postures:

I am pregnant with song. My body aches but does not betray me. I will sing songs and hide them away. I will tear them into bits and throw them in the street. The streets of my city are full of dark holes. I will hide my songs in the holes of the streets.

In the darkness of the night I awoke and the bands that bind me were broken. I was determined to bring old things into the land of the new. A sacred vessel I found and ran with it into the fields, into the long fields where the corn rustles.

All the people of my time were bound with chains. They had forgotten the long fields and the standing corn. They had forgotten the west winds.

Into the cities my people had gathered. They had become dizzy with words. Words had choked them. They could not breathe.

(*Mid-American* 11)

Generally speaking, Anderson’s vision of the modern self in *Mid-American Chants* is one of sordid estrangement from the basic sources of Midwestern life and traditions. Anderson’s nostalgia for pre-indus-

trial lore and the unmediated experience of rural life is contrasted with the self-alienating dynamics of urban working conditions. For all their stilted exaltation and dignified didacticism, Anderson's prose poems—which were published at a time when the reputation of the Chicago “Renaissance” was at its peak—also exhibit a concern with the rhythms of Midwestern everyday life and idiomatic speech which makes them the first (and, arguably, the last) significant example of a populist tradition of the prose lyric. As a whole, the collection displays a heroic, hymnal (and, as we will see, ultimately unsuccessful) effort to sing both the poetic and the working-class self into contemporary history and myth. Anderson's project to give public expression to the collective consciousness of the common people, however, was eventually undermined by the general lack of critical and commercial success met by the *Mid-American Chants*. Anderson's prose poems never reached more than a limited number of sophisticated readers quite untouched by the working conditions described in his collection.

The kind of “revolutionary feeling” which characterizes the *Mid-American Chants*, a formal synthesis of prosaic discursiveness and lyric mysticism, can also be seen as a logical (if only provisional) resolution of Anderson's aspirations as a prose writer. Anderson's correspondence attests to how important his experiments with the prose poem were to his own conception of his art, while at the same time putting the emphasis on their value as transitional episodes in his career as a fiction writer: “Some years ago I wrote the little book *Mid-American Chants* and that led directly into the impulse that produced *Winesburg, Poor White* and *The Triumph*. For two years now I've been at work on another thing I call *A New Testament*. And that has led directly into *Many Marriages*. If it comes off—the gods grant it may—it will be the biggest, most sustained and moving thing I've done” (*Selected* 32). Despite the fairly uneven quality of the collection—and, more generally, of Anderson's poetic work as a whole—the *Chants* constitute an interesting episode in Anderson's career, in that they stand as an early example of his sustained interest in experiments with short prose pieces. Anderson's short prose lyrics, which were published shortly after his first two “populist” novels (*Windy McPherson's Son* [1916] and *Marching Men* [1917]) were indeed soon to be followed by the more picturesque idiosyncracies of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) in which he was to find his true poetic voice. Moving away from the universal considerations and the anti-Whitmanesque, self-deprecating poses of the *Chants* to a deeper, self-forgetful investigation of individual lives, Anderson's miniature grotesques are his real lasting achievement in experimental

writing. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson was to create a unique, unclassifiable genre of his own, in which he would successfully reconcile his original talents as a fiction writer with his aspirations to lyric conciseness.

Anderson's experiments with the prose poem, however, continued to coexist with his ambitions as a novelist and short story writer, as demonstrated by his later return to the form with *A New Testament* (1927), a second collection of short, dramatic prose "songs" inspired by an even more scrupulous study of Biblical prosody. In these later chants, the Whitmanesque exaltation of the *Mid-American Chants* is tempered by the presence of a number of quieter and more meditative parabolist riddles and descriptive vignettes. The sobriety of style, sometimes bordering on the archetypal, and the restrained lyricism which distinguishes the best among Anderson's prose poems make them akin to two earlier works with which he was more than probably familiar when he started to work on *A New Testament*: Oscar Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1894)—another deliberate attempt at emulating the prose style of the King James Bible—and Kahlil Gibran's prose parables collected in *The Prophet*, whose first edition, published in 1923, instantly met with tremendous enthusiasm in American literary circles.

*

Despite the efforts and achievements of Anderson, Giovannitti and a number of other prominent figures such as Gertrude Stein (*Tender Buttons*; 1914), William Carlos Williams' (*Kora in Hell*; 1918) and Amy Lowell (*Can Grande's Castle*; 1918), the prose poem inexplicably vanished almost completely from the American literary scene in the 1920s, only to reappear in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the appearance of several full-length collection of prose poems by writers such as Russell Edson, Michael Benedikt, Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, David Ignatow and other representatives of what was later to be called the "American prose poem revival."

In this perspective, the work of Kenneth Patchen can be seen as a kind of "missing link" in the history of the genre. Patchen's first experiments with the prose poem (notably in *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* [1946] and *Red Wine and Yellow Hair* [1949]) coincide with an increased interest in formal experiments which were to include various kinds of concrete and semi-concrete poetry, as well as several attempts at blending poetry with nonliterary mediums like painting or music. All these aspects of Patchen's *oeuvre* are typical of a work-in-progress aspiring to a conception of art as emancipated from such notions as "high" and "low" culture, as well as from a number of accepted bound-

aries between various poetic and nonliterary genres. A number of prose poems written in the late 1940s, however, are clearly still in keeping with the tradition of “proletarian realism” which governs his early free verse. Among them, “Family Portrait,” a prose poem contained in the collection *Red Wine and Yellow Hair*, stands out:

Great tarry wings splatter softly up out of the rotting yolk of sun. In the millyard the statue of an old bastard with a craggy grin is turning shit-colored above the bowed heads of the new shift crunching in between the piles of slag That’s my father washing at the kitchen sink. The grimy water runs into the matted hair of his belly. The smell of Lava soap and sweat adds its seasoning to the ham and cabbage. On the other side of town a train whistles. Tearing shadows fill the steaming room. Wind rushes out of my old man with the sound of a thunderclap, and my sister vigorously rattles the lid of a pot. In the parlor my grandfather lies, two days dead. “Aye, and the only statue for him’s a spade in ‘is stumpy teeth now.”— “A lapful of withered nuts to make the muckin grasses grow . . .”

—“Hush you are, for here be the priest with his collar so tidy and so straight.”—“Liked his bit of drink, he did, God take the long thirst out of his soul and all.” I remember once after a brush with Mrs. Hannan, who happened to be passing hard under his window one morning, he told me, “Ah, there’s only one thing worse than the rich, my lad . . . and that’s the poor, and that’s the ruckin, lyin, unmannerin, snivelin poor, my lad!” and a great whip of tobacco juice lashed out into the dust of the road. On, on into the small hours went the singing and the laughing and the gay, wonderful story-telling . . . and the wax candles dripping slowly down on his stiff, dark clothes.

(*Red Wine* 47)

In the light of the overall development of a literary tradition of social protest of neo-naturalistic inspiration, Patchen’s “Family Portrait” appears as an interesting compromise between fictional realism and lyric conciseness, a form whose modal hybridity lends itself to the assimilation and expression of prosaic or “unpoetic” material but still preserves a “poetic” space for lyric intensity and nonnarrative presence. Patchen’s dispassionate account of working-class misery, as well as his unsavory description of urban blight and its psychological consequences, are firmly rooted in their social and geographical context and sustained by a democratic impulse conspicuously absent from the history of the American prose lyric, which—with the notable exceptions of Sherwood

Anderson's *Mid-American Chants* and, to some extent, of William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell*—had until then been associated primarily with the avant-gardist stance of Gertrude Stein's language games and Eugene Jolas' *Revolution of the Word*.

The specific form of radical realism which underlies Patchen's "Family Portrait" finds in the syntactic and stylistic suppleness of the prose vignette an adequate medium for the combination of scrupulously detailed, naturalistic description and the heterogeneous and discontinuous cadences of modern city life. If Patchen's "Family Portrait," like the Joycean epiphany, reflects an attempt at assimilating the "prosaic" into a poetic genre, it can also be regarded as a contemporary extension of Baudelaire's project to harness "the miracle of a poetic prose, without rhythm and without rhyme" into a description of "modern life—or, rather, a certain variety of modern, more abstract life" (*Poems* 24). Even though the underlying ambition of the prose poems collected in *Paris Spleen*—to combine a realist and an "abstract" and, therefore, self-consciously aestheticized mode of representation—differs from the unconcealed rawness of Patchen's vignette, both approaches originate in the same desire to capture the jolts of an overwhelmingly disharmonious and essentially urban modernity. More generally, however, the choice of a prose medium is best understood in the context of a flourishing literature of social protest in prose which, in the 1940s and 1950s, gained a larger popular recognition than did the equivalent movement in poetry. Despite the efforts of the likes of Patchen, Fearing, and many other "proletarian" poets, the greater success and public repercussion enjoyed by the novels of John Steinbeck, Robert Cantwell and Jack Conroy, along with those of novelists Henry Roth and Richard Wright, consolidated the prominence of fiction as the most accessible—and best-selling—medium for literature written by and/or for working-class people.

The Famous Boating Party and Other Poems In Prose (1954), Patchen's first collection consisting entirely of prose poems, clearly confirms his departure from a poetry of social statement towards the more playful kind of experimentalism which was to dominate his late career. Like Sherwood Anderson's *Mid-American Chants*, the fifty-five short pieces of the collection display a consistent use of the musical directness of popular speech as a means of lending the prose poem a distinctively folksy and American voice. They were originally meant to be spoken aloud and many of them were indeed performed live by Patchen, to the accompaniment of a jazz band, during a series of extremely successful reading tours in the late 1950s: Patchen's vision of

modern society as a complex constellation of syncopated rhythms and chromatic counterpoints is reflected in his use of a variety of tones and modes of representation ranging from the purely confessional to the dramatic, or even the didactic. Despite such modal and tonal experiments, Patchen remains, in many instances, faithful to the uncompromisingly popular tonalities of his early work in his attempts to transcribe the discontinuous rhythms of speech and the local color of contemporary experience, as in “The Famous Boating Party”:

The Announcer: Ladies and gents, your attention please. It is now exactly two and sixty-four minutes past seven. Thank you, thank you, I was coming to that if you will be so kindly. But wait! Things are beginning to do! I'm afraid that something has gone amiss! I will thank you not to panic . . . The management stands behind its usual rights in cases of this kind. I — excuse me — Sam! Hey, Sam! over here . . .! (Aside: No, no, no, *no* . . . Sam, look, I know you think I did. But I don't want no mustard on my frank. You know I never take it except plain—no pickle, no relish, no onion, no catsup, no mustard, no nothin!)

What the fellow said was murder, Sam — not mustard. Uh-huh, that's right — blew the ship skyhigh . . . Over seven hundred people — just like that, *poof-poof*.

(58)

Such experimental playfulness is representative of Patchen's uniquely American contribution to the prose poem form. Patchen's oralization and dramatization of the form into a popular genre (he was, at the time, one of the most widely read—and heard—poets in the United States) often closer to stand-up comedy than to any accepted definition of “poetry” paves the way for the later extravagant fantasies of Russell Edson, Michael Benedikt and other representatives of the “fabulist” prose poem. More specifically, the presence of humor and playfulness in *The Famous Boating Party* is inextricably linked with Patchen's understanding of the form as a supremely hybrid medium capable of accommodating various tones, modes and discourses. Patchen's rewriting of the inherent chromatic duality of the prose poem into a heterogeneous space for a multiplicity of “prosaic” and “poetic” avatars often creates a dissonant medley of voices and personae. In most of the poems of the collection, however, humor is created through a mixture or a juxtaposition of two stylistic or modal orientations usually accepted as incompatible. The use of a factual tone for the description of surreal experiences, in particular, is still a major generative feature of

many prose poems written in the United States today:

Only close-up could you make out the wings on their horses.
They were nearly transparent.

But that's how they covered so much ground. In a single
night they'd be twenty places.

Someone told me he'd noticed them in two places a good
hundred miles apart practically simultaneously.

He also said they had mouths in their foreheads. You'd prob-
ably think him of dubious value, witness-wise.

However . . . the fact won't down that an unusual number of
schoolgirls have been disappearing these last couple weeks.

It may well be all that talk of mouths in foreheads and of
strands of long silken hair found caught in the branches of the
dogwood down by the river has given some people a false
notion of the thing. This won't be the first publicity stunt to
get out of hand . . . though it could be the last.

("Evidence? What evidence?" 14)

"Rising a little" involves another kind of discrepancy between mode
of representation, diction and "content," in which Patchen's creative
subversion of capitalist discourse clashes with the helplessness of the
proletarian self:

RISING A LITTLE

Fearful with them gathered about my bed on that dreary
autumn morning

Wouldn't it just be to one like myself—a defenseless mouse-
thing quite unnailed and unnealed by the grayest of lives here
below in this vale of blackened tares—that they'd come

And not ever no no never to one of your fat and fancy-
whiskered tomadandandies in their soft-padding motorcars
emboldened all in as out by prosperity and other similar figures
of an economic legerdemain

Humor in Patchen's prose poems often originates in a creative and playful exposure of the limitations and failures of a particular discourse. Patchen's favorite targets include the claims to rational objectivity of the language of logic, scientific analysis ("Childhood of the Hero 1") and various other forms of utilitarian prose:

COURT OF FIRST APPEAL

Humbly—but with caution (in unbridled vigor of faith: acceptful of joy for whatever reason, for no reason—humbly I believe!)

In the splendorment and holification of everything individuated, and of everything togetherized; from causes known to me, from causes forever (unassailably) unknown to me: I believe!

In the serene and beautiful prevailation of life, from causes beyond understanding, I believe!

Serene and beautiful, that livingliveness beyond understanding!

(But of that most unsubstantial—though momentarily conspicuous—of all this earth's pitiful little nations, the human, I delay judgement until such time as the evidence shall reveal itself as being in any way applicable to what I must imagine the true nature of the case to be.)

(63)

By bringing together antithetical modes and discourses (here, the language of prayer and that of legal procedures), Patchen elaborates on the futility of our efforts to come to terms with the contradictions of modern life, a motif which pervades both his poetry and his fiction. In so doing, he also manages to expose the constructedness of the various rhetorical genres an individual inevitably has to resort to in order to verbalize his/her relationship to society at large.

The prose poem is not the only example of Patchen's experiments with prose and poetry. *First Will and Testament*, his second book of poetry, is a collection of lineated poems preceded by blocks of prose. More importantly, Patchen's "antinovel," *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* (1941), contains, in addition to an impressive variety of other short literary and extraliterary prose forms (including parables, impressionis-

tic sketches, lists, speeches, “confessions” and journal entries), samples of prose printed in direct juxtaposition to passages of poetry. Albion, Patchen’s fictional creation of a failed novelist—at least in the traditional sense—rejects the methods underlying conventional fiction because he is profoundly dissatisfied with the lack of presence and immediacy of novel writing: “this novel is being written as it happens, not what happened yesterday, or what will happen tomorrow, but what is happening now, *at this writing*. At this writing! Do you see? I told you before that I would tell part of our story in the form of a novel: I did not say that I would write a novel” (*Albion* 145).

Albion’s condemnation of the artificial premises of traditional fiction underlies his iconoclastic revision of the novel form into “writing” and his use of the fragment and the journal entry as an antinarrative form. As a result of his rejection of conventional treatments of narration, plot and characterization, the short prose fragment replaces the chapter and the paragraph as the basic structural unit of a new, *writerly* novel. Albion’s conception of “writing” as immediate fictional potentiality is the exact countertype of Patchen’s “novelization”/“fictionalization” of the short prose lyric discussed earlier. His use of the journal entry as his favorite compositional unit—a consequence of his resistance to the artificiality of accepted fictional structures and his insistence on writing “as it happens”—reestablishes a relationship of personal directness and lyric presence between the writer and his work.

In *Poemscales*, a later collection of prose poems, Patchen’s imaginative subversion of traditional genre boundaries further extends to the very notion of literariness. In the following vignettes, his use of the short prose poem shows unmistakable affinities with such short prose genres as the aphorism, the maxim and the short philosophical *pensée*. By moving back and forth between the colloquial and the philosophical, Patchen attempts to create a new form of speculative discourse whose closeness to the intimacy of personal experience challenges accepted distinctions between abstract and concrete, figurative and literal levels of meaning. The result is a form which makes use of the discursive resources of analytical prose at the same time as it seeks to debunk its underlying assumptions of objectivity and transparency:

137) ANOTHER DAY GONE

This . . . and it is already that. On, on we go, baffled by the shadow of this In-Out; baffled to the point of cunning which declares: It is so little, it is nothing, it is enough.

NONESSENTIALISM IN PRACTICE (138)

It's nonessential to believe that the special quality of every life resides not in its being (if by being we mean being somewhere: and if we don't, whose else's tail shall we chase?), but in its strange motionability, its headlong flight from anything and everything that even remotely smacks of "this day", "this place".

In defining the prose poem as the locus of convergence and conflict of various literary and nonliterary discourses, Patchen's poetics of hybridity does not limit itself to denying the legitimacy of a structural distinction between poetry and prose. Indeed, the coalescence of various utilitarian and nonutilitarian discourses into the transgeneric synthesis of the prose poem also challenges the imperviousness of accepted boundaries between theoretical and creative writing. In this respect, Patchen's "popular experimentalism," his domestication of late modernist avant-gardism into a Great Leveler of genres, stands as a unique and multifaceted milestone in the history of the American prose poem and, more generally, as a challenging contribution to both experimental and popular writing. Patchen's prose poems emerge as so many attempts to explore the potential of poetry for reclaiming specific functions and modes usually considered as the prerogative of prose genres. A platform for ludic negotiations between the subjective and the objective, the lyric and the narrative, the public and the private, the secular and the religious, Patchen's prose poems contain some of the most recent patterns of development of the contemporary American prose poem.

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