

*D.J. Enright 1920-2002*

D.J. Enright died last December at the age of 82. In his last book, *Injury Time*, written while cancer was slowly and painfully killing him, he genially comments on an item in the newspaper: "In a separate development, we hear of a Nigerian missionary who has come to Britain to rescue the country from 'the dark forces of humanism'. (At last someone is taking humanism seriously.)" The parenthetical joke is typical. D.J. Enright took humanism seriously, but by no means unhumorously.

Enright was the only working-class member of the Movement: he was born in Leamington, the son of an Irish postman and a Welsh chapel-going mother. In *The Terrible Shears* (1973), and some other books, he writes, with no self-pity, of his childhood (an act of self-exposure of which his mother thoroughly disapproved: she was only faintly mollified by the fact that the book was dedicated to her). Succeeding at School Certificate, he then went on to Downing College, Cambridge, where he was taught by F.R. Leavis, whose insistence on a moral dimension to literature never left him. But Leavisite leanings did not help him in his applications for academic posts, one reason why Enright spent much of his academic career abroad. He took his D.Litt. at what was then the the Farouk I University in Alexandria (thus an Englishman, writing about a German, was examined in French by Egyptian professors). Enright's overseas teaching took him also to Japan and Singapore, where he was colourfully denounced as "a beatnik mendicant professor" (an insult he later used in the title of a memoir) after causing offence to the government in his inaugural lecture at the University of Singapore in 1960. Only his popularity with his students saved him from expulsion.

As well as bringing European literature to the East, Enright spent much time trying to bring Goethe and Proust to the English. One notes that his enthusiasm for foreign writers and humanistic culture put him very much at variance with the

Movement image of insular philistinism (which perhaps attaches only to Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis, in fact). Enright's role in the formation of the Movement was considerable, though: he edited *Poets of the 1950s*, one of the two anthologies to launch the group, and can be credited with noticing Philip Larkin's work earlier than most.

His æsthetic link with the Movement can be found perhaps in his rejection of the Apocalyptic poets and the Social Realists in preference for the more sceptical rationalism of post-war English culture. But there is more than one form of commitment: in *Injury Time*, Enright remarks that "the trouble with belief is that if it isn't fundamental, it isn't much of a belief", and he was arguably, if paradoxically, a fundamentalist sceptical humanist. His belief in certain old-fashioned virtues is never apologetic, and never unintelligent.

His own poetry was closer to prose, for the most part: instead of musical effects or ornamental metaphoric flourishes, Enright mostly employed unshowy statements, propositions and speculations, allowing his words to appear straightforward, precise, unadorned: almost as if they had been translated from an elegant foreign language in a carefully literal manner. As a result, there is almost no difference between his poems and the entries in his commonplace books: both rely on aphorism (his own and those of others) and anecdote, with an accompanying delight in irony (on which he wrote an attractive book, *The Alluring Problem*, 1986) and paradox (and, occasionally, the fruitful error or deviance of misprint or dire pun). Haiku and tanka were two concessions to traditional form, perhaps because of his time out East, but more likely because he enjoyed subverting their potential portentousness and mysticism with bathetic and ironic content.

Enright will be greatly missed, by a large number of people: family, colleagues, friends, and a vast number of readers who never met the man, but who were moved, amused, stimulated and educated by his words. His writing is gentle yet uncompromising, showing pity but not sentimentality, critical of his age yet sceptical (for the most part) of nostalgia. There is a good-humoured forgiveness even in his assaults on error (whether ethical or typographic). He was a learned and literary man who could write with unfussy clarity and wit. He showed that there was still life left in humanism: he lived it, and he lived it well.