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THE USE OF THE GLICHÉ IN LIVERPOOL POETRY

Liverpool poetry appeared in the first half of the 1960s as a literary phenomenon closely connected with the explosion of the popular culture in those times and parallel to the Pop movement in British and American art. Its main representatives are the three poets included by Edward Lucie-Smith in the collection *The Mersey Sound*¹, published in 1967: Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Brian Patten. One of the strong beliefs which the Liverpool poets share is that there exists no such thing as a separate poetic language. Modern poetry should reflect the whole spectrum of everyday idiom, such as can be met within an urban environment of the second half of the twentieth century. There is no sense in "heightening" the language of poetry by isolating it from what is regarded as unpoetic, low, common, undignified. Poetry should be stimulated by all existing variants, registers, and dialects of contemporary language.

However, in the face of such a use of various non-literary idioms, the question arises whether we can still speak about poetry. The Movement poetry, which also employed non-literary language, was often accused of being linguistically dead. The Movement poems seemed to many critics "indistinguishable from rhymed prose"². In this case, the danger caused by the absorption of common language resulted in the frustration of linguistic creativity, essential to any poetry. The Liverpool poets tried to avoid this danger. Having in mind Stéphane Mallarmé's dictum (the task of the poet is "to purify the dialect of his tribe")³, they did not stop at absorbing "the dialect of the tribe", with all its

¹ *The Mersey Sound*. Penguin Modern Poets 10, London 1967.

² G. Thurlay, *The Ironie Harvest*, London 1974, p. 192.

³ See S. Mallarmé's 'Tombeau de E.A. Poe'.

variants, types, and usages. They wanted to "purify" it. In their poetry, the stable, worn-out expressions and hackneyed linguistic elements were to achieve new meanings.

Adrian Henri has provided theoretical background for that type of linguistic creativity which he called "revaluation of the cliché" and which, according to him, was "one of the most interesting aspects of what the Liverpool poets and some other young European poets are doing"⁴. On the whole, the revaluation doctrine assumes the creative attitude towards the linguistic material on which the poet of the 1960s works: common language, filled with clichés, commonplaces, redundant items and dead metaphors. Although so many of these elements of everyday language seem meaningless and devoid of emotional force, when they appeared in Liverpool poetry as its main poetic substance and were suddenly put in the centre of attention, transformed and revitalized, they acquired meanings and functions unsuspected before.

In the past, poetry was always regarded as the use of language which strived towards the greatest condensation of meaning: poets were careful to eliminate redundant linguistic material and avoid expressions of low cognitive, expressive or aesthetic value. They were searching for mots justes, the only words - exact and accurate - which would encapsulate their thoughts and feelings. This idea of what poetic language should aspire to, has changed since the Liverpool group chose to accept common usages of language as their poetic idiom. Both poets and readers have had to take a closer look at the structure and style of what we actually say, and to note the multitude of dead, meaningless expressions. These have always been an integral part of spoken language. They are the result of linguistic processes which happen in the evolution of any living language. Overusage is the main reason for linguistic elements becoming dead. Repeated too often, always occurring in the same, predictable contexts, certain words and phrases turn into clichés. Originally ingenious metaphors and similes, just like witty neologisms, lose their imaginative quality when they become stock, conventional responses. As clichés, they can be easily consumed because they do not require cognitive reflec-

⁴ Notes on Poetry and Painting, [in:] A. H e n r i, Tonight at Noon, London 1968, p. 80.

tion⁵. We forget that many well-known idiomatic expressions conceal variety of meanings, are based upon shocking associations, and consist of interesting structural solutions (e.g. "safe and sound", "tell it to the marines"). Such devices as alliteration, parallelism, rhythmic patterns and rhymes, present in many clichéd expressions, pass unnoticed by the people who use these expressions every day. "The essence of a cliché consists of the supersedure of original meanings by social functions"⁶. Intricacies of meaning, structure and sound patterns remain hidden in the shadow of the functional aspect of a given expression. As in the case of many everyday objects (like bulbs, hammers, cans), it is only their practical side that attracts our attention. A bulb is reduced to a thing one uses when electricity is needed. Similarly, "tell it to the marines" becomes a stock response to be used in a situation of disbelief. The shape of the first and the literal meaning of the second do not draw our attention. In this way, the object and the idiom lose their identity: devoid of form, they are reduced to a pragmatic function.

Clichéd expressions, just like "clichéd objects" remain meaningless because their appearance is confined to fixed contexts. Certain situations determine unequivocally the appearance of a concrete word or phrase. The situational context of meeting someone demands the almost automatic use of the "How do you do?" phrase. The linguistic context of "I have been sleeping like a _____" will hardly be followed by anything else than "log". In the examples above, the literal meaning and the ground for comparison pass unnoticed. The consequence is that the informational value of clichés appearing in fixed contexts is minimal. A fixed context arouses expectations about the occurrence of a given item, whereas - according to the theory of information - it is the element least expected which carries the greatest amount of information. Stock phrases bring scarcely any cognitive meaning; similarly, their expressive and appellative functions are negligible. Finally, their aesthetic value - due to overusage - is destroyed. Thus, all basic functions of language appear to be frustrated in a cliché.

⁵ A.C. Zijderveld, On Clichés. The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity, London 1979, p. 11.

⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

Not only words and phrases undergo the processes of decay through overusage. A register, a dialect, a style can waste away and approach the status of a cliché when it is identified only with one of its functions (namely, the practical one).

Worn-out language, however, can be revitalized. Lost meanings can emerge through the creative activity of a poet. This creative activity appears in the Liverpool movement as the realization of the poet's function of revitalizing the cliché. Generally, one can speak about two basic methods of revitalizing the cliché:

1) contextualization, which by putting a linguistic item into an unexpected context foregrounds its multiple meaning (usually the literal and the figurative ones);

2) transformation, which by changing an element of a phrase produces a new phrase with its own new meaning and at the same time evokes the original meaning of the phrase which has been transformed.

Through contextualization and transformation, clichés become mobile and can appear as humorous, intriguing, astonishing or perceptive - the characteristics normally hidden and insensible in the everyday use of the phrases.

The revaluation of the cliché is a method which has its analogue in visual arts; "much of Dada/Surrealism and Pop Art consists of doing just this" (A. Henri)⁷. Duchamp's bicycle wheel in an art gallery is an example of changing the meaning of an object by putting it into an alien context. Oppenheimer's fur plate and cup revalues an object of everyday use through its transformation: the material of which it is usually made has been changed.

The Liverpool poets, especially Adrian Henri and Roger McGough, made the revaluation process the hallmark of their poetry. Revitalized clichés occur in many Liverpool poems. The process has even elaborated its own genre: a very short poem, usually one sentence long, concerned with a single image or thought, the pivot of which is a revitalized cliché. The sense of those poems lies in the multiple meaning of a word or a phrase. The poems may raise doubts as to whether they still can be called poetry, as sometimes they resemble common verbal jokes whose only gratification is fun:

⁷ H e n r i, op. cit., p. 80.

He became more and more drunk
As the afternoon wore off.

(A. Henri, Drinking Song)

Mind
how you go
(R. McGough, A Poem for a National LSD Week).

The poets do not seem discouraged by the fact that these poems are scarcely anything than language play. In Henri's book, "The Best of Henri" alone, there are six such short poems. Yet Adrian Henri and Roger McGough not infrequently achieve interesting results when they employ the genre:

your finger
sadly
has a familiar ring
about it
(R. McGough, Summer With Monika, (26)

The context foregrounds the double meaning of the word "ring". The cliché (something has a familiar ring about it) is, in this way, revitalized: besides the idiomatic meaning, there is one more, both of them contributing to the overall understanding of that short love poem. The cliché has been revalued through contextualization.

The Liverpool poets have subjected to the revaluation processes common proverbs, idiomatic expressions, commercial and political slogans, lyrics of popular songs, i.e. all those linguistic items which usually do not require cognitive reflection. I shall now present several examples which will show the revaluation directive at work, applied to different linguistic items and using different methods..

Idiomatic expressions are revitalized most frequently by putting them into a context which exposes their literal meaning and destroys the certainty of the idiomatic one. The effect is often absurd or funny, so that in some cases these poems bring to mind popular Tom Swift's jokes:

"I love you" he said
With his tongue in her cheek.
(A. Henri, Love Poem)

Idiomatic expressions can also be revived by abnormal condensation. The idioms then overlap and modify each other. The artificiality of the situation makes the reader pay closer attention to its elements and thus revalue his understanding of the idioms. Such a practice is seen, for example, in McGough's "Railings":

-towards the end of his tether
grandad
at the drop of a hat
would paint the railings

The revaluation process occurs also when one of the elements of an idiom is transformed. A word, a phrase, or word order can be changed, new elements can be inserted, old ones deleted. The meaning of the expression is then suppressed, yet it echoes in the understanding of a poem. In McGough's poetry, one finds examples of a change of an element in a phrase: "you fall out of love" ("Cardiff"), an addition to a common saying: "old soldiers never die [...] only young ones" ("A Square Dance"), or a deletion of an element from a known phrase: "All is well that ends" ("BP, Kurt, Bingo and Me"). The method which creates new meanings leaving at the same time the old ones resembles portmanteau words in its summation of meanings. It can be, consequently, regarded as a case of linguistic creativity of the same order as neologisms.

Common proverbs and comparisons undergo similar processes as idiomatic expressions. They can be put into contexts which enables them to be treated literally or they can be transformed in a way which evokes the undertones of the original model (cf. R. McGough's "late birds screech wormless")⁸. Roger McGough frequently employs invented proverbs and comparisons modelled on traditional sayings (cf. "a task completed everyday/keeps sin and boredom both at bay")⁹. In "The Amazing Adventures of PC Flod" one finds examples which parody the style of common comparisons; it seems that their justification is in showing the arbitrariness of the old, well known comparisons. Among the numerous examples one can find

⁸ R. McGough, And the field screamed TRACTOR, [in:] After the Merry-making, London 1971.

⁹ R. McGough, Out of Sequence, [in:] Gig, London 1973.

"stealthy as an iguana", "shrewd as a pelican", "quiet as a truncheon", "wise as a brace of owls".

Adrian Henri's poems, on the other hand, provide examples of transforming commercial and political slogans. Advertising slogan "Go to work on an egg" is changed into "Go to work on a Braque" ("Liverpool Poems"/1/), a new slogan which constitutes the whole poem. The change of "egg" into "Braque" suggests an equation between the two. As is typical of Henri, art and its tradition is treated in a new way, adequate to our times: in a commercial way. Art is nothing better than a consumers' good. Behind Henri's transformation there is a hidden belief that art can be as useful as everyday objects; that they (art and everyday objects) can be replaced by one another. Everything can be art, art can be everything.

One of "Great War Poems" which goes: "Don't be vague - blame general Haig" is the transformation of a slogan which advertised Haig Whisky: "Don't be vague - ask for Haig!". The change of a few words creates a new slogan, while the original source remains perceptible. Both slogans, the actual and the evoked, contribute to the meaning of the poem. The device suggests a close affinity between commerce and politics, a belief especially popular in the sixties. In the same sequence of poems, one finds another similar transformation: a political slogan is transformed on the basis of phonetic similarity. "What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?", from the first world war propaganda poster changes into its bitter comment: "What did you do to the Great Whore, Daddy?" The phonetic resemblance as the motor of association, reappears in many cases of the revaluing process.

The revaluation of the cliché applies also to the texts of pop-songs. Singalong Schlagwörter often lose their meaning, and function solely as a set of syllables delineating the melodic line. A catchy, almost nonsensical chorus of a pop song can be revitalized and can regain its meaning, as in "Hate Poem", where the revaluation is made by a three - word comment: -

"To know know know you
Is to love love love you"
And I don't.

The clichéd stylistics of pop-songs is parodied in "Wild West Poems". There, the banal lyrics of famous songwriters, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, are presented in isolation and constitute the whole poem¹⁰. By this isolation, the lyrics become the object of reflection to which the reader is forced by the poet. The clichéd quality of the cliché is sublimated. The cliché begins to speak.

Linguistic ambiguity is the phenomenon on which Liverpool poets base the practices of contextualization and transformation. In both cases the poets construct polysemantic utterances. Through contextualization, they blend the literal and the idiomatic meaning (of. "your finger [sadly] has a familiar ring about it"); through transformation they blend the expected and the actual meaning (of. "you fall out of love"). Literary tradition knows a wide range of devices which act by utilizing the ambiguity inherent in language, or by juxtaposing the expected and actual expressions. In puns and portmanteau words on the one hand, and in malapropisms, spoonerisms, etc., on the other, we find a similar blending of meanings.

In Liverpool poems punning seems to be the most exploited practice of the revitalizing process. The emergence of other, forgotten or neglected meanings of certain linguistic expressions, the use of polysemantic words with the intention of showing both meanings serves at the same time the imperative of revitalized speech and the demand for verbal humour. Punning, a word-play on ambiguity in language, depends on contextualization: the poet creates a context which allows the double interpretation of a word. Punning, in this sense, resembles the practices of revitalizing idioms and common sayings by putting them into contexts which question their apparent meanings.

In Henri's "Morning Poem", the nominal phrase ("the breaking point") and the verb ("to snap") are put into a context which allows a double understanding of both:

"I've just about reached the breaking point"
he snapped.

¹⁰ A. H e n r i, Wild West Poems, [in:] The Mersey Sound, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 42.

In another poem, Henri utilizes the ambiguity of two noun phrases:

I wanted your soft verges
But you gave me the hard shoulder.
(*"Song For A Beautiful Girl Petrol-Pump
Attendant On The Motorway"*)

In their first, technical meaning the words "soft verges" and "hard shoulder" would be traditionally called non-poetic and excluded from poetic diction. In their second meaning, the literal one, the words lose their technical connotations and transform the sentence into a mini love-poem.

Spoonerisms and malapropisms are cases of the intended misapplication of words and can be treated as transformation processes. The original word is changed (transformed) by another. The sense of such a practice lies in the fact that the reader is aware of the original phrase, though he faces the transformed one. Two meanings are then juxtaposed: that of a phrase which is expected from the context and that which actually appears. The poetic quality of the device is achieved when the two meanings both contribute to the understanding of the whole. Adrian Henri's spoonerism:

Liverpool I love your horny-handed tons of soil
(A. Henri, *Liverpool Poems*)

goes beyond the sheer pleasure of distorting the well-known quotation. The archaic, pompous "tons of toil" is replaced by the bathos of the mundane, almost technical "tons of soil". The rebelliousness about which Grevel Lindop wrote¹¹ can be seen here in the act of ridiculing the unauthentic voice of sentimental poetic diction.

In "Let Me Die a Youngman's Death", Roger McGough misapplies the word "tumour" in the place where "humour" would be the most predictable. The misapplied word is phonetically similar to the word expected; but further justification for its use can be seen when it is considered in the context of the whole poem and its theme - death. The poem is a nonchalant expression of a desire

¹¹ G. Lindop, *Poetry, Rhetoric, and the Mass Audience*, [in:] *British Poetry since 1950*, Manchester 1972.

to die young and this makes both "tumour" and "humour" play an important role in the total meaning of the poem.

Other instances of "intended misapplications" show a similar situation of the word misapplied and the word expected co-operating in the creation of the total meaning. McGough's alliterated phrase "talk on tiptoe"¹² is a witty metaphor which in uncondensed form would read: "talk as quietly as one walks on tiptoe". In the same poem we find "shoes with broken high ideals", a less successful image, which joins the abstract with the concrete. "Broken high ideals" which echo "high heels" were to stand for the girl's moral downfall. In Henri's "Morning" the bottles of face shaving lotion change into "face-saving motions" of a woman in a relationship which is built out of semblances.

All these "intended misapplications", the associations between the words, are based on phonological resemblance (tumour-humour, talk-walk, ideals-heals, lotion-motion). Most probably this is partly due to the medium through which Liverpool poets present their poetry: the living speech. Consequently, devices not heard but seen, such as graphic rhymes appear seldom in Liverpool poetry. Roger McGough's "horse" and "worse" rhyme (in "Vandal") is a rare example. Even here, though, we can guess that the poet, while reading the lines, makes the rhyme recognizable.

It remains a matter of discussion whether such revaluing processes as may be observed in Liverpool poems reach the status of genuine poetry. Can a one-sentence poem based on a play with the literal meaning of an idiom aspire towards being called "poetry"? One tends to classify such practices as common language jokes for which fun is the only reason for being.

It is true that such poems as Henri's "Love Poem" are nothing more than a game with an ambiguous phrase for its own sake. Yet there is a number of poems in which similar word-play rises above the level of sheer fun-making. As I have tried to show in some of my examples, these language games can carry additional meanings, and when seen in the context of the whole poem, acquire relevance in its understanding. Then, the juxtaposition of the meanings of an ambiguous phrase does not produce humorous effect

¹² R. M c G o u g h, Comeclose and Sleepnow, [in:] The Mersey Sound, ..., p. 59.

(or, at least, the humour is not of primary importance), but is an urge for some kind of poetic reflection:

it might
be nature morte
but it's still
life

(H. Holden, Still life poem)¹³.

Two things: language games for the sake of fun and the use of linguistic deviation in order to achieve richness of poetic meaning, coexist in Liverpool poetry. Whether a given instance of a language game has genuine poetic quality or does not aspire higher than to the level of a joke, has long been a matter of discussion. It is illuminating to look at the reception of the punning practices of the Metaphysical school: there were critics who considered them as self-gratifying examples of bad taste, whereas others attributed to the devices considerable poetic significance.

Language games in poetry have been justified by many modern critics who claim that linguistic creativity as such is a mark of poetry. When language becomes the substance of creation, poetry begins. "The distinguishing feature of the poetic use of language is a focus on the code itself. The particular patterns in this case are ones which order the linguistic resources of the language in their own right, rather than shaping them to a particular conceptual model. As a result the code becomes opaque, i.e. is perceived as an autonomous object whereas in other uses it only functions well when it is a transparent medium"¹⁴. If we accept this point of view, which already has a long tradition¹⁵, the Liverpool poems I have presented here should be regarded as instances of poetic creation. At least two features of Liverpool poetry entitle us to do it: the revaluation of the cliché and the demand to turn the poem into an autonomous object (cf. McGough's "concrete"

¹³ Heather Holden is yet another poet associated with the Liverpool movement. "Still Life" appeared, [in:] The Liverpool Scene, London 1967.

¹⁴ I.M. G o p n i k, Semantic Anomaly and Poeticalness, [in:] "Journal of Literary Studies" 1973, vol. 2.

¹⁵ cf. ideas expressed by the Russian Formalists and Roman Jakobson.

poems)¹⁶. In both cases the focus is undoubtedly on the code (=language) itself. Language is both the substance and the subject-matter in most of these poems. The referential qualities of a poetic utterance become of secondary importance.

Literary critics who do not agree to define poetic creativity as making the code opaque, distinguish between verse and poetry, with the former treated as much more popular (nursery rhymes, popular songs, limericks, doggerel) and frequently dismissed. What these critics object to is not so much lack of originality (there is plenty of originality in many instances of popular verse), as the lack of the gravity of the subject-matter. The distinction between verse and poetry is not clear, though; the border-line cases include Stevie Smith and Edward Lear, cabaret songs and nursery rhymes. Is it poetry or mere "rhyming"?

For the Mersey poets, the problem loses much of its importance. First, they assume that limericks, pop-songs, cabaret sketches, etc., can also be successful poetry, in no way inferior to odes or hymns. Secondly, the fact that a poem does nothing more than entertain should not be treated as a charge against it. For the Liverpool group, fun can be the sole justification for writing poetry; and it often is. Thirdly, the Liverpool poets seem to favour the sole activity of playing with the language, even if the play is aimless. If one can find satisfaction in transforming, rearranging, and inventing words, it is always a desirable fact. Just as in pop-art, everyone is invited to play a disinterested, aimless game for the fun of it. Thus, it often happens that Liverpool word-games do not search for justification, they are considered values in themselves.

On the other hand, one cannot leave unnoticed the provocative aspect of these practices. Grevel Lindop sees "the revaluation of the cliché as a "symbolic gesture of rebellion appealing especially to the particular audience"¹⁷ which the Mersey poets attract. Various puns, neologisms, destroyed idioms mean to Lindop the anarchistic, destructive attitude of the poets. "The revived cliché is a fire-cracker under the dead hand of time, a little

¹⁶ Pantomime Poem, [in:] The Mersey Sound,...

¹⁷ Lindop, op. cit., p. 96.

rebellion against the moribund language created by previous generations, by "officialdom", by politicians and parents and all the other tedious stereotypes against which the young audience feels itself to be in revolt. It is a social gesture"¹⁸. It may be worthwhile to remind oneself that similar practices can be observed in other rebellious movements of the 20th century. Futurism, for example, employed orthographical deviation which was scarcely anything more than a gesture of rebellion against the limitations of tradition.

In the light of these considerations, the Liverpool group (along with Pop Art) presents itself as a continuation of the modernist movement¹⁹. It is justified, then, to understand the process which Henri called the revaluation of the cliché, not only as a technical device, but also as a manifestation of a set of attitudes which the Liverpool poets shared with Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism etc. Though the game-aspect of the revaluation procedures should not be undervalued, it must be remembered that they also function as a gesture of dissent, an attempt to subvert the foundations of the accepted modes of thought and to challenge the ossified norms of the established culture. Being explicitly indebted to some of the modernist ideas, the revaluation of the cliché as an artistic programme elevated the commonplace to the status of art and, by presenting it in unusual contexts (contextualization) and in unusual forms (transformation), made the commonplace look different, strange, fresh, and open to perception²⁰.

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¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See: Introduction, [in:] British Poetry since 1945, London 1970, pp. 31-32.

²⁰ Seen in this perspective, the revaluation of the cliché stands as an example of what Victor Shklovsky described as defamiliarization techniques in art.

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KLISZA I JEJ ZASTOSOWANIE W POEZJI LIVERPOOLSKIEJ

W twórczości poetów liverpoolskich (Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Brian Patten) "odnawianie kliszy" staje się główną strategią poetycką. Programowo wykorzystując język codzienny z całym jego bagażem wyrażań utartych, stereotypowych, banalnych, starają się oni nadać tym wyrażeniom (kliszom) nową wartość. Czynią to bądź poprzez kontekstualizację, tj. wytworzenie odpowiedniego kontekstu, który zawiesza utarte znaczenie wyrażenia i narzuca mu nowe, świeże, bądź poprzez transformację, tj. nieznaczące przekształcenia wewnątrz samego wyrażenia. W obu wypadkach mamy do czynienia z powstaniem i nakładaniem się dwu znaczeń: w kontekstualizacji jest to najczęściej znaczenie idiomatyczne i dosłowne, w transformacji - oczekiwane i faktyczne. W udanych utworach owe pary znaczeń nie są przypadkowe, lecz współgrają ze sobą i nawzajem się modyfikują. Procesowi "odnawiania kliszy" poddane zostały rozmaite konstrukcje językowe, np. idiomy, przysłowia, slogany reklamowe, teksty popularnych piosenek.

"Rewaloryzacja kliszy" łączy poetów liverpoolskich z takimi formacjami artystycznymi, jak dada, surrealizm, czy pop-art. W plastycznych realizacjach wspomnianych nurtów stereotyp językowy zastąpiony zostaje kliszą wizualną, np. przedmiotem codziennego użytku, który z kolei poddany jest analogicznym zabiegom kontekstualizacji bądź transformacji. Zabiegi te, kwestionujące utarte znaczenia, można odczytać jako przejaw obrazoburczej postawy wobec zastanej kultury, jako chęć wyjścia poza schematy narzucane przez tradycję czy przyzwyczajenie. Z drugiej jednak strony "odnawianie kliszy" w poezji liverpoolskiej ma wszelkie znamiona gry z językiem, zabawy, której to duch jest tak charakterystyczny dla sztuki lat sześćdziesiątych.