

## DIASPORA ADDENDUM



*James Liddy*

[EDITORS' NOTE: Through an oversight, the following piece was omitted from issue three of *Metre* dealing with Irish poetry and the Diaspora.]

Not to be self-important or anything, but I have been an emigrant, an exile, a disappearing act, and an object on the horizon since 1967 when I left Dublin. I came out of a literary and alcoholic city-culture at its most swan-songish and worked in a succession of North American cities—San Francisco, Portland, New Orleans, and Milwaukee. The first of these drank as much as Dublin and had as many useful poets but not the same quality of bars except North Beach, while Milwaukee suggests Dublin without the same quality of poets but with the bars. I have been in Wisconsin since 1975 and sometimes on rainy afternoons my new city reminds me of my old, though not as much as Chicago which has Irish faces in the rain. Milwaukee can strike me as being as stodgy and as melancholy as Grafton Street in 1955 but with the exception that the former is more erotic; young America seethes as an artificial paradise of desire, at least in the head. To advance temptation, or perhaps just fantasy, the bars close some hours later. As I stand in the music of the last call I am the same writer I would have been in Dublin yet I get the impression my stance looks more sensual.

Maybe it is mostly illusion; I gaze into the mirror: I am an exile, I am not an exile. "Exile" has enough alienation in it to be a real condition yet it often can be read as part of the flashy supernaturalism of the Irish literary tradition. It could mean this, however: the artist type is away from family and friends so cannot be readily interrupted. Distance becomes the spark of revenant memory; writing can seem the activity of alcoholic and workaholic ghosts. The famous like Joyce, Wilde, and others used new domicile and café in a more exuberant mode than they would have in Ireland. Our circumstances are more modest, but do not dismiss the soldiering in far foreign fields.

And my reading list in the US has been different. If I had stayed, would I ever have heard of Lorine Niedecker, Jack Spicer, and John Wieners?

My generation heaves out of Modernism and the ambivalence of trav-

el and resettlement is inbuilt. Fragmentation and collage are stamped in our passports. Should I declare myself an emigrant? Changes in Ireland have come so fast that I do not find them enchanting. Your Ireland is dead, that clarifies the mind.

If the new emigration is not like the old exile, perhaps I appear in the twilight zone between them. Maybe both are just a reworking of the Joycean formula, have I ever left? For one, I wonder if anyone can ever leave the pre-Vatican II Church. You can see that spire from your window. Montague's words which introduced me to Cavafy first in an old *Bell* moved me unbearably in my McDaid's gilded youth: you grow old in the same city wherever you voyage, your hair whitens in the same street. The dreams and images of the past are possibly more full of vivid light, spectral rain, if you are physically sundered from mother, hedge, and river.

One advantage of *abroad, overseas*, is to be able to play with the matter of Ireland. You can camp it up or at the very least force it into unfamiliar patterns. Recently I have been writing some epitaphs for myself, and I seem to compose them easily about Dublin. History runs completely as I look back.

In mother's womb I sipped  
the elixir of nationalism and words.  
Her boyfriend in her mind Yeats  
gave me rhythms, Joyce sent invocation,  
Ginsberg bestowed liberation.  
In Hodges Figgis the City Lights books:  
I was devoured by *Howl*, I began  
hyperventilating. Bars of Dublin  
turned into jammed paradises  
with wandering dishevelled starlets.