The Poet Who Caps Our Being

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James Liddy
On the Raft with Fr. Roseliep
Arlen House, 2006

Michael S. Beegal, Editor
Honeysuckle, Honeywine: A Tribute to James Liddy
Arlen House, 2006

Reviewed by Tyler Farrella

If there ever was a poet who deserved more attention, James Liddy is that poet. In the ever-changing and varied world of Irish letters, James Liddy’s star is finally on the rise—albeit slowly, but with constant deliberation and accomplishment. With the publication of his new book of poetry, On the Raft with Fr. Roseliep and a festschrift filled with poems, prose and reminiscences from friends and colleagues, the poet’s audience is expanding. His voice is moving, gaining ground. His thoughts attain a new sense of religion, sex and politics and of course (of course) his adopted United States. James Liddy can be compared to other writers, but what would be the point. His voice is far more daring, far more important. As Liddy’s friend Patrick Kavanagh wrote, “A poet is an original who inspires millions of copies.” The original James Liddy has inspired many of his students and friends to create and admire, and not many will be able to copy such unique behavior and contemplative writing.

Both of these new books are a glimpse into Liddy’s life, a look at discussion with friends, influences and ideas. The book of poetry uses Fr. Raymond Roseliep as a focal point and muse. Fr. Roseliep was a Catholic priest ordained in 1943 who received his Ph.D. from Notre Dame in 1954. He lived primarily in Dubuque, Iowa teaching at Loras College and writing more than a dozen books of poetry, mostly haiku. His presence is still felt in Dubuque with annual discussions of his work and a room dedicated to the housing of his materials and research materials at the Loras College Library. Roseliep is another neglected poet and one that attempted to find truth in art and spirituality. He was committed to the priesthood, teaching, and poetry, and like Liddy, used poetry to express his love for his country and the world. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. There is a balance in both of these writer’s works that looks at humanization through touching language and beauty as an act of condition. Here is a quote from one of Roseliep’s books that seems to address certain aspects of Liddy’s writing and voice:

Whatever success I enjoy as a poet must reflect the philosophy behind my work. Through poems I try to materialize spirit and spiritualize matter. I attempt to project the dissonance at the heart of all life: the clash between darkness and light, good and evil, purposelessness and purpose, awanov and denial, the sacred and the profane, flesh and spirit, death and the thirst for immortality. Yahweh and abondon. Believing as George Eliot did that “love is the word of all work,” I publish my poems so that I might impose fresh order on the disorder of the world. A poem is a plumb line by which all of us can better understand ourselves and the universe. A poem completes and caps our being.

There are many aspects to writing that Liddy shares with Fr. Roseliep and his fondness for his subject grows with each passing poem. Liddy, as a poet, is prized-like and contemplates the use of love (more accurately lust) to identify his deprivations. His poetry is fresh and unique, always creating a new reality for the reader while also examining contradictions as well as what defines him as a writer. The reader can always come back to Liddy’s use of his country of birth, the lively innuendo—an intoxicating waltz through the Ireland of Liddy’s youth. There is human nature, nostalgia, and anecdote in these poems all backed by a sort of biting wit that almost personifies these observations and philosophies. Take, for example, the first poem, “Let’s Invade Ourselves Not Iraq.”

Liddy’s version of a protest poem is quite strophic and one that uses contemplative autobiography to get to the heart of the poem. “I have a crusade inside me against killing in war / astonishing for a drinking man / Sweetheart, I have a crusade in me that steams like a / decaying liver / towards you” (11). There is the lust, a type of humor in the midst of war and life-writing. The disorder that Roseliep writes about is here in Liddy’s poetry as well. The poet is simply taking these ideas to another level, reshaping common conceptions of poetic subject matter, reflection, humanity and beauty.

Liddy is also very fond of making allusions to other authors and artists, to friends and colleagues. Some of the best poems in this collection mention fellow Wisconsin poet, Lorine Niedecker, friend and mentor Patrick Kavanagh, poets Jack Spicer and T. S. Eliot, Milwaukee artist Bob Watt and a poem honoring the encyclopaedia of Pope John XXIII. Liddy is clearly gifted, funny, and in awe of the poet and the recognize the influence he has had on their lives and their writing. Eamonn Wall’s essay talks about the Irish writer in exile in America and the impact it has had on writing and culture. Myles Na Gopaleen’s contribution is a review of an early Dolmen Press book by Liddy entitled Eas, My Kingdom for a Drink: Homage to James Joyce on his LXXX Birthday. The review is quite funny and told in classic O’Brien journalistic style. Bukowski’s “Letter to James Liddy” is typical of the late writer and tells of poetry, permission for Liddy to use some of his poems for publication. He writes, “we’re not going to cause any literary revolution, but we hope to say a few things that haven’t’, for some reason, been said and if the poem is a strong poem – the poem that drinks beer and smokes cigarettes and laughs – sometimes” (46). Many of the works in Honeysuckle, Honeywine accomplish these desires. Liam O’Connor’s short essay is also quite interesting talking tales of Arena (the most beloved of Liddy’s poems) and the overlapping with Liddy and those who traveled with Liddy to Spain, the house in Coolgreany, and flattering words that pay honest and generous tribute to a friend and confidant.

Many of the works jump off the page and relay much of Liddy’s devotion to writing, life, friends, love and art. It is gossip for the gossip poet and love for the love poet. One of the best contributions to Honeysuckle, Honeywine is Michael Harrat’s poem “The Poet as Saint.” It is a loving tribute from Michael Harrat, a traveler who crossed paths with James Liddy early in his career and also helped to shape the groundbreaking magazine Arena. Hartnett writes, “He is father to many poets / and he is lover of their songs…We have argued over style / in the grey sheltered dining rooms, / but we do not agree: he / shall be poets in the coming days” (19). The poem forever sums up Liddy’s influence and inspiration, his devotion to language and his love for his friends. Both books held elements of Liddy’s nature of poetry and it seems that the poet’s influence will continue to grow in the coming days.

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All this criticism does not mean that I found the book to be without merit. Even the most well-read of scholars can find information about writers and works with which they may not have been acquainted, prior to picking up the book. However, it would be a pleasant surprise if, rather than producing another book describing the fascinating lives of Irish women writers, or cataloging the literature and work waiting to be analyzed, scholars in Irish Studies began the endlessly-deferred project of engaging seriously and in an extended fashion with the texts that have been produced by many of the neglected authors discussed in this work. In fact, the women I’ll discuss in this review now so I can go do myself.

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