

A Plea For Prose

As our professed intent is the revival of the Irish Language, we need a definite appointment of methods towards that consummation for immediate and persistent practice. A ready and earnest striving must be set afoot to tide over the present time, because everyone giving thought to the business must know that the decade now running is charged with a crisis which shall decide for all men of practical sense the question of its weal or its failure as a living tongue. Consider the conditions that hold to-day.

Around the coast, on the side remotest from British influence, there is a daily waning crescent of Irish-speaking territory. Inland, many young people learn it in their schools and elsewhere, like the Continental languages, with even less satisfactory results, on account of the strangeness of the idiom to foreigners. Others there are, scholars who study the language in its primitive phases solely from scientific motives; but this kind may be neglected when telling over the classes that share a common sympathy in this affair.

Now, the first and second sets of people have, the one and the other, the very wants that they could reciprocally supply, and for the well-being of the tongue a transfer should in all ways be encouraged and secured. Those seeking knowledge from books are zealous for the language, because they are conscious of its worth, but, for want of the use and facility acquired by speech, they never know it as their own, and are forced to regard it as dead, abiding only in books, and never to take intimate part in the things of human concern any more.

The poor uneducated people whose living tongue it is even yet, husbandmen and fishermen mostly—for it clings to the sea-board bravely—speak it in many instances with wonderful purity and elegance, but look upon it as a poor, vile jargon kindred with their lot in some indefinable way, a stigma of poverty an effectual bar to the lowest social consideration. Hence they cease to speak it, and enjoin on their children the exclusive use of English.

This notion of a lack of respectability is the root evil of Irish decay, and the life of the language in time to come depends on its prompt eradication. For as all expedients for a revival are but sorry dreams, unless the revivifying force be from the native districts outwards, we must husband well the remnant of our hoard if we would have any seed left for a new propagation.

That bad name must be taken off at all hazards; and, considering the widespread interest now at length awakened in Irish matters, there should be no difficulty in finding ready volunteers for the task. If educated persons moved about amongst the people, talking to them and hearing them talk, they would perform the double service of learning the language from the proper source, and of showing those ignorant or careless of its worth, that Irish is something sought after and precious in the eyes of the great respectable world.

It has even been suggested, and the idea deserves consideration, that popular lectures in Irish, illustrated with lantern views, would be of untold worth to the cause wherever the language is understood. The lecturer could deal with the present movement and its progress at home and abroad, the scribes of the past and their work, local saint-lore and traditions; he could exhibit suitable views from ancient monuments and from 'the countless hosts of the books of Erin,' thereby in some degree proving to his auditory, especially those of the young generation, how priceless is the heirloom they would barter for nothing.

Another great want of the time is a popular literature. Irish lost its mainstay when, after long centuries of activity, it ceased to be written, and fell entirely under the feeble guardianship of oral transmission, to suffer the rapid wearing process fated to all rude tongues lacking the back-bone of a fixed literary canon. Especially in those days of ours so universal is reading become, that no language can hope for favour without its organs: books, magazines, newspapers, etc.

This want of a living literature must be supplied as quickly as may be. Our scholars must write to provide it, and the daily increasing number of those whose care for the language stops not short at

languid well-wishing, will be bound together as a reading public. Thus, minor requisites being found, we should have as a reward for our work the re-establishment of our suspended literature. For no man may say that it is dead.

Our native Irish speakers, of what province soever, can easily by training correct their vernacular to the normal of the last classic writers, subsidizing insensibly by the way much of the splendid fruits of recent philological study, whereby voice would be given once more to a stored-up wealth of words that have long lain silent. The head-waters are abundant to over-flowing; we have but to make a staunch joint in the broken conduit, and the flow will go on copious and sparkling like long ago. But there must be no foreign admixture.

English idiom, mannerisms, style, system of thought, must be rigidly eschewed. New writers must be honestly disabused of the idea that even passable Irish prose may be concocted by a process of superimposing the conventional Irish equivalent on each individual word, previously written out fairly in English. Neither let any such suppose that thereby they are licking the uncouthness of the language into shape, or lending it a hand on the path of progress; rather let possession by these beliefs be for a sign to them that they do not yet comprehend what Irish is.

The ‘blas,’ the subtle genius of the tongue, like the whole chequered nature of the Celt epitomized for tasting, breathes a spirit peculiar, unmistakeable, ineffably soul-satisfying to all those that feel it, know it. It may be met with yet in the old books, or still caught from the mouths of the old men; but at the strange, ungentle touch of the modern renovator, it is volatile as soft morning dew before lusty sun-gaze. Irish without it is a monstrosity unnatural, anomalous; let all who would have a return of the old purity and grace know and decry it.

An enemy to modern Irish prose, more energetic than even the unconsidered efforts of Neo-Irish writers, is modern Irish poetry. Wonderful is the portent, and unusual in our day, but the little literature we can afford to support has run unduly, almost entirely, into poetry.

Without attempting to probe the conditions that favour over-rank production of that manner of intellectual fungi, or stopping to visit the practice with the censure it deserves, it must be condemned here for its present baneful effects in totally submerging the prior and vastly preponderating claims of prose, and for its pernicious influence in establishing a debased model for the future. A literature that finds its sole expression in song is in a state of unhealthy action; but when the symptoms give such indication of chronic debility as here, there is need for drastic measures of remedy.

Prose is crushed out by the present system—what does it give in return? Recent files of Irish printed matter furnish an answer; for without being over-censorious, it can be safely said, that, though some efforts reproduce faithfully the form and spirit of legitimate poetry, and so might stand along with a robust prose literature, yet much of the body of contemporary song is worthless, much of it in such vicious taste as positively to be charged with untold possibilities of harm, that must debase and subvert purity of style in the future.

Correct, common-place English sentiment, thought, expression, it is, in greater part, with a miserably tortured poor shred of Irish for veneering. In its production all the requirements of Irish verse-building are ignored, and instead, the whole scheme of English prosody, such as full rhyming endings, poetic license, and the like, is regarded as essential. This vitiated taste derives its origin from the example set by Dr. McHale’s translation of Moore’s Irish Melodies.

Now, without venturing an opinion on the broader question as to whether these translations are poetry at all, one may with perfect confidence assert that they are not Irish poetry. For poets, there are the canons of the ancients, or the alternative mode, the assonantal, in use among our later bards; that Irish poetry may be made else, is a thing not to be thought of—impossible.

To firmly establish Irish prose, it must be boldly started and sustained as a matter of course medium for interchange of thought.

And here it may be noticed what a pity it is that so many men, anxious for the preservation of the language, still, as editors of Irish texts, have neglected to furnish their work with prefaces and the

other ordinary mechanical mountings in Irish, especially where such treatment, besides acknowledging the rights of a principle, would have been congruent over all others, and a practical testimony, too, that they were somewhat more than mere handymen at the work they had undertaken. This last anomaly is consonant with the host of wrong popular impressions concerning those things, viz:—that Irish scholarship of wonder-compelling profundity may subsist in a man along with inability to write a word of the language. There is very broad margin for distinction in the matter, and, among other things, it is the duty of the common sense directing the present revival movement to champion and force its recognition.

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