

**THREE VOICES, ONE MOVEMENT. A STUDY OF THE LIVERPOOL POETS'
CONTRIBUTION TO CONTEMPORARY VERSE**

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***Abstract:** This article explores the ideological and aesthetic views reflected in the works of the three prominent Liverpool poets — Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, and Brian Patten. As key representatives of the Liverpool poetry movement, these poets bridged the gap between popular culture and literary art, blending wit, emotion, and intellectual reflection in their poetry. The study analyzes the cognitive and emotional layers of their poetic expression, paying special attention to themes such as love, memory, urban life, social issues, and the human condition. By drawing from their selected works, the article reveals how each poet uniquely balances personal voice with broader societal commentary while maintaining a shared poetic identity rooted in post-war British culture. The discussion also highlights the accessibility and musicality of their verse, demonstrating how their stylistic and thematic innovations contributed to shaping contemporary English poetry.*

***Keywords:** Liverpool poets, contemporary English poetry, cognitive and emotional expression, popular culture, poetic aesthetics, ideology in poetry, post-war literature*

Introduction. The Liverpool Poets – Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, and Brian Patten – emerged as a distinctive literary trio in the 1960s, reshaping the landscape of British poetry through their innovative fusion of popular culture, social commentary, and emotional depth. Representing a new poetic voice that resonated with the post-war generation, these poets were part of the broader “Mersey Sound” movement, which embraced immediacy, accessibility, and the blending of high and low art forms. Their poetry often challenged traditional literary conventions, favoring clarity over complexity, directness over abstraction, and performance over page-bound introspection.

This article aims to analyze the ideological and aesthetic values embodied in the works of all three poets, highlighting how their diverse styles collectively contributed to a redefinition of poetic identity in contemporary English literature. Through examining selected poems, the

discussion will focus on themes such as love, urban experience, existential reflection, social engagement, and the interaction between intellect and emotion. Rather than privileging one voice over another, this study treats Henri, McGough, and Patten as equally influential figures in the shaping of modern poetic discourse.

Adrian Henri. In Adrian Henri's work, artistic expression and social analysis are interwoven, as he depicts urban life, the simple yet significant aspects of everyday existence, social injustice, and human emotions. The poet employs imagery and metaphors to highlight social and political issues through artistic expression, urging readers to think critically and reflect on the world around them.

Henri was not only a gifted poet and playwright, but also a skilled painter and teacher, a refined musician and performer. For him, painting and poetry were two wings of the same art – when colors failed to express his feelings, he turned to words; when words fell short, he conveyed his emotions through paint. Artistic expression in Henri's work is multifaceted and vibrant. "I want to paint," the poet declares. But the things he wants to paint cannot be captured with lines or colors. Can the arrival of a new year, or Roger McGough's appointment as Oxford Professor of Poetry, be adequately expressed with a paintbrush?

He wishes to depict things like real-life mermaids, large-scale portraits of every stone on Canning Street's pavement, the Beatles' newly written anthem, a poem written by Brian Patten using a fire extinguisher, the images of shelters where the homeless might find refuge, and a full-scale map of the world with his beloved at its center – and he transforms all of this into poetry. [1: 23]

I want to paint

...

Pictures worth

their weight in money

When the artist desires to depict things beyond the capabilities of oil or watercolor, the poet's pen comes to the rescue – poems worth more than their weight flow onto the page, resounding with musical accompaniment, reaching the depths of the human heart.

Brian Patten explains Henri's uniqueness as follows: "Whether it is sheep eating yellow roses, ghostly ferries manned by skeleton crews, or prostitutes standing in the snow like erotic snowmen, I've always delighted in Adrian's visual imagination. The poet in him wrote poems containing images that the painter in him wanted to paint, and the painter in him painted images that the poet wanted to write. But really it did not matter which part of his spirit received the

images first – Adrian would rush off with them to wherever it is Imagination cooks up its feasts, and, generous as ever, would return to share them with us all.” [3: 8]

Adrian Henri was an artist who combined several different, not always closely related, branches of art. As a poet who was also professionally engaged in music, he was the founder and lead vocalist of the Liverpool Scene a poetic rock band active between 1967 and 1970 and popular among the youth of Liverpool. When fans at his concerts would ask the usual question “Are you first a poet and then a painter, or the other way around?” Henri would respond, “First, second, and third – I sing for you.” But such a question is, in fact, irrelevant: poet Adrian Henri and painter Adrian Henri were one and the same person – he embodied both the sharp tongue of the poet and the observant eye of the painter. His contemporary poet, playwright, and composer Willy Russell says: “He was both.” [3: 148]

Henri began his creative career as a painter and later explored other artistic fields, yet he always acknowledged poetry as his central focus: *“I think of myself as a maker, and presenter, of images of various media. Pop poets is, I think, the most common label.”* [2: 411]

He speaks about himself in all of his poems. The theory that the poet and lyrical persona are not always the same does not apply to his work – in almost all cases, the poet and lyrical hero are one and the same: Adrian Henri himself. He defines himself primarily as an autobiographical poet: *“I am an autobiographical poet: my poems are a continuation of my life – some are factual, others imaginary. Perhaps that’s why I write love poems more than anything else.”* [2: 411]

In the realm of social analysis, Adrian Henri was a broad-minded and artistically liberated poet. Much of his poetry deals with pressing global issues – interpersonal relationships, the eternal conflict between good and evil, creation and destruction, and the responsibility of individuals toward humanity and society.

His poetry can be categorized into three main thematic groups: love, place imagery, and dedications. First and foremost, he was a passionate lover of art, nature, music, travel, friendship, and love. His love poems portray chance encounters, life’s miracles, moments of joyful union, deceptive feelings, and unwilling separations. His poems describing places feature cityscapes of Liverpool, Manchester, or an imagined Metropolis, as well as distant landscapes of Wales, New York, or South Africa. Wherever he went, he would return with a “collection of distorted images” of the place, which would eventually turn into poems or paintings. [2: Introduction]



Among his verses and illustrations, one can find many dedications to people he respected and cherished. These individuals stand out for being familiar and accessible – people from among the common folk – and thus resonate with ordinary readers, reflecting the essence of British social life in the mid-20th century.

Roger McGough. Pop art, which emerged in the 20th-century Western world under the humanistic idea that art should not be reserved only for elites and aristocrats but should also be understandable and serve the common people, laid the foundation for the rise of pop poetry in Western verse. This literary movement, in turn, gave rise to the “emergence” and development of the Liverpool Poets on the stage of English and world literature. Roger McGough, who is recognized as one of the Liverpool Poets alongside Adrian Henri and Brian Patten, also began his creative career as a member of a musical group. McGough was active in both branches of art, and his poetry stands out for its experimental form, artistic innovation, simple expression, and exploration of contemporary social issues. He brought the language of the people into poetry and created new forms of artistic expression.

His work is closely intertwined with significant social changes and political and cultural analyses, and he uses poetic experimentation to reflect these themes. The poet does not address society’s pains directly but presents them humorously. Humor is Roger McGough’s “calling card.” [7] Especially in his early years, when sharply criticizing societal flaws, he preferred to use humor so that the sharp and bitter tone of his poems would not come across as arrogant or conceited. As the poet himself says: *“If I’d written a serious poem I’d always end up making it funny, to prove to this imagined reader or listener, which would have been a fellow Liverpudlian, that I’m not better than you. It took a while to have the confidence to be serious”* [9]

His “ability to use poetic language originally [...] and introduce new ideas” [8] can be seen in almost every one of his poems. Roger McGough intuitively uses symbols in his poetry, avoiding fixed meanings. At the same time, he does not reject traditional symbols outright. Even though he dislikes clichés (overused words and phrases), he still uses them – placing “old” signs into new contexts and prompting the reader to see them from a different perspective. For example, the moon is one of the most frequently used images in his work, appearing in nearly a hundred poems. What is noteworthy is that the moon does not always carry the same meaning. For a happy child riding on his father's shoulders, the moon is close enough to touch despite being in the sky (“My Little Eye”); for lovers, it is a confidant smiling down at them (“An Apology”); in another poem, it represents the cold that freezes one’s hands (“A Lot of Water

Has Flown Under Your Bridge”); elsewhere, a beauty captivated by her own reflection in the moonlit water where lilies sway (“The Fish”); and in another, a sympathetic bottle-friend (“Star Juice”).

It is known that in poetry there is an art of arranging words in a unique form to emphasize particular meanings. Such poems in English are referred to as *poem pictures*, *visual poetry*, or *concrete poetry*. [5: 118-120] The features of visual poetry include the irregular arrangement of syllables and letters, punctuation, syntax, format, and layout – the word-formed images reinforce the meanings conveyed and enrich the reader’s artistic imagination. The images created with words come alive in the reader’s mind, forming imaginary pictures before their eyes.

Roger McGough has produced numerous visual poems. In poems like “Uphill Climb,” where letters appear to climb upward; “Downhill Racer,” where words scatter disorderly downward; “A Weak Poem,” where lines slump as if unable to stand upright; or “Beware the Allivator,” composed in the shape of stairs – he assigns both shape and meaning responsibility to words.

Roger McGough approaches the issues of change in society, personal and social freedom, politics, and the challenges of modern life with a unique perspective. The experimental and artistically innovative nature of his poetry – deviating from traditional poetic structure and attempting to create imagery – appears in the non-traditional content of his visual poems and in the way he uses humor to analyze the philosophical and social essence of everyday situations. His approach invites readers to think deeply and find new meaning in simple things.

Like his peers, McGough captured the hearts of the people with the fluency and clarity of his language. He consistently distanced himself from the “highbrow” style – the elite poetic style often inaccessible to the general public – and with his distinctive poetry, proved that the idea that “Roger McGough’s work is not worthy of serious literary attention” was unfounded.

By avoiding clichés that appear in nearly every poet’s work, and by using various wordplays (“The Care Less Cat”), invented words (“The First Day at School”), and phrases with multiple meanings simultaneously (“On and on...”), McGough established his own creative style. His poetry thus reveals the fluid and subjective nature of reality, emphasizing that there is no immutable, dogmatic meaning or absolute truth – only perspectives and interpretations (“Unlucky for Some”).

What made the poet widely recognized was precisely this unique use of wordplay, the spirit of humor, strong logic, vast imagination, and the fascinating depictions of the world of

children. In his poems, one can find words not listed in English dictionaries. He constantly rediscovered words from children's lexicons and skillfully used polysemous words from adult speech. Beneath his gently humorous expressions lie deep logical truths.

Through humor, Roger McGough sharply exposes various political and social problems. While he has written about love and criticism as an adult poet, his poems for children are diverse and constitute a significant part of his body of work. Whether humorous or serious in tone, his poetry challenges widely accepted, unchanging societal views – but without engaging in harsh debates. Instead, it calls for compromise, avoids anger and hatred, and strives for playful and life-affirming tones that always amaze the reader.

Brian Patten. In Brian Patten's creative work, cognitive and emotional elements are artistically expressed in a strong harmony: the unity of thought and feeling, the balance between intellect and emotion invites readers to deep contemplation.

"I can say for sure that behind the world of poetry there are many ways of expressing something. This means that poetry has its own unique way of expression. The best definition I can give is: poetry is the translation of the world behind words into words." [7]

A poet who wishes to translate the world behind words into words creates for both children and adults alike. His style, with its fluency and musicality, stands out from that of other writers. While Patten tells fairy tales for children, he sings love songs for adults. The theme of love occupies a significant place in his poetry. His 1981 collection *Love Poems* can confidently be called a compilation of the finest love poems in his oeuvre.

A researcher named Tribune defines Patten as a poet in this way: he is "a master of his genre, who approaches love and beauty in an entirely new way down to their most subtle points, and this approach is completely new not only for him but also for contemporary poetry."

Indeed, when reading Brian Patten's poetry, the reader feels a certain uniqueness, a difference from typical poetry – these are "poems not drenched in thoughts, but in feelings." [4] Almost all his poems are distinguished from his contemporaries' works by their vitality, ease of reading, and digestibility. The tone, charm, and uplifting spirit of his poetry give readers a true poetic experience. Patten's poems do not lead the reader to despair or cast a shadow over their mood. Reading his unusual lines, one senses the warmth and gentleness of spring; his simple and sincere poems feel close to the heart and reveal discoveries never encountered or even imagined before.

Patten's body of work, including poems for adults such as *Collected Love Poems*, *Little Johnny's Confession*, *Notes to the Hurrying Man*, *The Irrelevant Song*, *Vanishing Trick*, *Grave*

Gossip, Storm Damage, and Selected Poems, and children's collections like *The Elephant and the Flower, Jumping Mouse, Emma's Doll, Mr. Moon's Last Case, Gargling with Jelly, Jimmy Tag-Along, and Thawing Frozen Frogs*, can conditionally be divided into two major groups.

Poems like *Remembering Snow, Not Only, A Blade of Grass, When You Wake Tomorrow, In Tintagel Graveyard, and Gust Becos I Cud Not Spel, The Lion and the Echo, Schoolities, Mum Won't Let Me Keep a Rabbit, and Guess What Dad Does* explore themes such as sweet memories, love, trust, kindness, humorous childhood fantasies, magical tales, innocent mischiefs, and the dreams and secrets of tiny hearts.

Meanwhile, works like *And Sometimes It Happens, What I Need for the Present, Burning Genius, Mr. Ifonly, Note to the Hurrying Man, and Sometimes It Happens* prompt readers to reflect more seriously on human life, relationships, the essence of love, time, and various life situations.

To this group of thought-provoking poems, we may also include children's poems such as *Minister for Exams, Acid Snow Drops, The River's Story, Aphasia, and Rules*. It is worth noting that although these poems may seem written for children at first glance, they are in fact profound philosophical reflections addressed to adults through the voice of a child.

Brian Patten has also made a significant contribution to prose. His children's novel *Mr Moon's Last Case* was awarded a special prize by the Mystery Writers of America Guild. This modern fairy tale, written in the detective genre, is complemented by another fairy tale novel for children, *The Story Giant*. Unlike the first, which is based on a single plot, the second is a collection of many stories. The general idea of both works is to teach children, through literature, the essence of human nature, the importance of memories, the power of communication in relationships, and the need to preserve universal human values.

Brian Patten's work speaks deeply of emotional experiences, encompassing themes such as love, loss, loneliness, memories, values, and nostalgia. His emotionally rich style encourages the reader to listen to their heart, acknowledge their inner feelings, and reflect on their emotions. His philosophical insights urge readers to contemplate questions about self-awareness and the meaning of life. In Patten's poetry, cognitive and emotional elements complement each other. He does not merely express emotions—he invites analysis of them. His poems examine life's complexities and both personal and social relationships from cognitive and emotional perspectives, encouraging the reader not only to feel but to think. This combination enhances the impact of Patten's work and helps establish an emotional connection with the reader.

Conclusion. The poetry of Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, and Brian Patten reflects a unique confluence of ideology, aesthetic experimentation, and emotional expression. While each poet developed a distinct personal voice — Henri through his visual and avant-garde sensibilities, McGough with his satirical wit and playful tone, and Patten with his lyrical introspection — their collective output reveals a shared commitment to making poetry relevant and relatable to a broad audience. Together, they succeeded in democratizing verse, making it accessible without diminishing its depth or artistic value.

By examining their works through both cognitive and emotional lenses, this article has shown that the Liverpool Poets not only captured the spirit of their era but also helped to expand the possibilities of poetic expression in the late 20th century. Their legacy continues to inspire both readers and writers by demonstrating how poetry can be simultaneously personal, political, humorous, and profound. Their contributions deserve equal recognition as cornerstones of contemporary English poetry.

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