

On Milwaukee's James Liddy



James Liddy, Milwaukee, 2007. Photo by Nial Hartnett

Following up on Kent Johnson's [excellent account of the Chapson/Liddy scene in Milwaukee during the 1980s](#), I've been asked by the editors of *Dispatches* to provide a sketch of its continuation into the 2000s. I also thought I'd extend Kent's account of James Liddy (1934-2008), who very much shaped my first encounter with poetry, in hopes that it might rekindle some interest in his work.

I won't go much into his biography (see the critical study by Brian Arkins, 2001) but I learned all of these things soon after meeting him: he was from Coolgreany, Co. Wexford, son of an Irish doctor and an Irish-American mother, practiced for a year as a barrister, edited the literary magazine *Arena*, and left for San Francisco in 1967 to teach at SFSC, where he met his partner Jim Chapson. He then bounced around to various universities in the U.S. and in 1976 landed a job at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he stayed for the salary and bar culture.



Chapson and Liddy outside Graham Mackintosh's press, 574 Natoma St., San Francisco, 1968.

I first met James in 2005 through Chapson, whom I'd taken a poetry workshop with as an undergrad at UW-Milwaukee, visiting them in their apartment on the East Side, a stylish home filled with books, paintings, and religious iconography, much like a priest's quarters but with an unmistakable bohemian flourish, modest wooden furniture and elegant supperware.



James Liddy at his home in Coolgreany, Co. Wexford, Ireland. Late 1940's.

James with his mother, Clare Reeves Liddy.



left to right: St. Barbara, Jim Chapson. Milwaukee, 2019.

Before visiting James I had gone to Golda Meir Library to read some of his poetry.
From "Personal Odyssey"

Yes, I promise I will spread my sails to leave you
 because when I was young I took an oath

to make myself an individual however peculiar
 I might look or however far I might have to travel . . .

I left the house late at night and started
 walking under the million falling leaves of experience,
 an adolescent raging along the country lanes,

a book beneath his arm, at the first cross roads,
 I found my future waiting in the nearest field. . . .

In this passage from a poem in James's first book (*In a Blue Smoke*, Dolmen 1964) the style is formal and lyrical, sounding a bit like Paul Verlaine but with an element of early Kerouac ("raging along the country lanes,") which gives it vitality, making the last line even more suggestive.

I pathologized the other books as best I could and determined that James was: (1) upper-middle-class; (2) Catholic; and (3) gay, which I then confirmed using Google.

When I first met him he was in his early 70s but still quite energetic, talking non-stop and making a joke out of everything I said. For most people this would have been overwhelming, as it was for me, but it was also a lot of fun, like listening to an extremely witty but more-or-less insane person at a bar, which is where James spent most of his nights. Chapson wasn't going out much at that time but James very much went out, especially if he could find someone with a car, though he also walked everywhere or took the bus, so not having his own set of wheels never seemed like an impediment -- and I imagine he enjoyed being driven around like an Irish Liberace.



left to right: Nora Liddy (James's Sister) holding birthday cake; James Liddy in Mickey Mouse cap; Richard Shay in tweed cap; seated: Michael Krull in British Grenadier guard helmet; at James's home in Coolgreany, Co. Wexford; 1990's.

He was my first encounter with someone who absolutely swam with sociability. I took two classes with him, one on the Beats and a poetry workshop, my first encounter with imagism, objectivism, and surrealism. At this time I was also hanging out at the university library reading Language poets and other 20th century avant-garde writers. James had been Ron Silliman's teacher back in the late 60s (see *Under Albany*), which he told me the first time I mentioned I was reading Ron's famous blog.

It is strange to think how that blog and its now-gone-forever comments board were my second major introduction to poetry (Woodland Pattern, Zack Pieper and Mike Hauser soon followed). It was also weird to hear James refer to Susan and Fanny Howe as "rich daughters of Mary Manning." He had a completely byzantine literary sensibility, and to him the Language poets were a bunch of straight marxists who had demystified everything with theory.

It wasn't that he was politically conservative (he identified as a Catholic Socialist) but that he very much belonged to the cult of Jack Spicer and had an aversion to anyone he perceived as careerist.

Even though he would berate me for filling my head with "marxist-careerist bullshit," I think he also understood that younger poets needed to be in touch with the literature of their own time, to read everything. And even when we disagreed about art or literature or politics he was interesting. He didn't care at all about popular music, television or pop culture. He would talk at length about the institutional politics of the Catholic Church, Yeats, the San Francisco Renaissance, or he would pester me about my personal life and repeat any information

he could extract the next time he saw me, usually in front of others. James sometimes reveled in embarrassing his friends.

When I read *Poet Be Like God*, I immediately understood why he idealized Spicer so much. They shared, besides their enjambment and majuscules, an orphic idea of lyric. Perhaps something of this can be seen in these two poems from James's "middle period":

The hounds can't
Come in
The steeds can't
Come in
He tries to come in
The music of the erotic chase sounds
But the cap on his yellow hair gets knocked
 on the floor.
Young men with yellow hair lift him over
 the furniture. Their tears
That want to come into the poem
Freeze inside love

from *A Munster Song of Love and War*, (White Rabbit 1971)

Sandhills

Donn na Duimche
One of the fairies of Doughmore
Rides a white horse
 along the sandhills
His powers from beyond the sunset
When the cattle were hauled off
Farmers among the sands crying
"Where are Donn and his friends?"
"Tonight our power is nothing."
 The cattle stopped
The rustlers' sound the curlews
 on the breeze
The problem is
How to embody anonymous post sexual
Magic in your life

from *Corca Bascinn*, (Dolmen Press 1977)

Like Spicer, he could be extremely unpleasant, losing his temper when he disagreed with anybody or anything, reminding everyone when he wasn't amused.

He disparaged elitists while drinking Pimm's Cup and often loudly expressed opinions few would dare in today's political climate: "I'm for abortion only if the fetus wants it!" Positionality is everything, and I understand why some people were allergic to this.

Yet, despite the alpha peacocking, many women were among his close friends, such as the South African novelist Sheila Roberts (not the romance novelist), the Irish poet Leland Bardwell, and Katherine (widow of Patrick) Kavanagh. And he could be very helpful to his women students if he liked their poetry.

And though he could be difficult, he was mostly very pleasant, happy to be sitting at a table chatting away. He was curious about people and places in a way that I had never encountered. James liked both posh bars and dives, but didn't like places with loud music or too many people, so it was at Von Trier's and County Clare, where most UW-Milwaukee students never went, that I met poets like Pieper and Hauser, who in turn

introduced me to poets closer to my age who they were reading, many of them online (social media was still fairly new then but we were all going on Pennsoud and reading blogs). It was James who introduced me to Milwaukee poets Bob Watt, Antler, Susan Firer, Jim Hazard, Matt Cook, Tyler Farrell, David Baptiste Chiro, Jonny Lohr, and Karl Saffran, all aesthetically different from him and from each other, which taught me that all kinds of people write poetry for all kinds of reasons. It was because of James that I first walked to Woodland Pattern and bought a copy of Louis Zukofsky's *A* from Chuck Stebelton.

As he got older, his poems increasingly sounded like his conversation but with a neo-modernist bent: casual yet sharp and playful, full of biographical and literary references and beautifully complex thoughts spinning off in surprising directions.

from *Fruitfulness*

A fetus warped enough
to be a medieval fortune hunter
vowed to ineluctable things
blessing itself purging itself,
beseeching attention,
pre-disposed to drink as much as her...

From *It Swings from Side to Side* (Arlen 2011)

SING IN THE LIMOUSIN DIALECT FOR MY EPITAPH

I went in whispers to the young punks
some of them Elenor of Guienne
some Bernart de Ventadour
or if you prefer
Josephine or Napoleon.

I was a mixture myself.

In the country river of love
I was born and changed once,
born and changed twice,
changed three times.

from *Epitaphery* (White Rabbit Press 1997)

His readings were always charged with energy, his delivery vatic and declamatory.

Most people interested in Irish literature don't bother with much of the modernist tradition beyond Beckett and Joyce, and while the SoundEye Festival and Keith Tuma's anthology have helped expose formally "innovative" Irish poetries (Maurice Scully, Catherine Walsh, Billy Mills, Randolph Healy, Geoffrey Squires, Mairéad Byrne, Fergal Gaynor, Jimmy Cummins, Michael Smith, Trevor Joyce), James remains ignored, largely because of geographical reasons: he lived in Milwaukee.

And he brought to Milwaukee something of the San Francisco he experienced at the tail end of the Renaissance (just after Jack Spicer died in 1965 and Robin Blaeser moved to Vancouver in 1966), where, while trying to avoid Robert Duncan (James was instrumental in getting him to come in Milwaukee in 1982). In San Francisco he became quite friendly with Graham Macintosh, John Allen Ryan, and George Stanley (there is a poor-quality Pennsoud recording of Stanley discussing him at the Kelly Writers House), all before the emergence of what became the west coast Language scene around Silliman. I'd argue he was one of the first Irish poets to absorb what was happening in the U.S. post-war avant.



left to right: Liddy, Chapson, leg of Thomas Hill, at Graham Mackintosh's press (Linotype machine in background), 574 Natoma St., San Francisco, 1968.

I think James has been neglected by critics because his work doesn't quite fit in with the Irish canon, but he published an incredible number of books, chapbooks, postcards, and "bumper stickers" as he'd call his short poems, many of which were written on the corners of letters -- letters to Edward Dahlberg, Anthony Kerrigan, George Stanley, John Allen Ryan, William Stafford, John Ashbery, William Everson/Br. Antoninus, William Dickey, John Montague, Austin Clarke, Thomas MacGreevy, Thomas Kinsella, Anthony Cronin, John Jordan, Leland Bardwell, McDara Woods, Paul Durcan, Pearse Hutchinson, Richard Riordan, Eamonn Wall, John Heath-Stubbs, John Wieners, Patrick Ryan, Michael Begnal, Kay Boyle, Charles Bukowski, Padriac Fiacc, Adrian Kenny, Herbert Kubly, Graham Mackintosh, Howard McCord, Knute Skinner, Gerard Smyth, Terence Winch, and Patrick Kavanagh.

To me James was important because, even though he very much existed in the institution, he was absolutely determined not to be institutional in any sense of the word. Since his death, poetry in Milwaukee has changed: it's much less exclusively white and male; much more mindful of the city's racial divisions. This is all necessary for a scene to thrive (though new hierarchies inevitably return) and speaks to the need for art in people's lives. In this context, I feel kind of silly romanticizing a bunch of guys gathered around a table of pint glasses to discuss poetry, but that's how it was. It's now evident to me that there is a need for institutions to do the hard work of extending these spaces to lesser-heard voices and to be more self-aware about the canon.

That said, James pushed me to keep writing poetry. He also taught me to go with one's gut and say what one thinks, and to foster that in others. His poetry was an admonition to himself and his friends to do just that.



James Liddy, Milwaukee, 2007. Photo by Nial Hartnett

[See 16 Poems by James Liddy]