



From the Source to the Sea: An Evocative Journey on the Emblematic River Liffey  
with Poet and Musician Billy Mills

Billy Mills's 2009 chapbook *Liffey* is a *tour de force* of a poetic composition—and I use the word “composition” advisedly, to indicate that it is very like a work of music, another of his compositional skills, in its characteristic flowing progress from beginning to ending perhaps nowhere but in the sea itself, in the whole world. It is also a masterpiece of what the New Critics referred to as the “imitative fallacy.” This is not to denigrate or insult it in any way, as since the time that they wrote, there have been many fine works of which one could say the same thing. It in short imitates a body of moving water.

The work follows the emotive movement of the body of water, the River Liffey, as it progresses through the countryside, ending as the river does not end, coursing through the capital city of Ireland, Dublin.

The work *Liffey* is divided into twelve generally but loosely connected sections made up of an impressionistic collection of phrases, clauses, sentences, and ordinary if evocative image words. As Billy is now a haiku master, one can see the early advent and precursor of this kind of skill in this poem in the fragmentary manner in which the sections are put together, though it is not itself haiku.

The words come racing forth, but in an orderly fashion in their reiterations (as I said, like musical water, having tonal qualities), with overlapping phrases written under or near each other like this, from poem section 12:

“as these words  
as I make them  
as they speak”

There is very little punctuation, as the stoppages of gushing water are few. As in says in the pages of *The I Ching* from Princeton University Press (Wilhelm/Baynes edition, 7<sup>th</sup> Printing 1997), (and I paraphrase loosely): “Water flows everywhere on and on, and nowhere piles up. It overcomes resistances in any place.” The implication is: “In this instance, be like water.” The work leaps up and dances in sparkling fashion in overlapping waves, divided only by the brief organizational rubric of the numbers at the top of each section (1-12).

Just like water, the poem picks up the flotsam and jetsam of human and natural life like the truncated story of three sisters (sections 3-5, with possibly a brief two-line resurfacing of a piece of that life in a later section). This happens nearly without beginning and without end, as the Liffey flows past their home in the countryside, turns them up as a subject carried on the waves of creative poetic discourse for a while, then pulls the subject down in the waves, to be only a brief segment of time (as a theme would run in music).

The River Liffey in the poem flows from a source (which is simultaneously said to be in Section 1 “poetry...craft...wisdom”), a source of water being known to be a living, giving form of life for people, animals, nature in general, and existence in particular. It flows in this poem into and through section 1-12, where it meets the Irish Sea.

As it starts and as in Section 7, Mills says:

“to remember we  
told stories  
at every stop”

in the human commerce on the waves.

In summation, the ellipses from section to section, phrase to phrase of this work, not in the sense of punctuation but in the delicate and deliberate manner again of haiku, let in full “resonances” of meaning and beauty, the observation contributing to it by being intense.

Billy, as you can read in the short biography at the end of the work, is a practiced word master well capable of having tackled this monumental subject and giving it order through letting the discourse rush and tumble through his hands in a skillful way. The work is fully worth a sensitive read, and appreciation should not be long in coming for a writer like Billy from a worldwide audience (the work was copyrighted in 2009). Please give Billy your earnest attention to his work. He can

be reached at @BmillsBilly on Twitter (now “X”), and he has an email address which he will possibly provide if you contact him there. He is also at: Billy Mills <https://www.patreon.com/user?u>.