LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND LIFE

By Rev. GERALD O'NOLAN, M.A.

With the thunders of a mad world-war reverberating in our minds, if not actually on our coasts, it may seem somewhat *mal à propos* to invite the introspection which the above theme demands. But the war that rages without makes it doubly necessary to have peace and harmony and unity within. Existing international relations will doubtless in a short time be considerably dislocated. The fate of Ireland is very doubtful. But, whatever happens, it is our duty to do our best to secure that, little or great, in peace or war, self-governed or otherwise, we shall be, in essentials at least, and fundamentals, something more than a travesty on nationhood. It is very strange that, when we seemed to be on the eve of Home Rule, the one thing which, humanly speaking, could have prevented the fulfilment (at least the part fulfilment) of our hopes should have suddenly appeared (like a *Deus ex machina* in a tragedy), although it was such a rare and portentous occurrence, as the outbreak of a European war. It almost seems as if Providence did not wish us to undertake self-government until we are better fitted for the task. Indeed there are some who think that material prosperity and national independence are not for Ireland at all; that hers is the harder, if higher and holier, calling—to work out her salvation in poverty and suffering and subjection, and to lead the children of other nations, by the paths of prayer and privation, into the all-absorbing unity of the Church. I shall not discuss this theory here. I am rather disposed to think that our country may one day come back to her

own, and, without prejudice to her spiritual mission, take an honoured place on earth among the nations, if only she promote her own natural development from within. Possibly that development might go on more swiftly under the congenial influence and protection of a home government. But, independently altogether of Home Rule, independently also of what may be the ultimate material and spiritual destiny of Ireland, the real questions for Irishmen to tackle and to solve are these: Are we prepared to admit that at present our internal nationhood is not adequately developed? Are we prepared to admit that our national unity is gapped, impaired, imperfect? Are we prepared to admit that there is a health-giving germ which might be made to permeate the nation's vitals, changing water into vivifying blood, and making flesh and bone and muscle of what is now decaying tissue? This force, this germ, this embryo of national vigour and life is the Irish language.

I have said that the question of the wisdom of spreading the Irish language is independent of the question of Home Rule, and of the ultimate destinies of the Irish people. It is also quite independent of the possibility or impossibility of restoring Irish as the language of the country. All these things—the necessity for home government; the peculiar spiritual destiny of Christian Ireland, which certainly seems to be foreshadowed in history; the alleged impossibility of restoring Irish as the vernacular of the country—all have been brought forward from time to time as objections to the cult of the Irish language, and as excuses for refusing to join its votaries. These objections have been answered, and answered well. It has been clearly demonstrated, over and over again, that as objections they are quite invalid, and as excuses of the most flimsy texture. The question is, in fact, no longer debatable. Every sane-minded person in Ireland, no matter what his politics, religion, position, education may be, must admit as a first principle that if Ireland is to remain, or to become again, a nation, she must

become *the Irish* nation; and that to aim at making her the Irish nation without the strong natural foundation of the Irish language, would be the same as to build a house on sand, and certain to be followed by the same headlong ruin. I have no intention, therefore, of discussing such a chimerical proposition here. No public man of any self-respect or standing will dare to-day to oppose our position. All the opposition to the tenets of the revivalist may be characterised either as the scoffing of the selfish, or the trifling of the insincere, or the muddled mouthings of the ignorant. We have nothing to do with them here. It is to the unselfish, the sincere, the well-informed revivalist I wish to address myself. But, unfortunately, I find myself in an attitude of partial, or apparent, hostility. I might indeed praise them for many things. But we are too fond of praising one another in this country. And in any case friendly criticism will be productive of better results.

Here and there one does see a phase of the language movement of which one must say, *In hoc non laudo.* Language is a strangely complex thing. Its vocables have been compared to the stones and blocks that go to build a temple or a palace. And they are in truth the raw material out of which the palaces of thought, the temples of literature, have been built. Take up a dictionary. How cold and lifeless seem the words as they stand in columns there in strict alphabetical order. But look at these same words in the products of literature; listen to them as they proceed in brilliant beauty, warming, illuminating, inspiring, from the lips of poet, preacher, patriot, philosopher. At the creative breath of genius they take on new form and shape, and march along in splendid phalanx, to the music of all human emotions, instinct with life and thought and feeling, penetrating into the secret places of our souls, reaching even 'unto the division of the soul and the spirit.' Is it any wonder that the manipulation of such potent, yet such perilous, elements should be a task as difficult, as delicate, as the

most abstruse experiment in Nature's own laboratory? Is it any wonder that we, would-be makers of the Irish language, should sometimes shrink from this mysterious chemistry of literature for fear of marring it? Even the greatest writers in other languages—whose familiarity with the medium of expression was not impaired by years of disuse and neglect, whose art was supported by centuries of unbroken tradition, both of the written and the spoken word—even they have sometimes missed their ideal and sunk into solecism, or even bathos:

> Indignor, quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus.

We are handicapped by the years of inaction, persecution, indifference. And yet we *must* succeed. We must *make* the Irish language. We must produce a new Irish literature—a literature that will enshrine and ennoble all that is best in the language, and be at once the reflection and the exemplar of our life as the Irish nation. Hence the title of this paper.

Our language is the very foundation of the national life. On the future Irish literature will depend the preservation and development of the language; and this literature, as I have said, must at once record the present, and recall the past, and resuscitate their glories, and greater glories, in the future. This is the true business of the revivalist, and these three words—language, literature, and life—express in crystallised form the true compass and horizon of the Irish movement. Now, what is the prospect, on present lines, of the production in the near future of something really great in Irish literature? It is not a pleasant prospect. It is not a hopeful prospect. We must reform our methods, and the reform must begin in the primary school, and run right through the whole educational curriculum up to, and into, the University. The writer has had considerable experience of learners and teachers of Irish, north, south, east and west of Ireland. It will not be amiss to say a word to them under each of the three headings of this paper.

There is first of all the purely linguistic aspect of the language. Perhaps we are prone to pay too much attention to this. There is a strong tendency to deal with words as words, and neglect their other and more important aspects. We see traces of this tendency in the frantic discussions as to whether, e.g., deaċaiḋ or deaġaiḋ is the 'correct' form; whether freagraḋ (with a final ḋ) is not an attempt to kill the Irish language; whether freagairt (*horribile dictu !*) is not an outrage on decency, a perversion of history, a sufficient answer to the question *cui bono* in reference to the revival of Irish; whether the very name of the Gaelic League—Connraḋ na Gaeḋilge—is not enough to damn the whole movement as the off pring of misguided linguistic quackery; whether the mere mention of our native language (in the nominative) as Gaeḋilg should not be enough to sound its death-knell in the ears of scholars attuned to the classic 'correctness' of ancient days. There *are* people who think that these are really vital questions. I have spoken publicly on previous occasions about this bane of purism or classicism in the Irish movement. It is futile, I am afraid, to argue with the classicist. I should sooner hope to give a blind man a clear conception of a complex scheme of colours than to convince the purist of the error of his ways. He is perhaps a necessary evil and, like most necessary evils, will produce some modicum of good. At all events he has obtruded his personality in all countries, at some time or other, in the history of every language; and whilst he has caused no little disturbance and dissension, he has never done any real harm to the progress of the language. How could he? If this world is all a fleeting show, it would be hard to expect that language—that most volatile and flexible and fluctuating, perhaps, of all sublunary things—should remain permanent, fixed, unchangeable. There is no fixity or finality in language. Change is the essential condition of its life. Once its words become fixed absolutely in form and meaning, you may take it that its dissolution as a living language is at

hand. If the ideal of the classicist or purist is to attain this fixity, he *may* reach it, but when he does the language will be in the throes of death. Stagnation and infecundity are the natural and inevitable outcome of purism in any language. 'The serenity of the classic ideal,' says a recent English writer,[1] 'is the serenity of paralysis and death.'

The bugbear of the multiplicity of forms in Modern Irish, which looms so large on the horizon of many learners, has no terrors for any but the childish. Hence we might pass by the vagaries of the purist with a laugh and a contented shrug of the shoulder, if the same spirit were not productive of other manifestations less amusing, and at the same time more harmful. That spirit, as far as Modern Irish is concerned, has been largely 'made in Germany.' And I must confess that some of its effects offend us as much as certain other spirits made in the same country do. The Irish mind, unused, as it has been, to the highest achievements of education, is easily intoxicated by an overdose of German scholarship and accuracy. Personally I have the greatest esteem for German scholarship and accuracy, and if they were only reproduced in this country, and applied sensibly and scientifically to our own language, I should be the last to declaim against them. But the seeds of learning sown in certain minds have produced in this country a crop of pseudo-philologists who go about tinkering with the language, and crying out their wares in season and out of season, to the detriment of the unwary, and the ridicule of real scholarship. It is with the philologist, I fear, as with the poet. He is born, not made. At all events, the German factories have turned out specimens amongst us who are not a credit to their makers. When people edit books, and fill their notes with glaring inaccuracies and downright errors, it is time for us to open our eyes and say we will have none of it.

The teaching of Irish by the direct method shows, I

[1] Walter Raleigh, *Style.*

fear, the same fatal effects of a strained and microscopic attention to words and the absence of all appreciation of their most important functions. Let us take a hypothetical first lesson for learners who know no Irish. I tremble to think of the way in which I have seen such lessons taught. I tremble to think of the consequences of such teaching pervading all succeeding lessons; the same painfully mechanical adherence to the model (a *wrong* model!) in the book; the same lifeless impersonal treatment; the same unconscious repetitions of positive uglinesses and incongruities; nouns instead of pronouns, demonstratives instead of personal pronouns, inelegant uses of the definite article, sudden jerky transitions from question to question, and goodness knows how many other imperfections. And the most painful thing about it all is that the teacher is obviously in earnest, and doing his best according to his lights.

Imagine the irreparable injury which teaching of this kind, continued for months and it may be for years, must ultimately do to the minds of the unfortunate learner. Think of all the delicious effects of light and shade in the meaning and use of words which are utterly lost by this colourless and cast-iron system. And this brings me to the literary side of the Irish revival, and to a consideration of style in reference to Irish. For the student who has been taught in the manner which I am here opposing it is morally impossible to develop any style worthy of the name either in the speaking or writing of Irish. Hence the failures which we see in many Irish essays, and in not a few Irish books. From the very beginning the teacher must aim at forming the style of the pupil. And this is no easy task. A faultless style is the acme of perfection in literature. Even good writers feel its difficulties. Let me quote a passage from an English author on the subject:

> The stupid accidental recurrence of a single broad vowel; the cumbrous repetition of a particle; the emphatic phrase for which no emphatic place can be found without disorganising the structure of the period; the pert intrusion on a solemn thought of a flight of

short syllables, twittering like a flock of sparrows; or that vicious trick of sentences whereby each, unmindful of its position and duties, tends to imitate the deformities of its predecessor;—these are a select few of the difficulties that the nature of language and of man impose upon the writer. He is well served by his mind and ear if he can win past all such traps and ambuscades, robbed of only a little of his treasure, indemnified by the careless generosity of his spoilers, and still singing.[1]

It is not in English alone that the writer is liable to these encumbrances. They are not unknown to Irish, and it is high time for all of us to realise that the revival of Irish is not as simple as it looks. A keener appreciation of style, a stricter attention to the requirements of literature are badly wanted in our students, teachers and writers alike. A more extensive consideration, therefore, of this subtle evasive quality of style falls naturally within the scope of this paper.

It is almost impossible to define the word. The thing itself is more noticeable in the breach than the observance. When it is there we may feel its charm, but ordinarily we do not consciously analyse it into its constituent elements. When it is absent we feel the want, without being always able to put our finger on the defective form or phrase or fancy. Herein we have much need of higher education. For, if the younger generation do not master this mystery of style, we can scarcely hope, except by a miraculous accident, for the production, even in their ripe maturity, of any really great piece of Irish literature. The word 'style,' by its extension to all arts and crafts, proves the pen is mightier than the sword. It is by their 'style' that all human activities are ultimately judged. The creations of the milliner, the performance of the actor or the violinist, the administration of a diocese, even the handiwork of the professional pickpocket—if they are wanting in style they so far fall short of the practical ideal in these particular matters. Style has been called 'the ultimate and enduring revelation of personality' in any

[1] Walter Raleigh, *Style*.

and every sphere of human activity. It appeals to the eye and the imagination as a picture does, and can teach as many lessons. To the man in the street words are so many signs, whereby he is enabled, with a minimum of trouble to his thought or imagination, to transact the everyday affairs of life. Seldom are they fraught with vivid illuminative imagery. But as they flow from the brain and pen of the practised and perfect writer, what a wealth of imagery they impose upon the imagination. Take, for instance, Virgil's description of the descent of Æneas and the Sybil to the lower world:

> Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram
> Perque domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna.
>
> Through hollow kingdoms, emptied of the day,
> And dim, deserted courts, where Dis bears sway,
> Night-foundered, and uncertain of the path,
> Darkling they took their solitary way.

Here, though most of the epithets are negative—indeed largely because of this negative character—they present wondrously vivid pictures of that sublimely dreadful passage of a son of Earth to Tartarus. Or take Canon O'Leary's description of the horse-fair in Séadna. Who can fail to appreciate the beauty of the passage beginning: 'Ḟé ḋeire do leog sé a ṡúil ar ċapall ḋearg ċiarḋuḃ a ḃí go fuinte fáisgiṫe ag falaraċt ar fuid na páirce ⁊ marcaċ éadtrom lúṫṁar ar a ṁuin.' It has been truly said that you can do almost anything with words, but with words alone you can do next to nothing. Allied to this statement is that other one, that it is not what a word means, but what it means to you, that is of the deepest import. I have said already that with many people words do not appeal to the imagination at all. Many people also do not think of the meaning and implication and varied associations of their words. The consequence of this is the wrong and inartistic use of words. When this becomes a fashion we have the phenomenon of popular slang. The 'awfully' pretty, and

'jolly' good, and 'dreadfully' sorry of modern English are examples of this brainless abuse of language.

Suppose one wants to say in Irish: 'By the last state of man I mean the state in which he is on leaving this world,' it will not be an adequate translation to say: 'Sé staid deireannaċ an duine an staid n-a mbéiḋ sé ag faġáil ḃáis dó.' This neglects altogether the emotional or imaginative side of the sentence. That solemn word 'death'—what various emotions it may beget in different minds! What various associations it may have for different individuals! It may run through the whole gamut of human feeling. Love, hatred, envy, hope, despair, even joy, as well, of course, as sorrow, bereavement, loneliness, may be inspired by the bare mention of the word, the bare thought of the fact. And when an individual writer has the fact before his mind his imagination seizes some particular aspect, and his language, if he is a sincere and artistic writer, will reflect the particular emotion which is for the moment evoked. To use the colourless 'ag faġáil ḃáis' in the above Irish sentence instead of the required emotional rendering 'ag fágaint an tsaoġail seo ḋó,' is characteristic of much of our modern Irish writing, and is one of the many faults of style under which our modern books labour.

But not only must our literature appeal to the imagination, and so partake of the excellence of the art of painting; it has analogies also with the art of music. Language has its own peculiar melodies which no writer can afford altogether to neglect. And here again we have much to learn. There is an extraordinary roughness and uncouthness about the sentences and periods of some writers, which shows a woeful lack of appreciation of the melodic possibilities of Irish. Our language is so obviously musical that some of our poets particularly have developed the melody at the expense of the meaning. We know how cloying is the effect of endless alliteration and accumulated assonances, when they are foreign to the sense, and still more when they rush the writer into

nonsense. Here, as in most things, virtue is to be found in the middle course; and virtue, not pedigree or pedantry, is the mark of true nobility in literature as in life:

Nobilitatis virtus non stemma character.

This literary virtue, usually called taste, is the despair of many writers, who forget, if they ever knew, that dictum of Horace:

mediocribus esse poetis
Non homines, non di, non concessere columnae.

And if this is true of poets it is equally true of prose-writers. If the prose-writer is wanting in taste he cannot expect to be admitted to the elect company of the great masters. Want of taste in a literary work is as objectionable as want of taste in conduct. And here we may look, *en passant*, to the relations between grammar and style. While it must be admitted that no canons of accidence or syntax can mark out an easy royal road to style, attention to grammar nevertheless is necessary for the would-be stylist. But one can attend to grammar in two ways. One can scrupulously avoid the use of bad grammar. That is good and necessary. But one can and should attend to the good and tasteful use of what is undoubtedly correct. That is better and more necessary. What is correct is not always in good taste; and what is technically incorrect is sometimes not incompatible with good taste. A great writer will, on occasion, with imperial impudence, throw grammar to the winds, and soar above its petty particularities on the wings of inspiration. And posterity will pardon him. But bad taste is always unpardonable. For my part I prefer to see a learner of Irish using bad grammar, than using perfectly correct grammar in a way that shows him perfectly insensible to the canons of good taste. One day last summer I happened to be in an Irish-speaking district. I was passing by a school and an Irish lesson was in progress in the open air. A class of girls were reading Séadna. I stopped, of course, to listen, and I was struck by the

admirably intelligent way in which they read the text. The blas, intonation, enunciation, were almost perfect. Finally the teacher asked me to put them some questions. I did so. Or, rather, I put one question—and the answer I got so disgusted me that I could not bring myself to put a second one. The class whose intelligent reading had been a delight, the moment I put a question arising naturally out of the text, answered in a stilted, artificial, unnatural manner, repeating the words of the question with parrot-like precision, and equally parrot-like brainlessness and want of taste. I was very disappointed. It was extremely ugly. And yet the grammar of it all was irreproachable. It was very good grammar, but very badly used.

Teachers of Irish should be more anxious about the tasteful use of good grammar than the avoidance of bad grammar. We have seen something of this already in connexion with the direct method. The same danger, the same necessity for caution, runs through the whole language. Some teachers think, e.g., that they have taught the verbs is and tá successfully if they manage to get their pupils to reserve is for 'classification' and 'identification,' and tá for 'condition' sentences. But within the domain of is itself there is a much wider field for teaching, as there is much freer scope for that worst abuse of grammar—the untasteful use of technically correct grammar. An analysis of the whole range of Irish, Old, Middle and Modern, discloses the fact that there are at least eight or ten different ways of expressing identity with the verb is. Each of these ways has an individual tone or colour of its own, and generally speaking only one of them can be used with proper effect in any given set of circumstances. How many learners, nay, how many teachers know of this or think of it, or set themselves, in their studies or their teaching, to master the intricacies of the subject, at once so interesting, so illuminative, and so conducive to an appreciation of style.

One might write a long treatise on this subject of bad taste in the use of good grammar; and on the blemishes which it causes in passages which would otherwise reach well beyond the level of mediocrity. It is in this respect that Canon O'Leary excels every other writer of Modern Irish. His instinct is seldom at fault. Rarely does any discordant note occur to mar the music of his periods. Even in playful passages his style is marked by that eclecticism of phrase which distinguishes the inspiration of the gifted writer from the mere aspiration of the tyro. Take the following passage from Séadna—and I could find instances to the point on every page of all his works. It is portion of the well-known episode about the sguab:—

D'aimsiġ Taḋg a ḃata, ⁊ do laḃair Miċeál leis an sguaib. Seasaiṁ Taḋg i lár an tiġe. D'éirig an sguab ⁊ ṫug sí iarracht ar é ḃualaḋ idir an dá súil. Ḃí an bata go maiṫ, ⁊ an ċuisle láidir, agus ambasa ċosain Taḋg a ċeann ⁊ a ċeannaċa, aċ do ḃuail sí ins na cosaiḃ é, ⁊ do ḃuail sí ins na loirgniḃ é, ⁊ do ḃuail sí ins na glúiniḃ é, ⁊ do ḃuail sí ins na ceaṫraṁnaiḃ é, ⁊ ins an drom ⁊ ins na h-easnaḋaċaiḃ, i dtreo ná feidir sé ar ball cad a ḃí ag imṫeaċt air. Fé ḋeire do liúiġ sé an doras d'osgailt dó, ⁊ geallaim duit gurḃ é b'ḟada leis go raiḃ sé amuiċ.'

Look at that expression, 'Ḃ'é b'ḟada leis go raiḃ sé amuiġ.' Many do not seem to understand the difference between such pairs as 'Ḃ'ḟada leis' and 'Ḃ'é b'ḟada leis.' Yet the difference is important. How often in reading certain Irish books has our taste been offended by the substitution of one such form for the other. In the above passage 'b'ḟada leis' would have been insufferably weak, would in fact have been an anti-climax. 'Ḃ'é b'ḟada leis,' on the other hand, exactly suits the circumstances. The sentence identifies for us the one thing which the poor sguab-ridden Taḋg was longing for at the moment, viz., to be safely out of doors. This may seem a small point, but it is the uniform observance of these 'convenances' that distinguishes tasteful writing, just as it is the habitual neglect of them that is at once the cause and the mark of mediocrity.

Recurring to the lesson in Séadna, already referred

to, I must protest strongly against the abominable habit which shocked me on that occasion. It was not the children's fault. They were only doing what they had been taught to do; and they were surprised at my dissatisfaction with their answer. And the teacher had only taught them what she had been told to teach them—and told by an Inspector, too! It is a grave scandal that such things should be possible in any department of the educational system of any country. I do not think it would be tolerated in any other country but Ireland. And the only remedy for the grievance seems to be the thorough training of the teachers in the right and proper course, and the hope that they will have the courage to do the right thing in spite of the Inspector; and that the latter will in time have the good sense to see the folly of forcing his ignorance and incompetence upon the more enlightened teacher whom it is his duty to direct. I am somewhat loth to attack public officials in this way, but the matter has come under my notice so repeatedly in widely remote parts of the country, that I feel it would be a dereliction of duty on my part if I failed to draw the attention of the public to such an important fact whenever the opportunity occurred.

I have said that words can be made to frame a picture for the imaginative; and that the power of literature can strike melting melodies out of the hard mine of language. But this by no means exhausts the possibilities of literature. Every word has a meaning, and the thought conveyed is the most important element of the literary work. The other charms and graces, true and tasteful though they be, are in the last analysis, 'but the trappings and the suits' of thought. The thought is the radical, the fundamental, the kernel. The senses to be sure may find their pleasure in the way in which words are marshalled to convey sweet music or vivid images. But if the soul of thought be absent the result can never satisfy the intellectual needs of spiritual man. Thought is the soul of literature. And as man's soul is

housed in a tabernacle of clay, which is yet most beautiful and noble, a fitting habitation indeed for its spiritual tenant, so, too, the literary form in which the thought is cast must be beautiful and worthy, but the soul within must never be neglected. The house of clay can never take the place of the spirit which should inform it. The house and the tenant must suit each other, but the former should be made for the latter, and not *vice versa*. It is when these two sides of literature are duly attended to, and noble thoughts are successfully enshrined in fitting language that we are face to face with one of the world's masterpieces. When paltry or ignoble thoughts are presented in the tinsel attire of meretricious graces, or when fine vigorous thoughts are condemned to poor inadequate expression, then we have the literary failure—the words that should never have been spoken, the book that should never have been written, the message that was no message at all. It is only in a Shakespeare, or a Dante or a Goethe, a Virgil or a Sophocles or an Æschylus that we meet that highest form of literary achievement, in which, while sublime thoughts are quite definitely presented in graceful, vivid, powerful language, we yet seem to see—owing to that deft coquetry with words which only the giants of literature possess—weird hosts of other thoughts and other images, haunting our minds and memories, like the ghosts of long-lost friends, or the spirits we may know in another life, evoked by that powerful magic of the masters who know so well (or *do* they know ?) how to

> half reveal,
> And half conceal, the soul within.

Where is our modern Irish Shakespeare, Dante, Virgil, Goethe, Sophocles, Æschylus ? I know not. But it may well be that even now they are in the making. Every lesson in Irish, taught properly with a lively appreciation, on the part both of teacher and learner, of those graces and subtleties which are now too much neglected ; every book written with due respect for the literary taste and

expectations of the scholarly; every book read with critical knowledge of its excellences and its blemishes; will contribute to the ultimate formation (after years of evolution, it may be, but at any rate sooner or later) of a really great writer. That is what we want. A really great writer, above all, a great poet. We must not forget that poetry is the teacher of prose. And no less must we forget that no literary effort, be it prose or poetry, can thrive in uncongenial circumstances. John Stuart Mill has said indeed, and the criticism is an acute one, that 'eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard.' But the theory that poetry is the spontaneous monologue of the poet, in converse with none but Nature, is not to be taken too strictly; as though poets did not need an audience to inspire, or at least to hear with approbation, the utterances of their sublime soliloquies.

The whole history of all literary effort is against such an assumption. The best results in poetry have generally been produced under the ægis of a literary coterie. The true poetic frenzy has generally owed some of its quality to the presence of a Mæcenas—at least some hoped for Mæcenas—in the background. The public taste may indeed become depraved, but there will always be a select and fitting few to whose judgment the poet may safely consign his reputation, whose praise and admiration it will always be worth his while to work for. Still there is little doubt that in literary production the law of supply and demand, *mutatis mutandis*, holds good. It is our business, therefore, to expect and demand high literary excellence in our writers. Criticism must take up her iron pen and write her *dicta sapientia* in the blood of the too hardy aspirant to the temple of fame. And here I may point out the excessive narrowness of the field of view of our modern Irish writers. Fairies, leprechauns, tinkers, tailors, sprideanna, and even gréasaiḋṫe of the Séadna type, may be all very well in their own way, but one can ring the changes on them too often. And the mind familiar with the mighty figures in the great literatures

of the world, both ancient and modern, can never be satisfied with a personnel like these, speak they never so truly.

I do not for a moment wish to deny the charm which a clever writer can lend to such personalities, or to question the usefulness of these themes in modern Irish. They have undoubtedly their place in our literary evolution. But they must not be allowed to occupy the whole stage. We want other higher, broader, more intellectual subjects. We want more realism, and idealism of a less stereotyped kind. We seem to be afraid to touch the great salient truths of modern life from which the writers in other languages draw at once their material and their inspiration. The whole Irish revival since its inception has not begotten a single book, in either prose or poetry, which might be said to chronicle for all time the deep thoughts, the sublime ideals, the mighty love which created and sustained and spread the movement. It has been too much a linguistic movement, too little a literary renaissance. At any rate it is high time for us *now* to remodel our aspirations, to re-fashion our weapons. Even in Ireland life is not so vacuous, but that it might furnish material worthy of dramatist, historian, lyric poet, novelist. Even epics might be written on certain phases of it. Why are we so cowardly? Is it not time to do and dare, and test the potentialities of the glorious language which we are all so anxious to honour and preserve? Here we have a great incentive to take a lively interest in all that concerns the education, the true and proper education, of the nation.

There is no doubt that literature has an important effect on the national character. Tell me a man's favourite books and I will read for you his character—the saying is also true when applied to the nation. There is equally little doubt that in the Irish people, wherever they are unsullied and undegraded by anglicising influences, there is a true and noble literary instinct. There is no reason why it should not be carefully cultivated and fostered in the

schools and universities of the country. But we must all wake up to the fact that our writers hitherto have not looked far enough afield. Perhaps it is due to the want of familiarity with the great masterpieces in other literatures. Perhaps it is due in part to that laziness which finds it easier to produce a book on the conventional topics of the moment than to broach a subject at which it is feared, perhaps, the public might cavil; and which, in any case, though it might have the charm of novelty, would also be liable to present new difficulties of treatment, and even of vocabulary.

No doubt there are many causes at work. But they will be all gradually removed if the want of something deeper, broader, higher in the literary aspirations of the public be once created and felt. It is true that no recipe can be given for genius. But there are certain normal circumstances out of which in the long run genius is sure to evolve itself. The circumstances in Ireland, no doubt, have hitherto been abnormal. We have been severed from the ancient civilisation of our ancestors, and more or less from acquaintance with the modern civilisations of our neighbours. It will be a mighty task to thread our way through the mazes of anglicisation, back to the old life, inspired and guided by the old literature. But it will be a mightier task to push forward into the new life, with the great literatures of every nation to inspire us and save us from the stagnation of insularism. Yet this is the task before us. *Hoc opus, hic labor est.*

And this has been the purpose of my paper: to make you see the insufficiency of the present language movement; to fix your attention on the literary needs of the people; to help you all to strive, each in his own sphere and in his own way, for the production of a new national literature in Irish; a literature that will be worthy of the now, let us hope, re-nascent nation; worthy of the best traditions of the ancient native literature; worthy to take its place beside the noblest achievements in prose

and poetry, of any nation; a literature, in fine, that will serve to enforce the claims of our national language, not only on the backsliders amongst ourselves, but on the literature-lovers of every country; a literature that will help the world of readers by its individualism, beauty, nobility, and fine breadth of human sympathy to lead a higher, more intellectual, and more moral life.

GERALD O'NOLAN.