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Life And Poetry Of James Clifford

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It has always appeared fascinating to the author, how some people can be forsaken in their homeland and known only to people of other countries wither they had never been, whose language they didn't speak, whose admiration they would've never tasted. Such was James Clifford, an English poet who was only famous in the Soviet Union, which to the author appeared as a meritorious mystery. While in England only a handful of people including his friends read his poems, in the USSR—and now in many post-Soviet countries—Clifford's works were translated, read and quoted, and they still are. James Clifford doesn't even have an English Wikipedia page, only a short note in Russian. Nevertheless, he never knew he was famous in the other part of the world and knew no fame in his homeland. He began writing shortly before The Second World War tore Europe apart, and, sadly, he never saw any of his poems published. In 1940, Clifford was conscripted and then did his duty protecting his country in an anti-aircraft battalion near Dover, England, before being transferred to mainland Europe in 1944 where he was killed fighting off a German tank attack in France. All the scarce information the world knows about James Clifford is from his unfinished autobiographical novella and his friends' memories.



The best preserved photo of James Clifford James Clifford was born in 1913 to a family of a bank clerk. James never knew his father—when he was only one year old, John Clifford was conscripted to fight in the First World War, and, in 1916 met his tragic death at Verdun, France. Soon after that, his mother Joanna died of tuberculosis, and young Clifford was fostered by his maternal grandfather, Richard Douglas, a former mechanic in the London dockyard repair shops. The grandfather became the most prominent figure in Clifford's life and poetry and one of the most mentioned people in the novella. James lovingly recreated the image of that old English craftsman, a man of generous spirit, wit, and joviality, stocky and bearded, having those mellow wrinkles in the corners of the eyes, and often wearing a melancholic smile. Grandfather Rick wasn't only his whole family but also one of the main sources of artistic inspiration. He, according to the poet, knew many English and Scottish folk songs and shanties, the influence of which is evident in some, especially early, Clifford's poems. As a teenager, Clifford found himself interested in painting and after high school, he studied for two semesters in a private art college, after which his interest in art disappeared as suddenly as it appeared. However, as it often happens, his time at the college was not a total waste. There Clifford first plunged into the hitherto unknown to him world of artistic bohemia, in an atmosphere of passionate debate, often moving from the field of art to politics. Later, he worked as a draftsman in a construction company in Brighton before he was conscripted in 1940 to meet, just like his father, his tragic fate. Only years after that, his life continued in his poetry, once Vladimir Lifschitz, a Soviet poet, started translating his work.

All translations of Clifford's *The Way Of Things*, a collection of poems followed by the novella were published in the Soviet Union, bypassing strict censorship. It was a Herculean task for authors who wanted to speak freely in their language, but a much milder task for prose and poetry coming from foreign languages of the non-Soviet world. The translator and a poet himself, Vladimir Lifschitz knew how difficult it was to become an officially published author and how difficult was to have your "free" personal poetic revelations read by someone rather than your friends, especially those written on "sensitive" topics. Anything related to politics and war was scrubbed by the world's most vigilant censors, including things written in the soldiers' barracks. Soviet soldiers were strictly limited in writing anything at the front except letters, and even their letters went through censorship. James Clifford in turn was different. That Englishman wrote whatever came into his reckless head, even war poetry. Consider this Clifford's poem "The Retreat In The Ardennes", which was likely written days or weeks before his death:

Oh, we all felt truly on fire, When all suddenly went haywire! Life we believed not worth living, Death - simply devoid of meaning. There were five of us left- all grunts In our dampish dugout The higher command had gone nuts And were on their way out. We drank whisky taking turns From a can with our brothers Burning all stuff that burns - Orders, lists from the others And when I - God's humble servant- Heard the fighting from afar I felt whole, yes I felt fervent Free at last, with no holds barred! By lord almighty, I was free From all the doubts and

miserias That had held me tight in chains. Hell, I was actually free Of all
your chaos, your damned spree, And of all those earthly pains! I will
forget that boggy grove The pallid sunrise that I saw And how ghostly
trees meshed All that slow-flowing flesh. But I'll remember forever How
we burned every order, How we tore all the wires, How we all felt on
fire With nothing we couldn't smash!

The reader can immediately see why Lifshitz was so imbued with Clifford's lyricism: to write like him, one must have been born free and served and fought in another army. Lifshitz wrote, "Such fresh freedom I have not felt since my childhood! But it is also clear that there is more passion in the Englishman's poems, that this freedom is not just declared in them, but is present in the very fabric of the poem - both in its plot (heroic drunkenness under the bombs) and in the diction - a Soviet poet would never see in print such lines as: "The higher command had gone nuts and were on their way out.'" But you, of course, could say so about other armies, which gave Clifford the full *carte blanche*. The same applied not only to war but to anything written about civilian life, well, and literally everything else. The beauty of making and publishing translations was in the opportunity to finally have a voice, because even in the translated poem, an intelligent Soviet reader, trained in the Aesopian mode of reading, could see a re-translation of their native reality. That, for Vladimir Lifshitz, was crucial.

During the Second World War, Lifshitz managed to meet with his friends Vadim Shefner, Anatoly Chivilikhin, and Alexander Gitovich in

the besieged Leningrad at the Astoria Hotel, where they together made their “Astorian Declaration”. Among other things, they included there the following points:

- | ...
1. Our friendship, persecuted during the pre-war years, proved to be one of the forces which helped us in the hardest days of the war and blockade to serve our fatherland.
 2. Our creative principles continue to be simple and clear: to write the truth (“Do not lie to yourself, and you will not lie to others”). In 1940, Yuri Tynyanov told us: “I know what you are fighting for: you are fighting to restore to poetry the lost value of the word.” We do not at all wish to see in the future this assessment of the poetry of our time: “... a lot was missing: conscience, feeling, tact, measure, intelligence; but a verbal fornication was growing”.
 3. Taking advantage of the fate’s grace, which brought us together in the third year of the war here, in the unheated room 124 of Astoria, we confirm the strength of our friendship and our determination to fight for a truthful and high Soviet art.

... Soon after the war, the authors of the Astorian Declaration were convinced that “truthful and high Soviet art” was an oxymoron. Even if it could be “truthful and high” it was always so in spite of being Soviet, not because of. Gitovich, Lifshitz, and Shefner were targets of anti-Semitic persecution during the years of the Soviet so-called “anti-cosmopolitan fight” (even though Shefner was not even Jewish, but a descendant of a Russian sailor of Swedish origin; hence the surname), while Anatoly Chivilikhin, a native Russian and with the “right” surname, in poetry prone to archaism, was left untouched. Moreover, in the fifties, he was promoted to a high-rank position at the

Writers' Union, and was even transferred to Moscow, where he later committed suicide. From the noose he was pulled out by Lifshitz himself, and for him, that whole situation was a terrible shock — they were always close and frank with each other.

The Soviet censorship and psychological and literary shackles were suppressing any urges to talk truthfully about reality or even just to yearn overtly. All that together made the legacy of the Englishman James Clifford, who also went through the same war, and coincidentally was even born in the same year, refreshing and revelatory for Vladimir Lifshitz. He translated and published all twenty of Clifford's poems, which immediately attracted significant attention from the public and critics. They were fascinated by the great precision and freedom of Clifford's verse unavailable to a Soviet poet. They were jubilant, such that a critic Y. Kolker left a triumphant remark, "In the Soviet Union you can publish anything!", for the poetry book that included Lifshitz's translation of Clifford's "Squares". The reader can themselves make a conclusion about what shock and delight the Soviet literary public experienced after reading this provocative and unhinged poem:

And yet the order of things is surreal. All of you - those baking loaves,
Spinning threads, smelting steel, – someone shamelessly ripped you off.

They stole your labour, leisure and love - They stole the light of your
eyes; Truths down your throats they shove Leaving you less and less
wise.

An answer to every question you now possess. By seeing it all, you

become blind. And their newspaper's letterpress Serves you instead of your mind.

They've given an answer to every question. And everyone - draped motley and grey, become a part of the metro's digestion Early morning and late in the day

You fill the streets like human stew, one common brain, one common will, people who know how to sew, people who know how to mill.

Here they go, row after row - One-two — One-two — is their drill, Just a parade, only for show, People who know how to kill...

But one day, in the midst of the grind that gives you the fodder you need, You decide to escape the confined Square box whose rules you heed.

You riot and shout: "They're robbers!" Feeling fooled and betrayed. And then they send to you talkers People who know how to persuade

Meaningful will be their words, Noble, exalted and kind. Like two times two, they will thwart All attempts to leave them behind.

And you - poor brother - will repent. Like a stray sheep, you'll be absolved. With chanting and careful lament to your square you will be returned

But if you choose to persist: - No, you can't take my will! They'll quietly emerge from the mist, People who know how to kill.

Tasting the acrid, you'll swallow your woe, While in your window, like in a dream, crossing the sky, black squares will show you the sun's disconsolate gleam.

The fact that this poem, written by a foreigner from a free country, was so precisely capturing Soviet reality that it felt almost anti-Soviet and dissident, while somehow still managing to circumvent the censorship. Clifford's poems, or rather Lifshitz's translations of them, were published in magazines such as *Nash Sovremennik*.

in 1964, and were later published as a standalone collection in 1974. Lifshitz wrote to his son, "There is a lot and plenty of talks about Clifford here. Yevgeny Yevtushenko even wants to write an article about him - on the subject of generations and so on. He [told me that he] talked to Eliot about him, who confirmed that Clifford is an excellent poet, well known in England. <...> The poets congratulate me on my fine translations. Anyway, Clifford is materialising at full throttle. And don't think about revealing my beautiful little secret to anyone...!" The poems from a half-decayed notebook found in a satchel on the half-decayed corpse of an unknown English soldier were destined for short fame in the poet's homeland and then almost complete oblivion, but, thanks to Vladimir Lifshitz, were turned into a legend in the Soviet Union. James Clifford lived! And Lifshitz was the one who gave him that life.

Howbeit, in 1974, when Lifshitz was preparing his collection of Clifford's poems for publishing, he added a short biographical note of

the poet, briefly reviewing James's life, mentioning his birth, how he ended up living with his grandfather, his childhood and teenage years, his work, his conscription, and his death at the Ardennes—everything that helped the author to prepare this story. At the end of that note, Lifshitz added, "Such could be the biography of this English poet that emerged in my imagination and materialised in verse..." Thus in a moment, James Clifford transcended from being a real poet to being a literary character, but then ceased to exist altogether as times changed. After the truth was revealed, Clifford was no longer allowed to appear in Lifshitz's last published volume in 1977, and disappeared from the literary space, until later Lifshitz's son, Lev Loseff, in 1997, uncovered the decades-long hoax in detail and brought an English alter-ego of his father, James Clifford, back to reality.

P.S.

The first part of this article is based (and daringly extended by the author) on the biography of James Clifford written by Vladimir Lifshitz, that exact pivotal note he wrote for the collection that revealed the truth about Clifford.

The second part is largely based, and at times it even represents a partial free translation of Lev Loseff's article "The Tenacious Life Of James Clifford: The return of one mystification" published in the first issue of *Zvezda (Звезда- Star)* magazine in 2001. Lev Loseff emigrated to the USA in 1976, earned a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures from the University of Michigan, and became a professor of Russian

literature at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, a position he held until his death thirty years later in 2009. Loseff was a prolific author, writing both poetry and non-fiction works on Russian literature.

*In the end, the author desires to say huge thanks and send radiant beams of appreciation to * @ * who translated “The Retreat At The Ardennes” and helped the author to translate “Squares”.*

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