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978-0-521-13465-1 - D. J. Enright: Poet of Humanism

William Walsh

Excerpt

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I

CAREER

Dennis Joseph Enright was born on 11 March 1920, in Leamington, Warwickshire, to an Anglo-Irish family. His father was an ex-soldier 'obliged early in life to enlist in the British Army as a result of the premature death of his father, a Fenian'. He was also 'an absent-mindedly lapsed Catholic'. His English mother, though she also had a trace of Welsh in her, was 'vaguely a chapel-goer, but only because she felt the Church of England belonged to Them and was socially a cut above the likes of Us. (A primitive way of dividing up the world, perhaps, but events had generally borne it out.)'¹ Being brought up in a working-class family of mixed nationality, background, creed, has its disadvantages – not simply economic ones – but it had its advantages too. For one thing it deprived Enright pre-natally of 'the ability to comprehend religious or political ideologies, race, nationality and nationalism – phenomena', he observes drily, 'which one needs to have a firm grasp of if one is to lead a stable and balanced life'² in our present world. Enright's conception of a full and balanced life, as both his career and art confirm, was of a sort for which this 'deficiency' in training was the right preparation, the life of a poet requiring as it does a more gripping and less cloudy sense of reality. Not that there were not strains in his life as a child, consequences of poverty, of the early loss of a father, of having to be supported by an overworked mother, of a constricted milieu, and in his life in school, Leamington College, and a Midland community which he felt to be suffused with '. . .the. . . intense and petty concern for gentility. . .the habit of judging people by their most external manifestations. . .the sense of being stifled mentally and emotionally'.³

¹ *Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor*, London 1969, p. 103.

² Biographical material supplied for *Midcentury Authors*, a book forthcoming from H. W. Wilson and Co., New York.

³ *Ibid.*

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Some forty years later, when as a well-known poet, writer, critic, Enright visited China, he watched in Canton a class of exquisitely behaved children, their eyes above protective gauze masks delicately averted from the unfortunate freak of a foreigner, receive a lesson of brutishly xenophobic propaganda, and he reflected on the brainwashing he had undergone at the age of these children.

Nothing half as carbohic as this, no – just that it was merely right and proper to die for your king and country, that when there wasn't a war there was unemployment which was less stirring and worse for the country, that on Empire Day you saluted the flag and sang a special hymn, that foreigners were silly and wicked, that too much reading was bad for the eyes and other parts of you as well, and that God intended you to abide in that state of life to which He had called you, with the exception of a few scholarship boys who would have to be eternally grateful to society for going against God on their behalf.⁴

Being a scholarship boy in the 1930s, as Enright himself was, carried with it a set of feelings which, with the expansion of higher education and the wider extension of the grant system, is hard now to grasp. It made one conscious of merit and independence – in the circumstances of the times, of a very considerable degree of both of these things certainly – but it also communicated a sense of the gratitude expected by the kindly institution and the magnanimous society in which it existed. Scholarships brought Enright to Cambridge where he read English at Downing as a pupil of F. R. Leavis, an experience which had a lasting influence upon his personal character and his critical practice – though I hasten to say, an *absorbed* influence. Enright has never been a dwarf Leavis or in any particular a stereotyped *Scrutineer*. Leavis impressed Enright as one of the very few teachers he had ever come across who actively and deeply wanted his pupils to follow what he was saying and who treated them as something approaching equals without a hint of condescension. ‘. . . I consider myself extremely lucky to have had as tutors both Leavis and James Smith, for Professor – as he now is – Smith had the gift of bringing out the most gauche of pupils by deceiving them into thinking that they were teaching him and that he was grateful for it.’⁵

Enright was an unusual undergraduate, remarkable not only for his academic promise but for a distinctive and early literary

⁴ *Memoirs*, p. 200.

⁵ *Conspirators and Poets*, London 1966, p. 31.

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gift as well as for a singularly individual and attractive personality. Cambridge, the proper context for the development of these qualities, perhaps required at that time rather more than natural endowment. Certainly in these days such a person would have found himself very rapidly impelled up the academic escalator but at that time promise, particularly when it had realised itself at Downing and in *Scrutiny*, was by no means a guarantee of success, or even of work.

Life was hard then, in all sorts of ways. It was hard for 'scholarship boys' to get scholarships enough to enable them to go up to the university. It was hard to get published. It was difficult to start a magazine and difficult to keep it going. It was hard to find a post. Some experienced remarkable difficulty in obtaining promotion in their professions, or even security: in the 'Retrospect' appended to the reprint of *Scrutiny* Leavis mentions that it was not until he was 'well on into his fifties' that he at last achieved a full University Lectureship.⁹ Today a lot of us are Professors, and most of us at any rate contrive to become full Lecturers well before our fifties. Professor Kermode, incidentally, remarks of *Scrutiny* that 'merely to appear in those pages, it seems, was to found a reputation'. Yes, but what sort of reputation? Paranoia does not loom large in my own make-up – I confess at once to a sense of having done rather better for myself in life than I deserve – so I can assure Professor Kermode, without any personal bitterness, that for a candidate for home university posts immediately after the war – let alone earlier – to have appeared in the pages of *Scrutiny* was considerably more disadvantageous than to have appeared in no pages at all. Some of us went abroad in the first case – and whether we afterwards regretted it is another matter – simply because foreign universities were less particular or (perhaps through backwardness) less prejudiced against *Scrutiny*'s minor fry. What it was like in the 'thirties and early 'forties I can only imagine – but I *can* imagine.

That the Establishment of today is so much more tolerant, or nervous, or splintered, or amorphous, may in part be the result of the hard and telling knocks which *Scrutiny* gave the Establishment of its time. Today nothing succeeds like satire, as the history of the Angry Young Men so aptly indicates. Voices crying in the wilderness are soon after to be heard echoing through the corridors of power. And the academic arena is more often given over to exhibitions of grunt-and-groan than to genuine battle. In the age of affluence and atomic anxiety the missionary spirit seems hard to come by and hard to hold. Today *Scrutiny* would receive a grant from some foundation or other, it would even be able to pay its contributors, probably. But whether anything really like *Scrutiny* would last for long these days is a more doubtful question.

The generation to which the present writer belongs has a foot in each of these two worlds, and there is small excuse for *us* if we forget the con-

⁹ 'For the first half-dozen years of *Scrutiny* I had no post and no salary, and was hard put to it to make a living.' *Listener*, 1 November 1956.

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ditions, the atmosphere, in which the Leavises lived and worked during their formative and perhaps their greatest years. You *had* to be devoted, you had to be tough, to survive in any serious and minority-supported endeavour in those days.⁷

Accordingly – after the above I feel that a more neutral word would muffle the correct tone – accordingly, Enright entered the profession, the university teaching of English Literature, to which he has devoted some thirty years, in Alexandria at the then Farouk I University. He worked in Egypt for four years. During that time he married Madeleine Harders, a French woman, a teacher of French Literature and a gifted painter. They have one daughter, Dominique, now an undergraduate at Oxford. He published in Alexandria a volume of verse, *Season Ticket*, from which only a small group was preserved for reprinting in his first English volume, *The Laughing Hyena*.⁸ In his autobiographical note for *Midcentury Authors* Enright refers the reader to his novel *Academic Year*⁹ for details of his life during this period, and certainly that novel, to which I shall return in due course, conveys in a remarkably mature and confident manner the experience of the English teacher in an Egyptian university of the time as well as his life outside. Bacon, Packet and Brett are three teachers of English at the University of Alexandria, who embody the experienced, the ardent and the intolerant in the English character, and present a kind of English solidity in the face of the aspiring and impalpable Egyptian sensibility. The novel is beautifully light in its touch and it contains scenes, on teaching and the conduct of examinations in the university, which are the pure milk of gaiety.¹⁰ It may be that there is an inclination to reflect gently on the passage of events and that the action is seen through a slightly misted air. But the spirit of that melodramatic city with its horri-

⁷ *Conspirators and Poets*, pp. 34–5.

⁸ London 1953.

⁹ London 1955.

¹⁰ Cf. ‘University Examinations in Egypt’, in *The Laughing Hyena*.

The air is thick with nerves and smoke: pens tremble in sweating hands:
Domestic police flit in and out, with smelling salts and aspirin:
And servants, grave-faced but dirty, pace the aisles,
With coffee, Players and Coca-Cola.

Was it like this in my day, at my place? Memory boggles
Between the aggressive fly and curious ant – but did I really
Pause in my painful flight to light a cigarette or swallow drugs?

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ying beggars, simple fellahin, its cotton-Pashas, the sophisticated society of its big houses, is evoked with success remarkable in a first book. As successful and rare is the wit. Indeed, the combination of liberality of spirit with an exquisite capacity for mocking anything grand or spiritually obese makes *Academic Year* a memorable experience for the reader. It is also, like the Egyptian poems in *The Laughing Hyena*, a fine distillation of that part of Enright's life.

The Voice

What is the mystery of the Orient? It is the Voice,
Its dimensions in space and time, its lack of inhibition.
After size of belly, size of progeny, and size of bank balance, size of voice
Is the worthy, awful thing: the monstrous mark of Godhead.

No, it is not the tram that is quiet, it is the passengers
Who possess the Voice. No, it is not the Revolution at last,
It is two who possess the Voice, saying good day to each other.
No, it is not a village Cassandra predicting a slump in cotton,
It is a female of the Voice, keening some distant relative whom she never
met.

And as the thermometer rises, so does the Voice. In August,
When the body lies slumped in the shade, you still will meet
The Voice, boldly parading the burning streets. Oh,
More monumental than old Egypt's pyramids is its Voice!

And yet to what small end! Listen, my Egyptian friends,
I have heard a voice more powerful than yours, one that carries further
And shakes down houses. I heard it in a smart café,
Whispering some short sly European phrase.

It was in Alexandria in 1948 that Enright first evinced, publicly at any rate, that capacity or instinct for tripping lightly into disaster,¹¹ whether comic or cruel, which has been a feature of his career in half a dozen countries. The occasion could hardly have been more proper, a Sunday afternoon stroll with an Irish colleague along the Corniche to take tea with the Professor of Modern History and his wife. A bored bystander, a crowd less than well-disposed to extraneous elements, shouts of 'Jewish spies' and they were arrested by a small scared policeman. The police station was 'a little squalid hell of its own, smelling of urine, with

¹¹ 'The Fairies', in *Addictions*, London 1962.

Hard up at the time, the fairies gave me
what they could: the gift
Of laying the right hand on the wrong door-knob.

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women squatting in the corridors weeping noisily for their arrested husbands or sons, and policemen pruriently unwinding their bandages to compare the wounds they had acquired in the course of the last student demonstrations. Here and there were gargantuan play-pens, crammed with prisoners vociferously declaring their own innocence and the guilt of others.' There was the usual bawling interrogation by a lieutenant who had studied his role in a B-feature film. 'When did you swim ashore from that Jewish ship?' Rescue was effected by a clerk in the University administration who was one of a large group of admirers having coffee with the lieutenant's superior, all of them exclaiming 'over the latter's wisdom, his power, his wealth and probably his sexual potency too'. Drama collapsed into farce when Enright and his friend, stumbling out of the police station, suggested that as the police had made them late for their appointment, they might like to stand them a taxi: an idea that brought the house down. Later, a tip that he was being watched by the Secret Police explained 'why I had kept coming across those outstanding personages, uncommonly noble of visage and bearing, large and healthy-looking, carrying pastoral staffs, whom I had vaguely taken for the Moslem equivalent of dandyish Roman cardinals or for Egyptian landowners who disdained to wear foreign dress'.¹² A month later he was summoned to the University administration where it was apologetically explained that he had fallen under suspicion because on the question relating to religion on the entry form he had declared himself a Wesleyan Methodist. It was explained that *They* thought it might be something Jewish. Feeling like an apostate, Enright changed it to Church of England and the Secret Police lost all interest in him.

There were to be similar episodes dotted over Enright's career, some as daft as the Egyptian one, like the encounter with the man-eating landlady in Berlin, others as maddening, like those collisions with prudent British diplomats and flinching cultural officers, some more sinister, like the interview with the Acting Minister for Labour and Law in Singapore in 1960, who threatened him with immediate deportation because of a set of pretty orthodox remarks on the nature of culture in – of all things – an Inaugural Lecture on 'Robert Graves and the Decline of Modernism', or the wholly irrational and terrifying beating-up by a dozen policemen in Bangkok when Enright was on his way

¹² *Memoirs*, p. 104.

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divining in the current, shabby language natural vivacities, suppleness of tone, and a habit of treating a serious subject in a comedian's manner. Even so early in his career as this we see one who celebrates in an individual and wholly contemporary voice the human virtues of hope and charity.

It was a personality, of which these qualities are the natural expression, that Enright brought to bear upon his experience of Japan, where he was to spend the years from 1953 to 1956 teaching at the private Kōnan University near Kobe. His vision of Japan articulated sharply in *The World of Dew: Aspects of Living Japan*,¹⁵ and more profoundly in poems in *Bread rather than Blossoms*¹⁶ and *Some Men are Brothers*,¹⁷ is as different from Lafcadio Hearn's, a frozen, aesthetic vase, as it is from the economist's current view of the industrial giant. It takes its stand on the very strong and simple, but also difficult and evasive, proposition that Japan like any other state is to be judged on human grounds and in the belief that civilisation has to do with the diminution of the traces of human tears. In both Japanese history and sensibility Enright found something almost like a grudge against the merely human. The unusually complicated system of Japanese behaviour appears to be based not on a recognition but on a proud and yet pathetic denial of humanity. The Japanese set themselves intolerably high standards and the severest restrictions and broke away from them in fits of sudden and desperate violence. 'Unable to forgive others they have resorted to assassination; unable to forgive themselves they have turned to suicide, in its most agonising forms.'¹⁸ Their art, similarly, has the most fragmentary and tenuous connection with human life, its beauties are those of strict stylisation, the faces in its painting washed clean of all feeling, the gap between its poetry and its ordinary life wider than that of any other race. The Japanese object was to become either a god or, if that proved impossible, a work of art. All Enright's sympathies, in a society which showed this formalised animus against common humanity, were on the side of the young Japanese, 'whether the young writer, the young man in the street or the young woman who manages to keep off the streets'.¹⁹ It was his sympathy and his strenuously human concern which made Enright in Japan as elsewhere so rare a teacher of

¹⁵ London 1955.¹⁶ London 1956.¹⁷ London 1960.¹⁸ *The World of Dew*, p. 15.¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 21.

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students. Modest in aim – ‘I have no wish. . .to take into my hands the springs of their being. They are neither tap-water nor plasticine²⁰ – erudite and witty, a bit of a clown, feeling himself always in the presence of another human being, he was able, as I myself have observed in visiting universities in Singapore, in India and even in Britain, where he has taught, to affect the young deeply and significantly.

On Enright’s first day in Japan one of his future pupils came to see him looking intensely worried, an expression which he later became accustomed to. “‘We do not know what to call you,” he blurted out. “Call me what you like, within limits.” “‘Might we. . .could we,” he asked timidly, “call you ‘sir’?” “‘By all means – why not?” (After all, “sir” is a more neutral title than *sensei*;²¹ and somehow or other the latter is rarely bestowed upon foreign teachers, I suspect.) “Well, sir,” he explained in a relieved tone, “the Americans told us that we should not call anybody sir.”²² It was students like these, including those with rented tape recorders, paid for by the sale of blood to Transfusion Centres, who came to snatch a free lesson from the horse’s mouth or to get Enright to record in his pure and undefiled English the second half of *Black Beauty* or the first half of the *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* and who took disinclination as a curious foreign joke to be smiled at and disregarded: it was students like these and bar girls like Akichan, with a child, an old mother and a bed-ridden consumptive husband to support, who with others of her kind seemed to him instances of the most arrant, most heart-breaking wastage of human goodness, who made up for the other aspects of living Japan like ‘the blank unbridgeable chasm between an exquisite sensitivity towards the arts and a stolid insensitivity towards human suffering’,²³ or again what was expressed in the

²⁰ *Memoirs*, p. 179.

²¹ *Sensei*. ‘A magic word, and yet very equivocal. *Sensei* means “teacher” plus “scholar” plus “beloved master”; it means intellect, learning, culture, taste; it means China, *tanka*, *haiku*, Nō plays, pottery, Zen. It means head in the clouds, hermit, thinker. Yet it also means “those who can’t do, teach”, a reciter of old lecture notes, the over-worked and under-paid servant of a government institution or a private corporation, a man who hasn’t the wit to grow rich by shifting theoretical money from one bank to another, the uneasy tenant of an Ivory Tower that an atom bomb has fallen on.’ (*The World of Dew*, p. 24.)

²² *Ibid.* p. 58.

²³ *Memoirs*, p. 38.

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awful fight to get on or off trains, 'the collision at the door between those desiring to leave and those desiring to enter, the mild noises of distress from those being trampled underfoot and the mild noises of impersonal deprecation from those doing the trampling'.²⁴ Students and bar girls, universities and bars, bulk large in Enright's recorded memories of Japan, as he himself observes. The reason, he explains, is that the middle-class in Japan, like the middle-class elsewhere, remained secret and detached. But another figure which he met on a cold night in 1955, swathed from head to ankles in straw, remained in his mind. He has tried, he says, 'to exorcise [it] by means of poems written at intervals ever since, but without success.'

What did I fear the most?
To ignore and bustle past?
To acknowledge and perhaps
Find out what best was lost?²⁵

In 1956 Enright went as *Gastdozent* to the Free University of West Berlin, under the auspices of the British Council. When he had gone from Egypt to Japan he noticed an interesting difference in the characteristic misuses of English of Japanese and Egyptian students. 'My experience has been that those of the Egyptians are predominantly comic in spirit – slovenly, a bit brutish, cavalier, unpredictable but yielding to elucidation, orotund and occasionally superb. Those of the Japanese, on the other hand, are predominantly tragic – contorted, agonized, tight-lipped, sometimes baffling, consistent and insistent, and occasionally poetic in a gently sad sort of way.'²⁶ When he went from Japan to Germany he noticed a different kind of difference. The bad public behaviour of the Japanese had often disturbed and angered him. The good public behaviour of the Germans he found more acutely alarming. 'Disorder along with charm is feasible; order accompanied by politeness is highly acceptable. But order along with a stupid uncouthness is intolerable.'²⁷ In Germany, to start with, he was regarded by his colleagues at the Free University as an academic nobody, foisted upon them, perhaps for sinister reasons, by the British Military Government. In the eyes of the British Military Government, on the other hand, he was regarded as a slightly seedy non-member of that organisation, car-less, sports-jacketed

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 39.²⁶ *The World of Dew*, p. 97.²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 37.²⁷ *Memoirs*, p. 58.