"Liverpool is Where the Heart is". The Image of the City in the Liverpool Poetry of the Sixties

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The so-called Merseysound – the poetic movement which developed in Liverpool in the Sixties - represents one of the many expressions of the wider Underground literary movement, from which it inherited most of its stylistic and thematic elements. However, it has a personal character which, on the other hand, contributes to defining its peculiarity: that is the frequent and insistent presence of the urban theme and of Liverpool’s landscape.

For the three representatives of the Merseysound, Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten, Liverpool is not only a geographic entity but also a very important cultural and emotional one which is reflected and narrated in their poetry. On a literary level, it is presented as an extremely rich semantic unity, including different and even opposite dimensions.

What clearly emerges from the Poets’ output is, in the first place, their indissoluble link with their city, the place where they were born and which they feel they belong to. In fact, the relationship established by the Liverpudlians with their home town, a provincial city, is quite different from that existing between the Londoners and the capital city: it is based on a profound sense of loyalty, pride and, above all, great affection, and the bond linking the Liverpudlians seems to be based on a sense of civic motherhood inspired by the city itself. For this reason, the image of Liverpool becomes synonymous with city, considered as outer urban
space, but also with home, considered as family and intimacy. Therefore, Liverpool enters the poetic imagery in a spontaneous way, as an inspiring muse, but also as a mother figure, becoming the subject but also the voice of that poetry, as well as of the Poets’ inner life.

Because of their great concern with their city, the Mersey Poets have been defined as “metropolitan poets”, to underline the importance of Baudelaire’s influence on their work. In his Tableaux parisiens, Baudelaire depicted 19th century suburban Paris by recapturing and recreating through his poetry an atmosphere animated by both the spiritual and the structural element of the city. Its most typical inhabitants are described by encapsulating short but intense moments of their lives, always observed against the background of the urban architecture which, in a way, seems to integrate their existence. Besides, each element of this landscape assumes a symbolic value which increases the thematic function of the urban representation. Similarly, the Mersey Poetry develops an urban imagery in which, through the evocation of Liverpool’s people, buildings and districts, the spiritual and structural elements of the city powerfully emerge. Nevertheless, there is no place here for Baudelaire’s spleen or flâneur attitude, since the typical Scouse spirit, strong and positive, runs through the entire poetry, showing how the Poets share this vital and optimistic attitude, characterised by a sparkling sense of humour, which owes much to the presence of the Irish element among the population of Liverpool¹, and which defines the perspective and the tone which dominate many of the poems. Scouse humour goes hand in hand with surrealism, which, as Roger McGough defines it, is another “very much Liverpool thing” (King). From a poetic point of view, the surrealistic perception of reality helps the Poets to catch and represent “the complexity of modern urban life” (Lindop 196-7) with its strange and incomprehensible aspects. But it can go even further, reaching higher levels of personal imagination. In this respect, the influence of Guillaume Apollinaire and Dylan Thomas, two great masters of imaginative poetry, based on the automatism of thought, is particularly evident. For example, in the Mersey Poetry, the Poets’ free unconscious association of images has its privileged subject in the city’s landscape. In McGough’s “I say I say I say”, for instance, each element of Liverpool’s landscape, from its buses to its monuments, undergoes an anthropomorphic process by which it assumes a human appearance and faculties:
I say I say I say
a funny thing happened on my way here today
the buildings had hiccoughs the roads ran away.
Buses grew hairs in the most private places
traffic lights chuckled and pulled funny faces.
Hot-bladdered lampposts chased little dogs
The moon took a hiding from stars wearing clogs.
Policemen threw helmets at innocent stones
as cheeky boys laughed and broke words with bones
Sir Walter Scott has started to snore.
The lions in Lime Street have started to roar.
A poet’s not safe out alone anymore.

But the surrealistic vision does not lessen the poet’s sense of reality
which reveals itself in the line “Policemen threw helmets at innocent stones/
as cheeky boys laughed and broke words with bones”,
where McGough draws the reader’s attention back to the frequent violent street
fights between the local police and the many teenage gangs that sprang up
in Liverpool in the Sixties².

Gradually, Liverpool becomes a place where reality and surrealism -
and even magic - meet. This dual dimension reveals itself also in the
representation of the structural element of the city, which unfolds particularly
through the evocation of Liverpool toponymy. The names of Liverpool
streets, famous buildings and places appear as parts of the concrete reality of
the city’s space. But the celebration of the architectonic and monumental
environment of the city is always impressively marked by an affectionate and
sometimes even romantic tone, which reveals how the Liverpudlians
conceive and lead their lives in close connection with their urban
surroundings, for which they feel great respect and admiration. In “Liverpool 8”,
Henri praises a decaying Liverpool district³, where the Anglican
cathedral, the most remarkable and historically important monument in the
city, reigns supreme. It is also important to notice how the use of the
possessive adjectives – “our” and “my” – enhances the sense of attachment
and involvement conveyed by Henri⁴:

Liverpool 8... A district of beautiful, fading, decaying Georgian
terrace houses... Doric columns supporting peeling entablatures,
dirty windows out of Vitruvius concealing families of happy
Jamaicans, sullen out-of-work Irishmen, poets, queers, thieves,
painters, university student, lovers…

The streets named after Victorian elder statesmen like Huskisson, the first martyr to the age of communications whose choragic monument stands in the tumble-down graveyard under the cathedral… The cathedral which dominates our lives, pink at dawn and grey at sunset…The cathedral towering over the houses my friends live in…

In “Mrs Albion, You’ve Got a Lovely Daughter”, on the other hand, the structural element – streets and public places – is evoked in order to support the representation of the spiritual element which, this time, is to be found in the atmosphere of the young active and vital centre that Liverpool was in the Sixties\. So, Liverpool can be associated with the fresh and sensual image of teenage girls getting ready for a night out in town:

The daughters of Albion
arriving by underground at Central Station
eating hot ecclescakes at the Pierhead
writing ‘Billy Blake is fab’ on a wall in Mathew St
taking off their navyblue schooldrawers and
putting on nylon panties ready for the night
The daughters of Albion
...
comb their darkblonde hair in suburban bedrooms
powder their delicate nipples/wondering if tonight will be the night
their bodies pressed into dresses or sweaters
lavender at The Cavern or pink at The Sink
...

Again, the anthropomorphic process takes over, to such an extent that Liverpool, with its stately location at the mouth of the Mersey river, is transfigured into a girl (not for nothing, the most beautiful English girl) sitting “on the banks of the river dangling” her legs:

Albion’s most lovely daughter sat on the banks of the Mersey dangling her landing stage in the water.
In other poems, Liverpool toponymy provides a series of map coordinates through which poetic images and personal feelings are located. In other words, the city provides a precise setting, where the Poets’ inspiration takes shape and seems to find its meaning. As a consequence, even the Poets’ most private and surrealistic daydreams are set in Liverpool’s “cityscape”, as we can see in “Liverpool Poems”, where Henri pictures his favourite literary characters against the background of the city’s scenery, identified by its streets, bars and typical figures:

I have seen Père UBU walking across Lime St  
And Alfred Jarry cycling down Elliott Street.  
Prostitutes in the snow in Canning St like strange erotic snowmen  
And Marcel Proust in the Kardomah eating Madeleine butties  
dipped in tea.

It is evident how for the Poets Liverpool represents a fundamental part of their own lives, a witness to their existence and their experiences, and it is precisely for this reason that the reality expressed in the urban representation not only runs parallel to the Poets’ personal dreams and fancies, but can also give voice to their inner reality. In “Without You”, Henri focuses his attention on a frightening image of the Mersey river, which becomes a mirror of his own deep sadness and isolation caused by his lover’s departure:

Without you ghost ferries would cross the Mersey manned by skeleton crews.

In other love poems by Henri, like “Liverpool Poem”, the city’s landscape shows its constant presence not only as the background against which the encounter between the two lovers takes place, but also as a witness to it and an integrating part of the portrait of the loved woman:

Wind blowing inland from the Pierhead  
I was glad to be seen with you in Liverpool  
Dead ferryboats in the shadows between your hair and cheek.
Within the representation of Liverpool’s “cityscape”, the Liverpudlians play an essential role too. They seem to embody both the spiritual and the structural elements of the city. In particular, in McGough’s poems, the most typical Liverpool inhabitants appear as elements of the landscape and also as symbols of the unique character of the city. Such is the power of the figures pictured in “Limestreet ‘64”:

Ahoy Doris, docker’s delight  
with cheeky breasts and indelible lips 
tempting by  
smart as paint 
from your evilheels  
to your brothelblack hair 
laying a perfumed trail of gin 
Irish linen and men

Outside the Chinese cafes  
like buddhas bouncers stand 
lest a band 
of teds or sailors  
or drunken Viking whalers  
should seek to violate the chow mein  
and trample on the waterchestnuts.

Through such characters, as teddy boys, bouncers and sailors, McGough expresses the particular identity of Liverpool, an essentially working-class city, closely dependent on its port. In particular, Doris, the dockers’ prostitute, audacious and malicious, “laying a perfumed trail of gin/ Irish linen and men”, combines in her own figure what could be defined as the appealing “female” character of Liverpool and the characteristic “male” feature of this city of hard-drinking working men, not forgetting its strong popular spirit of Irish origin.

The strength of the human figures portrayed by McGough derives from their authenticity and humdrum nature. They are real people, taken from ordinary life and the real environment of the city. As we have already mentioned, they are representatives of an urban working-class society, which McGough also belongs to: policemen, prostitutes, sailors, girls working behind the counters of the cafés (“The Day Before Yesterday”), busconductors and busconductresses working as strip-teasers at night.
("My Busconductress"). All of them are considered as members of a family, a single little great urban landscape turning into a domestic space. The characters presented in "My Busconductor", for instance, are simple authentic urban figures; among them, the protagonist stands out because of his typical human attitude and feelings and the author assumes a clearly affectionate tone towards him:

My busconductor tells me
he only has one kidney
and that may soon go on strike
through overwork.

... 
His thin lips
have no quips
for fat factorygirls
and he ignores
the drunk who snores
and the oldman who talks to himself
and gets off at the wrong stop.

... 
And all the time
deepdown in the deserted busshelter of his mind
he thinks about his journey nearly done.
One day he’ll clock on and never clock off
or clock off and never clock on.

It is also worth noticing that, not by chance, McGough more than once presents his characters as passengers of a bus, a typical element of the urban landscape, seen as a microcosm or, as happens in the poem quoted above, even a metaphor for human life.

The sense of Liverpool as family and home justifies Patten’s romantic evocation of his childhood spent in Wavertree, a Liverpool district, in "Lament For the Angels Who’ve Left My Street":

Streets everywhere! All peopled by memories and the times
I was a monster and scared my playmates
on backyard walls cutting clotheslines
keeping impossible monkeys in impossible jamjars
playing games in the kickthecan streets and swinging
on lamps that were then gas and black.
Once again, the structural elements of the “citiescape” (streets, back-
yard walls, lamps...) merge with the poet’s own memories. In this way,
Patten creates a new landscape, informed both by the objective element
and by the subjective perspective which, being rooted in the poet’s per-
sonal memories of his childhood, enters the world of imagination and of
magic.

The magical aspect of Liverpool’s urban reality is also confirmed by
another recurrent motif of Patten’s work, that “teeming rain” which, being
so frequent in the weather of a North-West England city like Liverpool,
has become an integral part of its landscape:

After breakfast,
which is usually coffee and a view
of teeming rain and the Cathedral old and grey but
smelling good with grass and ferns
I go out thinking of all those people who’ve come into this
room.

But, above all, rain has always fascinated the Liverpudlians, since it
seems to establish a connection between heaven and earth, nature and city.

This indeed increases the romantic quality of the vision of Liverpool
provided by Patten, but, in a way, shared by all the Liverpudlians and
reflected by the works of the three Mersey Poets. In their poetry, Liverpool
becomes a powerful and colourful literary image, able to contain thou-
sands of other images, memories and sensations. Its landscape is con-
ceived as the natural and spontaneous projection of the authors’ lives and
personalities, a familiar place in which they can confide, a home they heart
always turns to. There are no borderlines dividing the outer urban space
from the personal and domestic one. Moreover, the love and the attach-
ment they express towards their city lead them to an intense perception of
all its charm by virtue of which Liverpool is able to become a special and
even magical place: its concrete reality, its structural element become the
dimension through which its spiritual element reveals itself and the poets’
most private dreams are disclosed. In the long run, Liverpool is no longer
an ordinary city, but it merges with the poets’ own identity in one great sin-
gle being. The fact that the Poets belong to Liverpool is felt as such a
strong and indissoluble bond as to make them establish a symbiotic and
mutual relationship with it: they are the spokesmen of the great soul of
Liverpool and Liverpool mirrors their souls, their feelings and their existences. Liverpool is their own life’s blood, since, as Brian Patten reminds us: “Nobody born in the city [...] 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” (Cookson 12).
The number of Irish born residents in Liverpool has always been substantial since the Potato Famine, during which Liverpool provided a safe shelter for many Irish refugees.

After the end of the Second World War, Liverpool started to face the dramatic consequences of the conflict. Like many other large cities in England, it had been brought to its knees and there was great poverty: many of its buildings had been razed to the ground by the Blitz, which produced widespread destruction that also involved the port – the great economic resource of Liverpool – and which crippled the working class, mainly represented by the dockers. This great economic plague inevitably caused vandalism, crime and other social problems, which also involved the younger generation. The Teddy Boys in the Fifties and the many other gangs of young people which continued to spread in England in the Sixties, were a predominantly working class phenomenon, which, in Liverpool, involved a large number of unemployed and frustrated young dockers.

As a matter of fact, in the Sixties, Liverpool 8 became a lively bohemian district, the centre of the artistic avant-garde of that time and the meeting point of all the local artistic personalities and all the students of the Art College, as well as the cradle of the Mersey sound.

Actually, Adrian Henri was not born in Liverpool, but in Birkenhead, on the other side of the Mersey. He spent his first twenty-five years in Wales and in the late Fifties moved to Liverpool and became part of its renaissance. He always loved Liverpool and considered himself as a real Liverpudlian. Of the three Poets, he was the only one not to leave Liverpool after the Sixties, but stayed there until his death – in 2000- continuing to promote the artistic heritage of the city.

During the Sixties, London was not the only “swinging city” in England, where teenagers, the real “people of the Sixties”, reigned supreme and dominated every aspect of life, from music to fashion. The fervent activities of the Liverpool College of Art – at that time enjoying a remarkable increase in the number of its young students – and the explosion of the so-called Merseybeat – a unique musical phenomenon created by the formation of many young local rock bands - contributed to facilitating an environment of creativity and new ways of thinking that led to the acceptance of many different styles of art and music. Moreover, they contributed to transforming
Liverpool in the new capital of the North, a young and active centre for pop art and culture.

6 McGough’s father was a docker.
King Z. *The way things are: Zoe King talks to poet Roger McGough*. www.zoeing.com/ interviews.html