

Life, love, death, and poetry in the work of Brian Patten

- S. N. Radhika Lakshmi

The Liverpool Poets

'The Liverpool poets' appeared on the literary scene in 1967, the name being coined by Edward Lucie-Smith [1] who called his anthology of their work: 'The Liverpool Scene'. The chief poets were Adrian Henri (1932 - 2000) Roger McGough (1937 -) and Brian Patten (1946 -).

The work of 'The Liverpool poets' was written to be read aloud in public, and although the poets have now developed separately, their literary outlook is still characterized by their common commitment to reviving poetry as a performance.

'The Liverpool poets' approach to poetry differs from that of other poets in that they consistently give the impression of being real people getting to grips with real and pressing situations. According to Edward Lucie-Smith 'The Liverpool poets' feel a 'real sympathy for their environment' and are more interested in life than in literature. This is the quality that sets them apart from the other post-modern poets. Like the French Symbolists, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, 'The Liverpool poets' believe that the effect that a poem produces is more important than the poem itself; a poem should be considered as an 'agent' (that conveys the poet's message), rather than as an 'object'.

The poetry of 'The Liverpool poets' is also characterized by the undercurrent of sarcasm, irony and pungent wit, which runs through many of their poems. They are also noted for their directness of expression, simplicity of style, and, (in the manner of Robert Frost), their deft handling of complicated ideas in uncomplicated language.

Patten's poetry achieves its effect through feelings, and this is what distinguishes him from the other two 'Liverpool poets'. According to Linda Cookson [2] Patten's poetry complements that of Henri and McGough, but there is an essential difference between them in that Patten's humour is of an entirely different character from the verbal gymnastics of Henri and McGough, and is subordinated almost always to an underlying seriousness of purpose.

Grevel Lindop, in his essay on 'The Liverpool poets' [3], says that during their performances they constantly observe their audiences for the smallest sign of discontent or boredom, and points out the temperamental differences between them. He says that Henri's reading is 'meticulously controlled, the moods of the poem are carefully varied', in contrast to 'McGough keeping an entirely straight face even through the

most comic ones'. Patten on the other hand seems both more spontaneous and less relaxed. He appears moody, even inarticulate between poems, and the audience is excited, not only by the enormous passion with which he reads his poems but by the suspicion that at any moment he may be going to pick a quarrel with someone'. Thus their live performances reveal the poets' temperaments and give an insight into the subjective nature of their poetry.

Patten's attitude towards life

Patten's first volume of poetry, *Little Johnny's Confession*, was considered a masterpiece when it was published in 1967. According to Martin Booth [4] the title poem *Little Johnny's Confession* has a blend of 'dream, violence, and pathos in it'. Little Johnny borrows a war-time souvenir, a machine gun which belongs to his father, and 'eliminates' a number of his 'small enemies'. He runs away but the police are after him, asking:

Have you seen him,
He is seven years old,
Likes Pluto, Mighty Mouse
And Biffo the bear,
Have you seen him, anywhere?

('Little Johnny's Confession' - Little Johnny's Confession)

The boy knows he will be trapped in the end, when the tracker dogs pick up the scent of his lollypops. Martin Booth [4] says the 'amalgam of innocence, bizarre situation, childhood day-dreaming, pathos and tenderness' is characteristic of Patten's work. This was what young audiences wanted at a time when the world was violent, morally confused, and turning towards the Hippie peace era.

In *Johnny Learns the Language* Patten reflects on the inadequacy of words to express one's feelings and emotions. Johnny learns the language to communicate with the world, but soon realizes that mere words cannot bridge the communication gap, as words in themselves do not enable others to understand him. Words also reveal the attitude or personality of the speaker. Johnny's mother always spoke to him with kindness, her words overflowing with love and affection while, in sharp contrast, his father was always frugal in his use of words; 'words rarely sneaked out' of his mouth. Moreover, his father's use of words such as 'defeat', 'loss', and 'regret' seemed to reveal his defeatist and negative approach to life. It is ironical indeed that these words seemed to be prophetic, as they became 'blueprints' of Johnny's future.

Patten shows the transformation in Johnny's personality in *Little Johnny's Change of Personality* with the insight of a psychoanalyst. According to critic Grevel Lindop [3], there is a metamorphosis in this poem, brought about

by the poet's description of Johnny's change of personality and the boy's realisation that he belonged to 'Generation X', a generation comprising of numerous complexes and psychological disorders. Martin Booth [4] says that Patten was to the period of 1967-74 what Ginsberg and the Beats were to the previous generation - a poet who tried to perceive and exorcise inner feelings by saying it 'how it was'.

In *Little Johnny's Final Letter to his Mother* the boy confesses to his mother that he has left the city to get himself 'classified', to make a decision about his future. Patten presents the theme of a boy's alienation from home because of the fact that he is a juvenile delinquent. This poem is sad and moving, but it also reflects the optimism and self-reliance of young people in the years of increasing wealth and freedom. It is evident in Little Johnny's poems that it is domestic disharmony rather than the world outside that emerges as the most powerful destroyer of childhood.

Patten poignantly projects the difference between illusion and reality in many of his poems. For instance in *Projectionist's Nightmare* he juxtaposes the illusion of the make-believe world with the stark reality of death. A bird enters a cinema and smashes into the screen where a love scene in a garden is taking place. The bird is killed and 'Real blood, real intestines, slither down'. The audience is left screaming 'this is no good . . .this is not what we came to see'.

In *Portrait of a Young Girl Raped at a Suburban Party* Patten presents the disillusionment of a young girl who is raped at a suburban party and walks home 'already ten minutes pregnant'. The incident leaves her mentally and physically drained because 'Those acts that called for tenderness/ Were far from tender.

Yet already ten minutes pregnant
In twenty thousand you might remember
This party
This dull Saturday evening
When planets rolled out of your eyes
And splashed down in suburban gardens.

('Portrait of a young Girl Raped at a Suburban Party' Notes to the Hurrying Man - 25)

In *Party Notes* he describes the various dreamers and idlers of modern society who lead a meaningless existence because they refuse to emerge from the illusion of pleasures and see the reality of things. Patten gives a snippet of his philosophy in *Why Things Remained the Same* when he says that though 'The need to change is ever present nothing really changes'

In *Minister for Exams* Patten satirises the rigidity and misguided approach of an educational system which demands stereotyped answers,

even to questions intended to stimulate the child's subjective imagination. Also on the theme of the education, in *Dead Thick*, he attacks the attitude of the English teacher who thinks he is 'too busy for literature', because he is more interested in getting promotion than doing his duty.

In another poem, *Drunk*, Patten reflects that everyone should get drunk on exciting and fruitful activities which lead to dizzy raptures. The term 'drunk' refers to frenzied involvement in any activity, as distinct from the usual sober, solemn, careful approach to predictable routines. Similarly, in *The Purpose is Ecstasy*, he opines that we will be slaves to habit and monotony until the day we die if we don't put our dreams into action. The purpose of such an endeavour is to achieve ecstasy, and that makes all the difference between success and failure in life.

The universal appeal of Patten's poems is due to his deep understanding of the world and the problems peculiar to the modern era. His verse is a reaffirmation of faith in life. His robust optimism is evident in all his works, though in *In Perspective* he acknowledges that 'Happiness like sorrow, needs to be fed'. He says that since happiness is but an occasional interlude in the general drama of pain, one should be ready to seize it in whatever form it presents itself. For Patten even the 'luxury' of a momentary meeting with a friendly stray dog can induce happiness and rejuvenate his spirits.

The characters who populate Patten's poems are varied and individualised, just as real people are individual and unique. To cite just a few examples of the characters who become etched in the reader's memory forever; the morally shattered teenage girl who was raped at a suburban party; the juvenile delinquent Little Johnny who eliminated a number of his small enemies as a protest against the ill-treatment and cruelty meted out to him by his drunkard father; the psychologically fractured children afflicted with 'Aphasia' (deaf and dumb) who feel alienated from society; frustrated Jimmy who 'blows his brains out' unable to endure any longer the suffering and misery brought about by poverty and an inadequate social and political system; the girl who indulged in self-destruction, aided and abetted by the use of cocaine, because she was weighed down by 'Too many problems at dawn' (*Pop Poem*); the old man who insists on hearing only 'bona-fide celestial music' (*Ode on Celestial Music*); the romantic lover who becomes a 'burning genius', a composer, as a result of his unrequited love for a violinist (*Burning Genius*).

Thus like the many colours of a kaleidoscope, his characters are multifaceted and multi-dimensional, real enough to be characters in novels.

Patten's poems express the 'Theorem of the livableness of life' (Stevenson) and provide answers to the problem of 'how to live' in our complex, problem-ridden modern era. But there is also, here and there, an echo of the sentiment that in spite of our best efforts there must also be a note of resignation in our endeavours, as if in the final analysis our actions could at best be termed a 'faithful failure'.

The theme of love in Patten's poetry

Patten's works are notable for their romanticism, with subtle references to the deception and frustration caused by estrangement from love. His volumes *Vanishing Trick* (1976) and *Love Poems* (1981) celebrate the trials and tribulations of love; from dizzy sensual raptures to aesthetic love bordering on spirituality. In *One Another's Light* he ruminates on the influence that we have on one another, and on the power of love, the great force that binds one person to another. Lit briefly by one another's light, the light of love, of life, we simultaneously pursue a path of our own making and 'Think that way we go is right'.

In *In the Dying of Anything* Patten compares the attitude of lovers to each other in later years to their attitudes in their youth. As lovers grow older love-making becomes based on a mere touch or feeling and 'There is nothing simpler or more human than this', whereas in youth love 'bursts even against the rainbow' (suggestive of its physical intensity) 'softly soaking us'. The aged lovers lie in quiet repose catching 'what life and light we can'.

Patten says that when there is a rift between lovers they cannot even have peaceful sleep. The lover in the poem *You Have Gone to Sleep* feels acutely the difference between the sleep he had with his beloved in the past and his sleep in the present. 'Once sleep was simply sleep', but now sleep is preceded by doubts and distrust leading to 'awkward questions'. Hence sleep is now agonising and he only hopes that this night is the last on which there will be any kind of 'pretence', and that the morning will clear things up one way or the other.

The poem *And Nothing is Ever as Perfect as You Want it to Be* expresses Patten's sense of loss and loneliness caused by estrangement from love. He ruefully wishes that if only love could be brought home like a lost kitten, or, like strawberries, be gathered in a basket, life would have been happier and much easier. But, regrettably, love cannot be revived or retrieved once it comes to its natural death, since once broken down it can never be mended. The poet consoles himself with the thought that nothing in this world is ever as perfect as one wants it to be. Everyone has to endure his share of sufferings and bear the pain. That is the law of nature, of life itself.

Patten's poem *A Blade of Grass* expresses the idea that when we are young we tend to believe in the concepts of love, truth, and beauty. Even a blade of grass will be accepted in lieu of a poem when a lover offers it to his young beloved. But as we grow older we become cynical and even a 'blade of grass /becomes more difficult to accept', for the calculating mind will dismiss a blade of grass as merely 'grass', nothing more and nothing less.

You ask for a poem.
And so I write you a tragedy about
How a blade of grass
Becomes more and more difficult to offer,

And about how as you grow older
A blade of grass
Becomes more difficult to accept.

(*'A Blade of Grass'* - *Love Poems*. p. 23)

In the poem *Burning Genius* Patten suggests that even failure in love has the power to kindle the spark of creativity that lies dormant within. The poem tells the story of an ordinary civil servant who later becomes a musical genius. The poet traces the origin of the 'burning genius' generated in the lover, showing that it was due to his love for a violinist who spurned his amorous advances, causing him to seek solace by cultivating an interest in music which in turn became a passion. Hence she was his inspiration, and it was to this muse that 'he owed his burning genius'.

In *Vanishing Trick* Patten gives a sensitive portrayal of a lover who is hurt by the cold and indifferent attitude of his beloved who talks of separation 'as if going were the smallest matter'. The lover wants to be resilient too, and to salvage his pride wants to try his beloved's 'Vanishing trick and manage . . . to feel nothing'. That is the only way to forget the woman who has betrayed him.

The poem *On Time for Once* celebrates true love that has withstood the test of time. The lovers have cruised along safely and withstood 'so many nights bloated with pain'. They are unsure of their destination, or the choices they should make, but they are certain that wherever they might go, and whatever they might do, they will be together. In *Nor the Sun its Selling Power* he opines that just as the rain or a tree or the Sun does not put a price on what it gives, one should not fall in love with the expectation that one's partner will behave as one pleases. Love must be given for love's sake, and not for selfish reasons. One cannot 'sell' one's love to another; love should be given away like a gift. Lovers should accept each other as they are, including their faults and foibles.

In *An Obsession* Patten describes his obsessive love for a woman, which became an overwhelming passion, an addiction which could be 'cured only by withdrawal':

So many partings in the mind, the heart
has not the courage to follow through.

'Grinning Jack' - the theme of death in Patten's poetry

Many of Patten's poems deal with the themes of ageing and mortality. In *Staring at the Crowd* he says, 'I saw the skeleton in everyone'. He reflects that 'Grinning Jack' (the skeleton, symbolising death) lurks inside everyone, waiting for its moment to conquer the flesh and shed its outer covering. He points out, in a mildly ironical way, that we go through life preoccupied with our mundane existences, and our plans for the future, oblivious of the fact of ever-present invisible death, Grinning Jack, threatening to put an abrupt end to everything. But perhaps it is this characteristic of life that enables us to take an interest in the trivial aspects of daily life; otherwise we would experience the grimness of a graveyard in everything we did.

The Last Gift, an elegy on the untimely death of Patten's friend Heinz Henghes, expresses the poet's grievance that 'the last gift' - God's gift of a long life to some, while denying it to others - is beyond human comprehension. Although perhaps there is some consolation in that idea that, according to Patten, the soul that rises from a human body could be reborn in the form of a fish or a sparrow or even a plant.

I still strut without understanding
Between an entrance of skin and an exit of soil.
It is too much to expect he will come back
In the same form,
Molecule by sweet molecule reassembled.

When the grave pushes him back up
Into the blood or the tongue of a sparrow,
When he becomes the scent of foxglove,
Becomes fish or glow-worm,
When as a mole he nuzzles his way up
Eating worms that once budded inside him,
it's too much to expect that I'll still be around.

I'll not be here when he comes back
As a moth with no memory of flames.

('The Last Gift' - Grinning Jack p. 132-133)

In *Cinders* Patten laments the death of his mother, whose 'Life was never a fairy-tale', and in *Armada* recounts his nostalgic reminiscence of childhood days spent with her. Just as a child's paper boat was blown out of reach by a gust of wind, so too was his mother 'Blown out of reach by the smallest whisper of death'.

For as on a pond a child's paper boat
was blown out of reach
by the smallest gust of wind,
so too have you been blown out of reach
by the smallest whisper of death...

('The Armada' - *Armada*. p. 14-15)

The poem *In the Dark* suggests that the fear of death as one becomes older is so overpowering that one expects death any moment, blissfully ignorant of the fact that 'death might pass by' and ignore one for the present after all.

Just as Shakespeare described the seven stages of man's life, Patten has presented the grim reality of death in its true form in *Five Down*. The icy cold hands of death freeze all five senses; sans touch, sans smell, sans hearing, seeing, taste - sans everything. But Patten believes that death does not necessarily have to be the end, that a 'man lives so many different lengths of time' in that he continues to live in the thoughts of his near and dear ones even after his death. Hence even in death there is continuation of life - that is the paradox of human life.

A man lives for as long as we carry inside us,
for as long as we carry the harvest of his dreams,
for as long as we ourselves live,
holding memories in common, a man lives.

('So Many Different Lengths of Time' - *Armada*. p. 70-71)

Patten's attitude towards poetry

As a performance poet Patten is more interested in pleasing his audience than in pleasing the critics. Wary of critics, and suspicious of intellectual analysis, in *Literary Gathering* he tells of his unease among the dissectors (who 'dissect to murder'), and reveals his contempt for theoreticians of verse. The poet yearns to be anonymous, to:

breathe
free of obscure ambitions and the need
to explain away any song.

He aims to please only the true lovers of poetry, ordinary men. He writes 'for good people, people as huge as the world'. (*If you had to Hazard a Guess who would you say your Poetry is for?*)

In the poem *The Right Mask* Patten suggests that poetry should be subjective, and that the 'mask' a poet should use is to write subjectively, but altering the truth a little to make it less painful. A poet should try on his own face, 'The mask no one else could possibly use'. The poet portrayed in *The Right Mask* tried to be impersonal, 'To separate himself from it', but he failed in his attempt to depersonalise poetry because his verse, devoid of the personal note, was merely lyrical without conveying any sense or meaning. The poet tried to stifle his personal note a little, muffled its voice to be less painful and tried to modify his face to suit the mask so that even his friends did not recognise him. The poet acknowledges that it was the right mask, a mask that conveyed his real self, but modified, in the manner of 'Tell the truth but tell it slant' (Emily Dickinson). Patten here supports the romantic view that poetry should be personal and subjective, and should mirror the poet's personality, thereby contradicting T. S. Eliot's view that poetry should not be an expression of personality but an escape from personality.

In *Interruption at the Opera House* and *Prose Poem Towards a Definition of Itself* Patten reveals his support for a view of poetry as a natural and subversive act, a gift to the masses, 'The rightful owners of the song', and his rejection of the coterie of intellectuals who regard poetry as their own property. In *The Critics' Chorus or What the Poem Lacked* he attacks the approach of critics who are concerned only with the so-called 'flaws' in a poem; its departures from conventional themes and techniques. It is precisely these 'flaws' that save a poem from being consigned to oblivion. Perhaps the poet shows a 'hunger' for novelty of thought or expression that has nothing to do with the 'Correct idiom in which to express itself'. It is the 'road that is not taken' that enchants a poet, and the forbidden fruit 'far off' that is more alluring than a familiar fruit near at hand. Patten concludes that the path of originality and inventiveness is not an 'easy pathway that is already trod by countless many'.

Patten wrote about what people understood about themselves and wanted to have explained. In this sense he was really their spokesman. The most important thing about Patten's work is that it has not become dated, and nor will it become so in the years to come, because it feels the pulse of the present, which includes not only 'the pastness of the past but also its presence' (T. S. Eliot).

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Patten's Works

- 1) Little Johnny's Confession. London: Allen and Unwin. 1967.
- 2) Notes to the Hurrying Man: Poems, Winter '66 - Summer '68. London: Allen and Unwin. 1969.
- 3) The Irrelevant Song. London: Allen and Unwin. 1971.
- 4) The Unreliable Nightingale. London: Bertram Rota. 1973.
- 5) Vanishing Trick. London: Allen and Unwin. 1976.
- 6) Grave Gossip. London: Allen and Unwin. 1979.
- 7) Love Poems. London: Allen and Unwin. 1981.
- 8) Storm Damage. London: Unwin Hyman. 1988.
- 9) Grinning Jack: Selected Poems. London: Unwin Hyman. 1990.
- 10) Armada. London: Harper Collins. 1996.

The major works of The Liverpool poets

Some of the important works of Adrian Henri are 'Tonight at Noon', 'Autobiography', 'The Best of Henri', 'Selected poems 1960-70', 'From the Loveless Motel', 'Poems 1976-79', 'Wish You were Here' (1990), 'Not Far Away' (1994).

Some of the important poetic works of Roger McGough include 'Watchwoods' (1969), 'After the Merrymaking' (1971), 'Out of Sequence'(1972),'Sporting Relations'(1974), 'Unlucky for Some', (1981), 'Waving at Trains' (1982), 'Melting into the Foreground'(1986), 'Spotted Unicorn' (1988) and so on.

Brian Patten's chief poetic works for adults include 'Little Johnny's Confession'(1967), 'Notes to the Hurrying Man'(1969), 'The Irrelevant Song' (1971), 'The Unreliable Nightingale' (1973), 'Vanishing Trick'(1976),' Grave Gossip' (1979), 'Love poems' (1981), 'Storm Damage' (1988), 'Grinning Jack '(1990), and 'Armada'(1996).

Further Reading

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Dr. S.N. Radhika Lakshmi

Lecturer

Ibri College of Technology

Ibri,

Sultanate of Oman