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James Liddy

The Poet’s Soul Purified

By Tyler Farrell

WHEN I GROW UP (if I ever have to) I want to be just like James Liddy (1934-2008). I want to emulate him, profess his wisdom, write and work for the image of the poet while remaining young in spirit and at heart. I want to promote James and in the words of St. Teresa of Ávila, "1 wish that I could persuade everyone to venerate this glorious saint, for I have great experience of the blessings that he obtains from God." My adoration of James Liddy even seemed to blossom at the moment I learned of his peaceful death, the moming after Election Day 2008 ended in hopeful triumph.

To many, the death of a poet is always a profound and triumphant occurrence. Personally, it has made me grateful and proud of our time together. Therefore, I knew I had to celebrate in classic Liddy style with drinks, conversation and reminiscence. That night (after many a pint) I exclaimed, "Let us rejoice! Our beloved love poet, James Liddy, has been born into life everlasting. Let us give thanks and be glad." It was a small way of encouraging his fans to proclaim Liddy's eternal Spring, his lessons foretold, his placement as our hero, friend, muse and mentor. That night was filled with stories of Liddy's proclamation of love and poetry, his immortal instructions from Joyce and Yeats, his efforts to encourage youthful words from the young at heart. As James always knew, poetry should be a young person's game, a devotion to the immortal voice and power of the word, an announcement of poetic self

James Liddy was a tireless worker. He did more for poetry, publishing, Ireland, Catholicism and sexuality than most poets, presidents, teachers, cardinals or kings. He taught friends and students alike to embrace our time and place, our knowledge of history and religion, our memory and awareness. He taught us to live, to "work hard at reading the tea leaves," to become writers in outlook and spirit. James urged important writing that ignored safe themes and formulaic styles, words from a true self. With Liddy's example many followers stretched the boundaries of what poetry was or could be.

Liddy's words and actions came from within. He was a work of art in himself and I saw it revealed when he held readings on Valentine's Day or took a group of students to the gravesite of Lorine Niedecker, or when he sat it Jacque's in Milwaukee surrounded by young, inquisitive poets. Once, after a reading, he received a standing ovation

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and immediately stopped the audience to announce, "If you stop we can get to the bar sooner." It would be one of many times I saw his edgy attitude, his desires and beliefs about how poetry should be heard, how praise almost stunted the ego. For many, these thoughts seemed to also resonate.

But Liddy's life was always impressive to most. His extensive career reads like an oral history, a poet's journey filled with 1950's *Dublin, Arena,* the Dolmen Press, the San Francisco Renaissance, New Orleans and finally the German dream city of Milwaukee. If you knew Liddy, you knew his stature, attitude, and generation. Yet he stood as a unique member of the Irish literary elite with a challenging style of writing and persona, not at all safe or traditional. I remember how he despised poetic forms and encouraged me to write more like Frank O'Hara—one of my many heroes. "If you're having trouble with stanzas, eliminate them," he said. "What have stanza breaks ever done for us?" He was direct and honest, highly respected.

The first time I met James Liddy was in Dublin in 1994 while taking a summer class at Trinity run by Eamonn Wall. Liddy, a guest lecturer, talked about writing and Ireland mostly. I listened intently and took voracious notes that now seem to speak more to the experience than the limitless insight he dictated to the class. At the end he stood up and announced, "Is there anyone here from Milwaukee? I love to talk to students from Milwaukee." Eamonn looked to me and we went to the front of the room to speak with James posing in his big blue sweater. He told me that the royal blue was in honor of the fírst Irish flag and graciously invited us to lunch at a nearby Pub. There I had my first real discussion with him. I felt awfully naïve at first, but Liddy made those feelings go away. He was encouraging, asked who I liked to read and if he could see some of my poems. He immediately brought out some confidence in me and recommended books, offered advice. He told stories in between sips of Harp that cultivated our growing connection. Soon, he became one of my closest friends, someone I looked forward to seeing and working with. It was a joy even on the days when he pushed quite hard to improve my mind or my writing. I felt like he knew me better than most people because of his impressive intellect and wit, his devotion to who I was, who I wanted to become. When I was in need of direction he gave me his undivided attention.

I worked quite closely with James at UW-Milwaukee and in the years after I graduated. We went to conferences together, traveled to Coolgreaney and Kilkee, frequented bars, classrooms, and offices. It was a formative experience, a look into the literary and academic world from the often contrary and highly interesting perspective of James Liddy. We wrote each other weekly and I remember one very encouraging letter when I was just starting to get published. It was filled with congratulations and an invita

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tion to lunch to discuss some recent poems. We went to a seafood restaurant and he said, "Fish is brain food" as our plates arrived, his hand securing a napkin under his collar as he ate like a dignified, well-educated and intense artist. His optimism was unparalleled and his amount of guidance was immeasurable. After lunch we went back to his apartment on Park Place and sat in the sun on his back porch drinking a Pimm's cup and talking about poetry, publishing. Graduate school, and gossip. When I left I remembered feeling a sense of accomplishment and a real admiration for my teacher. I think that day made me a better writer, although I probably didn't know it at the time.

Excursions with James were always an educational adventure as well: bars, restaurants, the dry cleaner, bookstores, his dentist. I especially enjoyed conferences and readings. He was a showman, an idol almost. The few members of his entourage were always riveted watching him read, speak, elucidate, and captivate in different arenas. I relished those times to listen and laugh, ask questions, jot down ideas for poems or writers to investigate. I thought it was similar to the education that Liddy himself formed in his own life, from all the many writers he knew. But I knew it was only a fraction of that. Nevertheless, 1 looked up to James as a father, like he might have seen Kavanagh or even Joyce. I remember a line from Liddy's first Dolmen Press publication, *Esau, My Kingdom for a Drink.* "So you, James Joyce, loving us seriously behind our backs like a father, caring for us unmarried virgins who might die without kissing life." Liddy changed the way I saw writing and life, he helped me not to die a literary virgin and I felt blessed.

James was an intricate man, but his love for his friends seemed to always shine through. We looked up to him and loved him back. We realized the weight of being with Liddy and then forgot about it, enjoyed a relationship that was mutual and honorable. Many of his comrades were admirers who couldn't and probably never wanted to fit in elsewhere. But James made us feel accepted. He put us together with others of our kind, our odd species with similar loves. He created a world and preached from within. We almost saw him as an angel sent from Dublin with a unique intensity, a kind of proclamation for a new generation of writers who were received with outstretched arms welcoming many faiths.

James always lived as a writer should. He embraced the moment then looked ahead. At a reading in Illinois we stayed at a boarding house near train tracks. After breakfast we sat outside as a train loudly passed by. James exclaimed, "Oh, let's hop it. I want to become a young hobo with Jack Kerouac again." He talked about the Mississippi River in a similar way, of being on a ran headed for the gulf It was his romantic side illuminated. He entertained and acted. He made most situations a significant joy and always loved wherever he was at any given time.

Liddy is unlike most new writers. He was poet who believed in real morality, a man filled with truth and honesty. He took on his own life choices and desires, the ultimate perception of how a poet lives. He professed once in a bar "can't the world ever be serious?" as he laughed

loudly in the faceof naïve, uninformed attitudes, at people who judge like "fatherpolitics and motherchurch [from] across the narrow sea." Because of Liddy I also attempt to embrace life, to ponder issues, to create and continue to better my writing. I have taken from him the real meaning of love and trust that comes between a student and his mentor and tangible lessons about knowledge and its genesis.

Finally, the image I will remember most is James standing at a bus-stop in Milwaukee, his hands behind his back and a smile on his face. In those carefree days, when I often picked him up, I imagined he must have been deep in thought, possibly writing a poem with lines tucked away to be used when his typewriter beckoned at 2 a.m. after a night at the bar with friends. Now he must be wandering the alleys of Catholic heaven looking for his idols, countless writers, popes, bishops and artists. He must be wearing his Oscar Wilde T-Shirt and having a conversation with Baudelaire and Jack Spicer over a pint. Therefore, 1 urge everyone who knew James (or knew of him) to go forth and be blessed, to enter a bar and raise a glass to the poet, or

have "one more for the road." God knows I owe James more than a drink, but it can be a simple start to a constant devotion, our admiration of his image and words, and an everlasting toast to Liddy's faithfully poetic and generous soul. •

—*Madison, Wisconsin*