

The Liverpool Scene: A comparative Study of the Liverpool Poets

- S.N.Radhika Lakshmi

The concept of Liverpool poetic scene as introduced by Lucie Smith in his anthology originated in the early sixties. The Liverpool poets appeared on the literary scene in 1967. The name was originally coined by Lucie Smith who titled the anthology of these poets as The Liverpool Scene. The chief figures who spearheaded the Liverpool poetic scene were Brian Patten (1946-), Adrian Henri (1932-2000) and Roger McGough (1937-). The Liverpool poets, unlike their predecessors, simplified the art of poetic writing as they catered to the masses, and the common man. They believe in propagating poetry as a "public performed art". Though these poets have published volumes together and individually, their poetry also reaches the masses through oral poetic performances. It should be noted that of the three Liverpool poets, Henri and McGough went truly pop and formed and led the "underground pop groups" later. But it was Patten who steered clear of pop music as he himself has mentioned that "the media descended on Liverpool trying to get us to do records and become part of the pop thing...I wanted nothing to do with publicity... I just wanted to write poetry" (qtd.in Cookson 11-12). Brian Patten is one of the popular poets in contemporary British poetry. Patten being one of the chief poets of the Liverpool school along with Adrian Henri and Roger McGough can be spoken in the same breath with great names such as Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill, and Charles Tomlinson.

The Liverpool poets also contributed to the cultural explosion in the Liverpool city in the 60's. Liverpool city had "spawned and been spawned by The Beatles" (Booth 133) in the sixties. The difference between the Liverpool poets and other pop poets or rock poets of the mid sixties is that the rock poets wrote purely for music, and were influenced by it to a far greater extent than the Liverpool poets. The Liverpool poets' works were literary and poetic in their approach. They were concerned with the state of the art, as "the Liverpool poets were still concerned with books and the state of art rather than the actual aim of hitting the hit parade" (Booth 113). Unlike some of the rock poets like Pete Brown, Phil Stim and others who wrote directly for music, the poetry of Henri, McGough and Patten shows traditional literary qualities though they "lived and wrote on the periphery of the poetry world, where it met the rock music world"(Booth 133). The Liverpool poets are distinguished from the other underground poets by their popular success. Lindop Grevel admits that the Liverpool poets are so widely known that "their names will always have significance for literary history"(93).

George Melly in his book *Revolt into Style* proclaims that among the poets of Liverpool school, it is Brian Patten who reveals traditional literary qualities, though he was associated with the other Liverpool poets like McGough, Henri and Pete Brown who were influenced by, and were subsequently to influence rock music, and were even called "the pop poets". After all, the Beatles originated only from Liverpool in the early 60s and hence it is no wonder that most of the Liverpool poets were directly or indirectly associated with the growth of popular music at that time.

Lucie Smith in his anthology of the Liverpool poets *The Liverpool Scene* gives a graphic account of the impact the Liverpool city had on these upcoming poets of the sixties. According to Allen Ginsberg, Liverpool is "the centre of the consciousness of the human universe" (qtd. in Smith 25). Pete Brown gives a lively account of the Liverpool literary scene when he recalls how the budding poets of the Liverpool scene gathered at Streate's coffee bar, and gave poetry performances. He says that the coffee bar was "the centre of activity and meetings" (qtd. in Lucie Smith 6). Like the coffee houses in Queen Anne's period, Streate's coffee bar in Liverpool became the beehive of literary activity.

In the early sixties, Henri, Patten and McGough were gaining reputation as performance poets. Brian Patten a "cub reporter" on the *Bootle Times* gained recognition through his oral performance in clubs and coffee houses and some of the poems were published in the poetry magazine *Underdog* which was started in 1964. Poet Michael Horovitz in his anthology of underground poetry *Children of Albion* acknowledges the vital role played by Patten in the growth and development of the Liverpool poetic scene even in the early sixties thus: "Brian Patten is the man most responsible for building the actual Liverpool scene with his plangent erotic saxophonetrance voice, & a scrutable sincerity- evoked also in his littlest, purest of little mags-*Underdog*" (qtd.in Cookson 10).

The influence of the Liverpool city on poets Henri, McGough and Patten is considerable. According to Lucie Smith, the poets from Liverpool seems to have a "curious love-hate relationship" with the city (7). The anthology *The Liverpool Scene* comprising of poems by Patten, Henri and McGough not only gives a picturesque account of the city with its description of the roads, graffiti, pop culture, the influence and the impact of Beatles and the flower power, but also brings to light the native speech with its local flavour and "the attitudes to life which they express" (Smith 7). Liverpool is predominantly a working- class city. The rich tended to live in the Green Belt or the other side of the Mersey side. Liverpool is not only famous for its poetic scene or the pop scenario but also for its foot ball team. The people of Liverpool are gifted with natural sarcasm, and this characteristic sarcasm is truly reflected in the poetry of Patten and other Liverpool poets.

The success of Beatles at international level had a great effect on the provincial culture as a whole. Pop music, pop culture and pop art flourished in the city, and gained recognition all over the world in mid sixties. In the literary scene, Liverpool is more uninhibitedly colourful, more deliberately "public" than any other place in the British Isles. McGough at that time belonged to The Scaffold, a satirical group with a rising reputation. Mike Evans, a member of the Beat group- The Squares and Brian Patten gave poetic performances and thus revived the cult of poetry as a public performed art. It was Lucie Smith through his publication of *The Liverpool Scene* who introduced Patten, McGough and Henri to the reading public. The Liverpool poets were greatly influenced by the American poet Allen Ginsberg. Generally in the poetry of Liverpool poets one does not find the attitude of "complete disgust with society and the established order of things" as it is evident in the works of the provincial poets (Smith 8). Lucie Smith says that Liverpool poets feel a "real sympathy for their environment" and that "they are more interested in life than in literature" (12).

In the poetry of the Liverpool poets, one finds a diversified admixture of intellectual subjects such as Jarry's *Pere Ubu*, and fantasy poems dealing with folk heroes such as Patten's *Batman*, *Superman* poems, which are half-frivolous and half-serious in tone. There is a lack of cultural hierarchies in Liverpool, for the audience or the readers of poetry accept both Alfred Tennyson and Jarry with equal enthusiasm. As Patten says in *Where are You Now Superman?* (LJC 20-21) attempting to revive the hero worshipping of the superheroes of childhood days thus,

We killed them all simply because we grew up;
We made them possible with our uneducated minds
And with our pocket money
And the sixpences we received
For pretending to be Good. (20-24)

These childhood heroes are forgotten as one enters the adult world leaving behind the world of fantasy. These fantasy poems according to Lucie Smith, are "a celebration of unease, of ambiguous feelings- not so much towards the old world of the comic strips as towards the new celebrators and promoters of comic-strip values down there in the south of England" (9).

The Liverpool poets not only had a real sympathy for the environment but also showed even a greater loyalty towards it. Though life is tougher and not all that prosperous, as it is in other cities like London, Liverpool poets feel proud of their native land, for in Liverpool one feels closer to the essential English values and ethics. Hence the natives have an innate sense of superiority derived simply from the fact

that they belong to this great "awe-inspiring city". The people of Liverpool are open-minded and receptive to the onslaught of a variety of cultural invasions, since in Liverpool one does not see the prudery of taste, as it is prevalent in the provinces. Even Beat music is not regarded merely as an entertainment or as a background noise in Liverpool as it is in the other provinces. Lucie Smith observes that in metropolis, one tends to discriminate between "high art and low"(10). The Liverpool audience is receptive to both poetry and pop music without discriminating against any form and both are accepted on an equal footing.

The Liverpool literary scene was also associated with the prevalent pop culture at the beginning. Even in the early sixties, the Liverpool poets like Henri and McGough were fascinated by pop music, and were determined to apply rigorous standards to the pop material to raise its level. Patten believes in the "poetic entertainment but poetic entertainment is not poetry, it's not sort of big enough" (qtd. in Smith 10-11). The Liverpool poets, in the beginning, primarily wrote for the young audience in simple language. Their appeal was partly due to their nativity. These poets were lionised by the young Liverpool audiences, for "they have not cut themselves off from their environment, have not sold out to middle-class culture (Smith 8). Their verse was "strongly oral". They primarily wrote for the young audiences but it appealed to people of all age groups from the young to the old.

As in the metropolis, the Liverpool audience does not evaluate the poems or a work of art on the basis of its academic and moral values. The verbal analysis of the American neo-critics from Yvor Winters to William Empson has been scorned at by the Liverpool poets. Even Patten has attacked the approach of the new critics in his poems *Literary Gathering*, *The Wrong House*, *Trapped 1* and *2*. "Truth to feeling is valued much higher than truth to language" by the Liverpool poets, says Lucie Smith (11). In this respect, one can trace the romantic poets' influence on the Liverpool poets who attach more importance to emotions than to the structural or technical aspect of the poems as it is evident in the case of Patten. In the Liverpool literary scene, one finds a simultaneous cultural explosion of poetry, art, music and painting. For instance, Henri, one of the chief Liverpool poets, was a painter and teacher of art. The world of poetry, art and pop music seemed to be inter linked in a kind of symbiotic association, as each benefited from the other. Thus artists, musicians and writers exist as a single group exchanging views with one another, and thereby widening the scope of their subject. It is pointed out that "If one wants to find a modern equivalent of Murger's *Vie de Boheme*, one has to look for it in Liverpool" (Smith 12). Even in Cubism, Surrealism, and Dadaism, one finds the impact of various arts. But only in the English literary world there is segregation from the other arts. But this deficiency is not to be found in

the Liverpool literary scene, for there is to be found a fusion of arts such as painting, music and poetry in it.

The Liverpool poets, like the French symbolists, believe that the effect a poem produces is more important than the poem itself. A poem is not merely an artifact but also an "agent" (that conveys the poet's message or feelings) rather than an "object" in itself. Though in their poems are present "sentimentality, coarseness of texture, carelessness with details" (Smith 12), they do not prove to be a barrier to enjoyment. These poets always give the impression of being "real people at grips with real and pressing situations" (Smith 12). The impact of the Liverpool poetic scene is so great that it is bound to shape the future developments both in literature and in the English society as a whole opines Lucie Smith.

The performance poetry became popular due to the combined efforts of Patten, Henri and McGough. The publication of the anthology Penguin Modern poets NO.10- The Mersey Sound in 1967 established their reputation as the Liverpool poets in the literary circle. All the three poets-Henri, McGough and Patten have developed separately since then, though their literary outlook is characterized by their common belief in poetry to be a literary form worthy of public performance. It should be noted that their poems were initially written to be read aloud in public. The impact of the Liverpool city on these poets is quite considerable. Patten himself has acknowledged the lasting influence that the city has on him:

Nobody born in the city- and I mean the city, not its outskirts, bleak and new and soulless-can ever really leave. The city is within them.... Its images and memories are so powerful they will remain with me forever; Liverpool I carry within me, from the first breath to the last. (qtd. in Cookson 12)

Adrian Henri's poem Liverpool 8 (LS 23) gives a graphic account of the city:

Liverpool 8... A district of beautiful, fading decaying Georgian terrace houses... Doric columns supporting peeling entablatures, dirty widows out of Vitruvius concealing families of happy Jamaicans, sullen out - of- work Irishmen, poets, queers, thieves, painters, university students, lovers... (1-5)

Patten's verse appeals to the mass audience due to its artistic integrity and his themes were drawn out of his own experience of life. "Brian Patten used the best words for a mass audience" (Booth 135). He did not sacrifice his art for the sake of musical effect or cheap popularity and his verse was always poetic and lyrical. "He did not prostitute his art though

and he did not patronise his listeners-cum-readers, nor did he lose his artistic integrity" (Booth 135). Patten's poetry is not static but is "always in motion" as the poet has adapted his subject to suit the fashions and trends of the changing times. As critic Booth says,

of the Liverpool poets, it was Brian Patten who became the leader and it is he who has maintained his artistic hold and development, leading his ideas and muse on from earlier work to later progressions. If the intention of art is always to be under change and flux then Patten's poetry is just that, for it is not a fixed point but always in motion. (136)

It should be noted that one of the main reasons for the popular success of the Liverpool poets is due to their understanding of the relationship between poet and audience. During the poetry performances, they constantly observe their audiences for the smallest sign of discontent or boredom. There were temperamental differences among the three Liverpool poets, which characterized their reading performances, as observed by critic Grevel Lindop. Henri's reading is "meticulously controlled: the moods of poems are carefully varied" (95). This seems to be in contrast to McGough, who keeps "an entirely straight face through even the most comic ones" (95). Patten on the other hand seems both more spontaneous and less relaxed. Lindop observes that "he {Patten} appears moody, even inarticulate between poems, and the audience is excited, probably, not only by the enormous passion with which he reads (or rather intones or chants) his poems but also by the suspicion that at any moment he may be going to pick a quarrel with someone" (95).

The poets' live performances reveal their temperaments and give an insight into the subjective nature of poetry. McGough and Henri encouraged the audience to see poetry as an entertainment. Both these poets read their verse to the accompaniment of music. These two poets were involved in the pop scenario. McGough was a member of The Scaffold (a satirical group), and he often read poems in intervals between performing sketches and musical comedies for the Scaffold. Henri led a poetry/ rock group called Liverpool Scene from 1967-70. Henri and McGough also combined poetry with music in their poetic performances, unlike Patten who wrote or read poetry for its own sake without sacrificing the "artistic integrity". Patten has also produced several successful albums of his own poetic recitations.

The poetry of the Liverpool poets is plain speaking, blunt, without any pretension of intellectual air or complexity. But it is not without "deeper meanings or emotions or intentions" (Booth 135). They took poetry out of the bounds of lecture hall and classrooms. Yet they were listened to by thousands of men, educated and uneducated alike. Patten and other Liverpool poets seemed to have been influenced by Adrian Mitchell who had mastered the art of speaking to an audience in its own

terminology and on its own terms. Mitchell has remarked in his preface to his work *For Beauty Douglas: Collected Poems 1953-79* "None of the work in this book is to be used in connection with any examination whatsoever" (qtd. in Booth 135). Adrian Mitchell was determined to write poetry for its own sake, and preserve its purity by keeping it away from the adulterations of education. Booth says that it is unfortunate indeed to keep such poetry away from the academic circle, for "this is the kind of poetry school pupils should be studying alongside others, in order to see what poetry really is" (135).

The poetry of the Liverpool poets differs from other contemporary English verse, due to its "oral tradition". As Lucie Smith says "it has made its impact by being spoken and listened to, rather than read" (qtd. in Cookson 8). Henri and McGough who encouraged audience to see poetry as an entertainment catered to the working class audience by writing verse that was humorous, witty, colloquial and rooted in urban life. Henri recalls, "What was interesting about those early years was that the Liverpool audience accepted us as a kind of alternative entertainment, not culture...it was just a night out for them"(qtd. in Cookson 9).

McGough is of the view that poetry and entertainment go hand in hand. One cannot separate one from the other. He refers to his own performance as being part of modern entertainment. He admits that they have got "no literary or dramatic heritage" (qtd. in Smith 39). Their verse was meant to entertain the audience with simple, uncomplicated language. It was meant to entertain and provide them with delight. As McGough points out, the audiences did not think of their verse as that which carried a message or being didactic:

At the readings we did every Monday night at Samson and Barlow's the kids didn't look on it as Poetry with a capital 'P', they looked on it as modern entertainment, part of the pop movement. They may go away crying, or they may go away very sad, but it was a certain experience to them, all part of experience. (qtd. in Smith 127)

The Liverpool poets have thus succeeded in making poetry accessible to people. Patten admits that the aim of the Liverpool group of poets was to reach out to the common man, to the general public. "I think we've influenced each other mainly in the need to make poetry continually accessible to people" (qtd. in Cookson 21).

The success of the Liverpool poets has paved way for the literary tradition of poetry to be considered as being written and performed for audiences. The Liverpool poets have broken down all the social barriers, and have wedged the gap between the middle and working class by making their poetry accessible to all kinds of people, both the educated and the uneducated alike.

Cookson says that

Just as the Liverpool poets helped to break down the London/ provinces divide and the middle-/ working-class divide, so in the 1980s poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah have attacked the black / white divide and have played their own part in the birth of 'rap' poetry. (21)

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

Patten's chief poetic works for adults are- Little Johnny's Confession (1967), Notes to the Hurrying Man: Poems Winter'66-Summer'68 (1969), The Irrelevant Song and Other Poems(1971), The Unreliable Nightingale (1973), Vanishing Trick (1976), Grave Gossip (1979), Love Poems (1981), Storm Damage (1988), Grinning Jack (1990), and Armada (1996). His work is translated into many languages. Patten won Eric Gregory prize (Ted Hughes was one of the judges) and also received Pernod Creative Arts Award in 1967 for his poetic achievement at the young age of 21. He also writes for children. His novel Mr Moon's Last Case (1975), won a special award for the Mystery Writers of America Guild, and his book of verse for younger readers, Gargling with Jelly (1993), has proved to be one of the best-selling collections of the decade.

Patten's first volume of poetry Little Johnny's Confession was considered to be a masterpiece when it was published in 1967. According to Booth, the title poem has a "blend of dream, violence and pathos in it" (136). The poet in little Johnny series of poems presents conflicting images of innocence and violence, pathos and tenderness. Booth says that this "amalgam of innocence, bizarre situation, childhood daydreaming, pathos and tenderness were characteristic of Patten's work"(136). This is what the young audiences wanted at a time when the world was violent, morally confused and was turning towards Hippie peace era. Booth says that Patten's verse made a tremendous impact on the youth of the 60s, and Patten was to the period 1967-74 what Ginsberg and the Beats were to the previous generation- "a poet who saw and exorcised inner feelings by saying it "how it was" (136).

Patten's poems such as Little Johnny's Final Letter and Schoolboy reflect the self-reliance and optimism of the young people in the years of increasing wealth and freedom. Patten's poetry is the kind that broke down all barriers by speaking in the language of the common man, while at the same time retaining its artistic skill and maintaining the poetic

tradition. Patten "spoke with a common voice but with considerable artistic skill and control" (Booth 137).

Bulk of Patten's poetry dealt with the themes of lost innocence and feeling of disillusionment experienced by the youth. Poems such as *Somewhere between Heaven and Woolworth's: A Song*, written in simple language with relevant metaphors- "A girl dressed in denim / With boys dressed in lies" (15-16) dealt with the theme of loss of innocence and the feeling of emptiness experienced by the young people in the 60s. Patten's poetry explored the sub-culture of the teenage world, which later became the dominant culture in course of time. Patten while writing poetry was always conscious that he was writing for an audience "that would also hear him" (Booth 137).

Patten's second volume *Notes to the Hurrying Man* was even more popular than his first book. The poems were "punchy, direct and suggestive of peace" (Booth 137). The poet's inventiveness and uniqueness of imagination are evident in such poems as *A Projectionist's Nightmare*, *Burning Genius* and *Pop Poem*. Booth says that Patten was a "phenomenon and he was original and unique, for it is true that no one could write as he did (137). As Patten grew older, he began to write on more serious subjects. His poems were now aimed at an adult audience who could understand his feelings as they did when they were younger. Patten was thus "taking his audience into age with him" (Booth 137).

Patten's poetry is a reflective glass that mirrors his own optimism, his immense faith in the human nature, and his perception of man's feeling of resignation to mystifying fate as well as to the twists and turns of the inscrutable life. He wrote "what people understood about themselves and wanted to have explained" (Booth 137). Booth points out that "Patten's verse was a reaffirmation of faith in life, its coils and turns, its fates and its abundance of goodness, possibly tinged here and there with the beauty of melancholy" (137). Patten wrote what the audience wanted at that time, and he could sense the mood of the audience with a prophet like vision. He caught the mood of the audiences of his time either "deliberately or by chance", and depicted their feelings and emotions in verse. Booth concludes that the most important thing about Patten's work is that it is not "dated in the least" nor will it be in the years to come as "the innocence of the 'flower power' years has not been lost in the subsequent years of social violence" (138). In fact Patten has set up a trend for the younger poets of the forth-coming generation to adopt and follow.

It should be noted that in the poetry of McGough and Henri, the serious tone of Patten's poetry is not to be found, though in their poetry there is flippancy of tone and lighthearted appeal that made up for a lack of depth in their verse. McGough and Henri are very much close to each

other in their poetic style and can be seen as "twins in artistic terms" (Booth 138) as they write in similar moulds on similar subject matter.

Patten's poetry achieves its effect through feelings, and this is what distinguishes him from the other two Liverpool poets. According to Cookson, Patten's poetry complements that of Henri and McGough, yet 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.

Booth says that the poetry of Henri and McGough is characterized by wordplay, inventiveness, interspersed with witty anagrams and lighthearted bantering: "Their poetry is typified by copious wordplayings, a somewhat stylized sense of wit and a certain sadness at times which manifests itself in the form of lost youth, sorry loves and the downs of life in cities" (138).

Henri, Patten and McGough are the pioneers in introducing the trend of poetry as a public performed art. Henri himself admits that he was initially trained as a painter and that he still painted and exhibited his works. "I think of myself as a maker, and presenter, of images of various media. Pop poets is, I think, the most common label" (qtd. in C.poets 411). Like Patten, Henri is primarily an autobiographical poet. Henri says "my poems are extensions of my own life, some fact, some fantasy. For this reason I write perhaps more love poems than anything else". Henri, like the other two Liverpool poets sought to revive the old ballad tradition and older verse form (traditional rhyme) in his poetry. Henri, Patten and McGough believed that poetry is not merely the sole property of the elite minority or a coterie of intellectuals. The Liverpool poets sought to reach out to the wider cross section of the society, which also included within its compass even "non-literary audience". Henri says that "In an increasingly fragmented and divisive society I still see my main problem as trying to reach as wide an audience as possible while still writing what I feel to be valid modern poetry" (qtd. in C.Poets 412). He sees poetry and art as forms of communication. He believes that as "communication-mechanism", poetry is even more effective than painting (qtd. in Smith 11).

The similarity that we find in the poetry of the three Liverpool poets as evident in *The Mersey Sound* (1974) is their preoccupation with urban themes and the realities of urban life written in simple and direct language. But there are striking similarities between the early works of Henri and McGough. Both the poets are conscious humorists who indulge in word play for comic effect- for instance Henri's poem *Song for a Beautiful Girl Petrol-Pump Attendant on the Motorway* produces its comic effect through its use of contrarities. "I wanted your soft verges / But you gave me that hard shoulder" (1-2).

The Liverpool poets' success is directly related to the response of the audience to their poetry. Henri says that they write poetry with the view of communicating directly with the audience. Henri is of the view that poetry is meant to be read aloud. "If you can't say it, don't write it" (qtd. in Lindop 94). Henri explains that in the case of poetry written for public performance, the poet chooses to include or exclude a line, or alter the form of a poem based on the criterion of "what seems to go down well". Therefore the audience plays an important role in the organization of their poetry. Some of the rhetorical devices adopted by the Liverpool poets (and many of the underground poets) are the use of cliché, "Ubi Sunt" lyric and the use of metaphor for its own sake (metamorphic poem). They use clichés such as "damsel in distress" (Henri's Batpoem). Henri expresses the need for the revaluation of the cliché when he says that by revitalizing a cliché, one can give new meaning to an archaic word. Henri says that "The cliché is a living piece of language that has gone dead through overwork. At any time it can be energised or revitalized. Often by changing its context, putting it in an alien context, contradicting its apparent meaning" (qtd. in Lindop 95). The revaluation of cliché or revitalizing of an archaic word is employed in Henri's poem Liverpool 3 wherein the poet uses spoonerism: "Liverpool I love your horny handed tons of soil"(1). Again in the Morning Poem, he uses spoonerism: " 'I've just about reached / breaking point / he snapped' " (1-3). Patten and McGough also have employed this technique in their poems. McGough puns with the word "ring" in the lines: "Your finger sadly / Has a familiar ring about it" (qtd. in Lindop 96). Patten's Party Piece has the lines: "later he caught a bus and she a train / And all there was between them then / was rain" (16-18).

This revaluation or revitalizing of a cliché, and giving the word a new meaning by using it in a different context, is a common practice of the Liverpool and "underground" poets. The use of revived cliché as a rhetorical device is traced to the multiple influence of Dadaism, Surrealism, pop art as well as to that of Mallarmé and Eliot's concept of the poet as purifier of "the dialect of the tribe" (qtd. in Lindop 96). Their use of rhetorical devices such as cliché, ubi sunt lyrics, and the use of metaphor for its own sake, have made their poetry different from that of the other modernist and post modernist poetry.

The Liverpool poets employ the poetic technique of ubi sunt lyric or the construction of the entire poem around a single rhetorical device as exemplified by a series of poems by Patten such as Bat Man and Maud.

In the poem Maud, 1965 (LJC 46), Patten uses similar rhetorical device as when he asks,

Maud, where are you Maud?

With your long dresses and peachcream complexion:

In what cage did you hang that black bat night?
 What took place in the garden? Maud, it's over,
 You can tell us now. (1-5)

Lindop points out that such poems are a revival of the ancient or primitive genre—the use of Ubi Sunt lyric. This device can be traced to one of the earliest poems *The Wanderer* written in the 17th century: "Where is that horse now? Where are those men? / Where is the hoard-sharer? / Where is the house of the feast? / Where is the Hall's uproar?" (qtd .in Lindop 97). The difference between the ubisunt lyric of Patten and that of *The Wanderer* lies in the use of diction. It is the use of portentous style for the treatment of comically insignificant or trivial subject that adds to the charm of their poetry. Patten's *Maud* achieves its effect by its implication of Tennyson's *Maud*. By placing *Maud* in the modern setting Patten poignantly projects the difference between the Victorian era and the modern society while at the same time pointing out the fact that the basic human sentiments are still intact in the modern world when he projects *Maud* as a symbol of lost innocence.

Another important trait of the Liverpool poets is their use of metaphors for their own sake. Lindop calls this kind of poem as "the poem of metamorphosis" (98) which in modern poetry became the simplest and most accessible form of surrealism. The poets use metaphors to create word pictures as in the case of Patten's *Little Johnny's Change of Personality* (LJC 13):

Please Mr Teacher, Sir,
 Turn round from your blackboard,
 The whole class has its hands up,
 We're in rather a hurry.
 The desks are retuning to forests,
 The inkwells overflowing,
 The boys in the backrow have drowned. (8-14)

In this instance, the poet uses the metaphors to create word pictures in order to show the rebellious nature of Johnny and his classmates who belong to "Generation X", a generation characterized by psychic disorders and rebellious behaviour. Thus by means of using the metaphor for its own sake, Patten achieves the totality of effect, to show the transformation in Johnny's personality from being a normal boy into a rebellious schoolboy with a bizarre behaviour.

In McGough's *Mother the Wardrobe is Full of Infantrymen* (LS 55) similar approach is evident:

Mother, the wardrobe is full of infantrymen

i did, i asked them
 but they snarled saying it was a man's life
 Mother, there is a centurian tank in the parlour
 i did, i asked the officer
 but he laughed saying queen's regulations,
 piano was out of tune anyway. (1-7)

Another common trait is the poets' mockery of the superheroes like Batman and Superman. Henri's Batpoem (LS 47) is a non-heroic anthem, wherein he projects Batman as a helper of the speaker who is nothing but a seducer of pretty girls, and damsels in distress.

Take me back to Gotham city
 Batman
 Take me where the girls are pretty
 Batman
 All those damsels in distress
 Half- undressed or even less
 The Batpill makes 'em all say Yes
 Batman. (1-5)

Here Henri presents the Batman not as a gallant hero who assists the speaker to rescue "the damsels in distress", but only as a lewd character who helps the speaker to seduce girls with the aid of bat pills.

McGough's poem GoodBat Nightman (LS 46) is a parody of A.A. Milne's well known bed time poem- Vespers as shown in these lines:

A glass of warm blood
 And then straight up the stairs,
 Batman and Robin
 are saying their prayers. (9-12)

Patten's Batman poem is written in a similar vein, though the poet, unlike the other two Mersey poets, laments over the loss of his childhood companions, to that "Ghastly Adversary"- Mr.Old Age.

The Liverpool poets' popularity in the late 60s and early 70s is partly derived from anthologies such as The Liverpool Scene, The Mersey Sound, and partly due to their revival of poetry as a performed art, through their frequent appearances on stage throughout the country and on television. These three poets wrote for the youth and much of their audience comprised of the younger generation. Anthony Thwait in 1985

remarked that these three poets are, "old troupers and they must rely on the surefire audience-holding techniques, not on the charm of self-identification of mere youth: after all, Henri was born in 1932, McGough in 1937, even Patten (born 1946) is not the young colt he once was" (101-102).

Thwait points out that Henri's sentimental love rhapsodies, and even Patten's dreamy urban fantasies have receded into the decade that brought them forth. But Thwait himself admits that Patten, Henri, and McGough draw in big turn outs when they read in public as it is with other poets like Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill.

Patten may not be the "young colt" that he once was, but his poetry still holds fascination for the youth and the matured audience alike, especially in the later stages of his poetical output. His themes combine the vigour of the youth with the worldly wisdom of the sage, which unique combination achieves the real purpose of Patten's poetry, that is to delight and instruct, by drawing inspiration from his own perception of the world based on his experiences.

Thwait refers to the performance poets in Twentieth Century English Poetry as mere crowd-pleasers, when he says "Henri and the rest are... clowns, entertainers" (qtd.in Cookson 22).

Cookson observes that much of the literary critics' discomfort was due to the popularity gained by the Liverpool poets mainly in the role of performance poets. Mike Horovitz dismissed Henri and McGough as being mere "pop stars" in his introduction to his anthology *The Children of Albion*, though he admitted that Patten's "plangent erotic saxophonetrance" voice was responsible for the evocation of the actual Liverpool scene (qtd. in Bowen 8).

Adrian Mitchell also remarks that part of the effect in Patten's poetry is derived from the poet's own reading of his verse- "The voice in which he reads his poems has all the colours of a melancholic alto sax, a swaying voice which induces his audience to sweat warm olive oil" (qtd. in Cookson 20).

Grevel Lindop expressed doubts about Patten's ability to sustain his audience over a period of time. The youth of the 60s have become adults now. Both the poet and the audience have matured and developed and in tune with it, Patten has succeeded in taking those audiences into age with him. As Martin Booth says Patten's own development and maturity could be traced in his own poetry: "The girl at the teenage party became the civil servant who resigned his job to love and follow a concert violinist, and the dragon has metamorphosed into adaptations of Aesop's fabulous animals or a scientist's regeneration of the dodo"(137).

Patten emerged as the most original and promising talent in the 60s. Ian Hamilton points out:

Brian Patten is a much-publicised member of the much-publicised Liverpool scene, and the only one of that rather dismal crew who has shown even a glimmer of poetic talent. Whether or not his slight gifts will be able to survive the plaudits of fans and the cynical attention of entrepreneurs remains to be seen. But Patten does show tremblings of promise; he is a sensitive, intelligent writer with an excellent ear. One can only hope that he is sensitive and intelligent enough not to be fooled by the current fuss. (qtd. in Cookson26-27)

Patten views that when a poet directly goes to the audience, he takes the risk of antagonising the critics or the literary establishment: "he [poet] takes the risk of being ostracised by the academics, partly out of envy, and partly because he takes the work out of their hands" (qtd. in Cookson 26).

Peter Porter criticized the poetry of the Liverpool poets as being "cabaret type of poetry" that caters to the taste of the working class people and uninformed provincials-

I've found that the only really popular style of poetry...is the pop poetry, the Liverpool cabaret type poetry- you could'nt really dignify it with the name 'cabaret', more the underground shelter sort of poetry. That goes down pretty well. There's a tremendous fondness for anything soft and squashy. (Lindop, 207)

Though Peter Porter does not approve of Patten's sentimental verse, he admits that Patten has got that "little touch of moonlight on the page" (Lindop 207). He prefers Henri's crude, jocund verse to the marshmallow, "little touch of the moonlight" kind of romantic verse of Patten.

Lindop with reference to Henri's view that audience plays an important role in the organization of poetry, points out that the poetry of the Liverpool poets evolves out of a joint and non-literary collaboration between the poets and audience. Lindop implies that these poets are popular only among the non-literary, unsophisticated provincials and that their poetry caters to the crude and cheap tastes of these young people. Lindop also points out that these performance poets draw only young audience: "It includes few people whom one would guess to be over 24, and a mere scattering of the obviously middle-aged" (95). He opines that close contact between the poet and audience should not make the audience's response to be the barometer of the quality of a work produced by the writer. It will only result in the poet bowing to the audiences by altering his subject matter to suit their taste. Not only the

subject matter, but also the poet's language, "vocabulary and his figures of speech will be affected for the worse" (106). But this may be true in the case of other Liverpool poets, but not so in the case of Patten. There is a clear difference that marks him out as a poetic genius. Patten's poetry has also been well received in print by the reading public.

It should be noted that Patten also happens to be a victim of some of the most vituperative attacks by critics. His *Little Johnny's Confession* has been reviewed by Christopher Ricks as a work of a disillusioned youth - "Who poured triple superphosphate fertiliser over Brian Patten's innocence? Too luxuriant and too luxuriated in, is his childhood wonder at the world" (qtd in Cookson 23). Stanley Reynolds, an American journalist, even dismissed the popularity of the Liverpool poets as being insignificant, as the poets are popular only among the uninformed and nonliterary audiences of the Liverpool city: "The fact that the Liverpool people believe that their bad poetry is different from other bad poetry...does not make it so. Seven hundred and forty five thousand, two hundred and thirty scousers after all can be wrong"(qtd. in Cookson 22).

Lindop acknowledges that Patten is the most promising talent among the Liverpool poets. "There seems, atleast to be more potential for development in Brian Patten's recent work {*The Irrelevant Song*} than that of the other Liverpool poets and underground poets" (106).

Patten is considered to be the most literary of the Liverpool poets. But then their reputation as literary artists suffered due to Henri's and McGough's involvement with the pop scenario. McGough and Henri were committed to the idea of establishing the trend of poetry as performance. McGough's performances or poetry readings were given as part of the act of Scaffold which combined a medley group of items such as sketches, music, poetry and most of all satire. Henri founded a poetry rock group called The Liverpool Scene. In fact it was Patten who steered clear of the pop scenario.

He says that,

I just didn't want to be involved in a music scene, I just wanted to write and that was it. Maybe I was seen as more of a poet than Adrian and Roger at that time because I wasn't involved with all that kind of world. I wasn't doing anything else but writing. I wasn't standing on the stage fronting a Rock and Roll group (like Henri) or singing Lily the Pink (McGough). (qtd. in Bowen 77)

The wide acceptance of the performance poets' work, by the audiences of the 60s came as a real threat to the literary establishment. Alan Sinfield echoes the prejudice of *Critical Quarterly* when he points out the magazine's bias towards the evolution of this new genre in the field of poetry- poetry as a public performed art: "The new "pop" verse often has

a slight lyric grace, some humour and a pleasing simplicity of diction. There is no doubt, however, that so far its poetry achievement is small, and its notoriety largely a result of public gimmicks" (166).

Patten's poetry seems to be different from the pop poetry in so far as he tried to tell simple truths. Patten's *Little Johnny's Confession* was appreciated by Allen Ginsberg, the American Beat poet who quoted on the cover of the book that Patten was "younger than the atom bomb". Lucie Smith appreciated Patten for his ability "to tell so much truth so simply" (qtd. in Bowen 77).

In this background, Booth points out the disintegration of the Liverpool group of poets as a school by 1976: "The Liverpool poets appeared in 1967 and although they are all still writing, they ceased to be a unit by 1976 when Brian Patten's collection *Vanishing Trick*, more or less ended that style of poetry that so typified the school from the Mersey"(114).

Patten's second book *Notes to the Hurrying Man* was even more successful than the first. According to Phil Bowen "Patten's reputation as a writer of metaphysical fables begins here" (88). Patten's books *The Irrelevant Song* and *Vanishing Trick* according to Cookson represent his most sustained achievement as a love poet. This theme of Patten's poetry at different levels of fantasy and reality is discussed in detail in this thesis, which seeks to provide a new outlook in interpretation and understanding of Brian Patten's poetry.

Critics like Donald Davie and David Holbrook raised a hue and cry over the inclusion of Patten's poem *Portrait of a Young Girl Raped at a Suburban Party* in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* by Philip Larkin. David Holbrook unfavourably compares Patten with Hardy, and thus airs his prejudice against Patten by comparing him with the Victorian poet whose poems were written for readers of a different era. Hardy's poem *On Departure Platform* appealed to the Victorian sentiments, just as Patten's *Portrait of a Young Girl Raped at a Suburban Party* is relevant to the modern age. Apart from the theme, the use of language is so divergent that they cannot be compared in terms of poetic achievement.

Patten's *Storm Damage* published in 1987 did not measure up to the expectations of the critics. Lachlan MacKinnon reviewed it as poetry that "flickers like the last surviving members of a species of butterfly, a sad memorial to its own failed promise" (qtd. in Cookson23).

Patten's *Armada* (1996) is his finest achievement as a poet till date. Ben Wright an American poet compares Patten to the romantic poets. Wright sees in Patten the tradition of what Allen Ginsberg called the "vatic" poets at the fountain-head of fable-making and prophecy: "At times he really hits it, that essence of the romantic poet, of seeing the

universe in the cry of a skylark-someone as great as Claribelle Alegria calling Angel Wings one of the greatest lyrics in any language!" (qtd. in Bowen 120). Armada proved to be what "Patten's readership had been waiting for" says Bowen (167). Matt Holland comments that,

Patten has lost none of his talent for using plain language, free of pondered and paraded poeticisms, yet full of language charged with meaning...His judicious use of the personal pronoun 'I' is masterful giving just the right amount of feeling to engage the reader/listener in a very intimate way while not indulging in a discharge of self-pity. (qtd. in Bowen 163)

Charles Causley points out the optimism and hope that characterize Patten's poetry. He says that Patten's poems are "beautifully calculated, informed-even in their darkest moments-with courage and hope. Patten, uncompromisingly, goes all out for the poem, not the audience and the rest follows (qtd. in 20th Century Children's writers 762).

Patten calls his own works a "poetic diary"-that is a record of his own varied experience, thoughts and feelings, his flights of fancy and imagination:

As for the poetry, in a sense my poems have been a poetic diary, but I suppose as my life's not unique it becomes a diary of many lives. I hope my latest poems are my best poems, but time will be the judge of that rather than me. It all comes out in the wash in the end. Time whittles it down to maybe just one poem that might survive (qtd. in Bowen 168-169).

As Bowen surmises whether Patten, Henri and McGough singly or collectively go down in the annals of history or amount to little more than an anecdotal footnote in the myriad lists of reputations that form a part of the 20th century literature, only time will be the judge. But no one can deny the fact that their poetry will survive. Patten and the other two Liverpool poets have become the mouthpiece or the spokesmen of the people of their times.

Works Cited

Bowen, Phil. *A Gallery to Play to: The Story of the Mersey Poets*. England:Stride Publications, 1999.

Booth, Martin. *British Poetry 1964-84: Driving through the Barricades*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Causley, Charles. "Brian Patten". *Twentieth Century Children's Writers* 3rd. Ed. Tracy Chevalier. London: St James Press, 1989. 762-63.

Cookson, Linda. Brian Patten. United Kingdom: Northcote House in Association with the British Council, 1997.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Newyork: Routledge, 1988.

Melly, George. *Revolt into Style: The Pop Arts in Britain*. London: Penguin, 1970.

Thwait, Anthony. *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-84*. London: Longman, 1985.

Radhika Lakshmi S. N.
Asst. Prof. of English
English Language Centre
MECIT, Al Rusayl
Sultanate of Oman