

“Can We Go Back Into Our Mother’s Womb? –

A Letter to the Gaelic League by A Hedge Schoolmaster”

J. M. Synge 1907

‘Much of the writing that has appeared recently in the papers takes it for granted that Irish is gaining the day in Ireland and that this country will soon speak Gaelic. No supposition is more false. The Gaelic League is founded on a doctrine that is made up of ignorance, fraud and hypocrisy. Irish as a living language is dying out year by year - the day the last old man or woman who can speak Irish only dies in Connacht or Munster - a day that is coming near - will mark a station in the Irish decline which will be final a few years later. As long as these old people who speak Irish only are in the cabins the children speak Irish to them - a child will learn as many languages as it has need of in its daily life - but when they die the supreme good sense of childhood will not cumber itself with two languages where one is enough. It will play, quarrel, say its prayers and make jokes of good and evil, make love when it’s old enough, write if it has wit enough, in this language which is its mother tongue. This result is what could be expected beforehand and it is what is taking place in Ireland in every Irish-speaking district.

I believe in Ireland. I believe the nation that has made a place in history by seventeen centuries of manhood, a nation that has begotten Grattan and Emmet and Parnell will not be brought to complete insanity in these last days by what is senile and slobbering in the doctrine of the Gaelic League. There was never till this time a movement in Ireland that was gushing, cowardly and maudlin, yet now we are passing England in the hysteria of old women’s talk.

A hundred years ago Irishmen could face a dark existence in Kilmainham Jail, or lurch on the halter before a grinning mob, but now they fear any gleam of truth. How are the mighty fallen! Was there ever a sight so piteous as an old and respectable people setting up the ideals of Fee-Gee because, with their eyes glued on John Bull’s navel, they dare not be Europeans for fear the huckster across the street might call them English.

This delirium will not last always. It will not be long - we will make it our first hope - till some young man with blood in his veins, logic in his wits and courage in his heart, will sweep over the backside of the world to the uttermost limbo this credo of mouthing gibberish. (I speak here not of the old and magnificent language of our manuscripts, or of the two or three dialects still spoken, though with many barbarisms, in the west and south, but of the incoherent twaddle that is passed off as Irish by the Gaelic League.) This young man will teach Ireland again that she is part of Europe, and teach Irishmen that they have wits to think, imaginations to work miracles, and souls to possess with sanity. He will teach them that there is more in heaven and earth than the weekly bellow of the Brazen Bull-calf and all his sweaty gobs, or the snivelling booklets that are going through Ireland like the scab on sheep, and yet he'll give the pity that is due to the poor stammerers who mean so well though they are stripping the nakedness of Ireland in the face of her own sons.'

Bibl. note: Composed after the Playboy Riot in 1907; first published in abbreviated version in J. M. Synge 1871-1909, NY: Macmillan 1959, pp.262-63; see full version in Collected Works, II [Prose], ed. Alan Price, 1966, pp.399-400 [also quoted in part in Alan Titley, 'The Irish Language and Synge', in Nailing Theses: Selected Essays, Belfast: Lagan Press 2011, p.135]. Note Editor's Ftn. '[...] The last three lines, from 'and yet he'll give the pity' to 'face of her own sons' are lightly scored out in Item 52.'