

REPLY TO CONLETH ELLIS

Ask a rhetorical question and you get a silly answer. In *Poetry Ireland Review* No. 14 I wrote about the group of poets in Irish who first came together at UCC in 1968 and subsequently published their work in *Innti* and various individual collections from 1970 on. Their achievement seemed all the more remarkable to me given the almost complete silence of the poets who should have immediately preceded them. The *Innti* poets faced into a silence, with no context or continuity to ease their early progress. What happened, I asked, to the generation which should have formed the link between that of Ó Direáin and Ó Ríordáin and that of Davitt, Ní Dhomhnaill, Rosenstock, *et al*? My own (sensible) answer, as I looked for the Irish-language contemporaries of Montague, Kinsella, Heaney and Longley who began publishing during the fifties and sixties, was 'They are not there.'

Then along comes an irritated Conleth Ellis (*PI Review* No. 15): 'Here they are', he says, marching in eighteen poetic conscripts, birthdates presented for inspection. A little less irritation and more thought might have given Corporal Ellis pause. If, as well as the birthdate, he had given the year of the first published collection in each case, it would have been more informative, although considerably less impressive. Of the nineteen names on his list, how many had published a collection in Irish by 1968? Three. And none of those more than one. As I wrote: 'A few lone voices, infrequent books, but nothing sustained.' Ease the critical date up to 1970 and the tally rises to six – still less than a third of those on the Ellis list.

Now, I would not wish to be misunderstood by Mr. Ellis – and still less by anyone else. The excellence or otherwise of the poets on his list is not an issue here. Several of them, including Conleth Ellis himself, have made (are now making) a vital contribution to the course of Irish poetry. But this seems to have come about as a reversal of the expected order of things. The older generation of poets has followed, or at best has run alongside, the younger as it announced itself. As forerunners or pacemakers, nearly all the names on the Ellis list are irrelevant. And lest Mr. Ellis get irritated again, here is one of those at the head of his list prefacing a first collection: 'Formhór a bhfuil

anseo, scríobhadh iad ó scoil gheimhridh Merriman 1969 i leith. Ag éisteacht dom le filí óga Éireann in Aonach Urmhumhain – ag éisteacht amháin a bhíos – bhuaíl sé isteach i mo chroí gur mhór an náire dom, agus a raibh de bhuntáistí Gaeilge agam, nach rabhas ag cur le sruth na héigse.’ (P. Ó Fiannachta, *Ponc*, 1970).

The editor of *Poetry Ireland Review* has expressed a hope for further debate of my original remarks and on the response by Ellis, but there really is nothing more to be said. What might be interesting would be a consideration of just why there was this hiatus during the fifties and sixties. If the Ellis list demonstrates anything, it is that there was a number of potential poets who, for one reason or another, did not make a showing until relatively late. Perhaps they were simply unfortunate in not having the cohesive force of a shared point of contact, and the energy of someone like Davitt. But that can be no more than part of the answer. A full account would need to take account of the following:

1. Publishing outlets.

Poets writing in English had the opportunity of turning to British publishing houses in addition to Dolmen which made a speciality of contemporary Irish Poetry. Allen Figgis, an Clóchomhar and Sáirseal agus Dill tried valiantly on limited resources but could not constitute a secure publishing base for poetry.

2. Periodicals.

Before *Innti* there was no Irish language periodical devoted exclusively to poetry. *Comhar* did much by giving generous amounts of space to poems, and more than anything else acted as exemplar to the *Innti* poets, but it was not a specialist poetry magazine.

3. The state of Irish.

There were changes in the social structure of Ireland during the sixties, one effect of which was a radical demographic change in the Irish-speaking population and in attitudes to Irish. This had consequent effects on the relationship of a poet to his community and audience.

4. Attitudes to modern Irish literature.

Modern English literature was being taught and taken seriously in university courses; was this also the case with Irish? The

whole question of the relationship between contemporary writing, the undergraduate syllabus, and the formation of a readership over the past three decades awaits investigation. It can have been no less crucial for poets in Irish than it was for poets in English. For instance, it is surely of significance that both Seán Ó Ríordáin and Seán Ó Tuama were in contact with UCC students around 1968.

These are some of the factors which must have played a part in the attenuation and resurgence of poetry in Irish. It would be useful to know more.

– Peter Denman