

and let me lock and bolt the doors and quench the lamp. He and Mother might both be burned alive in their beds. But when I went out for an evening walk I hoped frantically to rescue some American heiress whose father would realize the talent that was lost in me, or, failing that, to tag along behind some of the senior members of the Gaelic League and try to talk as grown-up as they seemed, and often and often I wasted my precious couple of hours, walking up and down the Western Road and meeting nobody who would even speak to me. As I came up Summerhill the pleasure of being all of a piece again was overshadowed by the prospect of the morning when once more I should have to part from the half of me that was real, and it was like a blow in the face when I found the door locked, and Mother came scurrying out to open it for me.

'Don't say a word, child!' she would whisper.

'Why?' I would ask defiantly, loud enough to be heard upstairs. 'Is he on the war-path again?'

'Ten o'clock that door is locked!' Father would intone from the bedroom.

'Ah, don't answer him! Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Better fed than taught!' Father would add, as he had added any time in the previous ten years.

When my first wretched effort at composition appeared in a children's paper and word of it got round the office, everyone was astonished, but most of all my boss. He was a decent man, and a clever one, and he knew better than anyone that I was definitely not a smart boy. I remember him sitting at his high desk with the paper open before him and a frown on his bulgy forehead as he nervously readjusted his pince-nez.

'Did you write this, Native?'

'Yessir,' I said, feeling I had probably done it again. Everything I did only seemed to get me into fresh trouble.

'Nobody help you?'

'No, sir,' I replied warily, because it looked as though someone else might get the blame, and I still clung to the code of the boys' weeklies and was always prepared to own up. The frown deepened on his fat face.

'Then for God's sake, stick to writing!' he snapped. 'You'll never be any good on the Great Southern and Western Railway.'

And that, as we used to say, was one sure five. As usual, looking for models of fine conduct, I had hit on a left-wing time-keeper who knew all the Italian operas by heart and made it a point of honour

not to take off his cap before the bosses. Seeing that anyone who knew so much about opera must know the correct thing for other situations, I decided to do the same, with results that may be imagined. Even then, I should probably have been let off with a reprimand, because I had no self-confidence and merely went about blindly imitating anyone and anything, in the hope of blending somehow into the phantasmagoria, but, with my bad sight, I had also fallen over a hand-truck and injured my shin so badly that I couldn't walk for weeks. But on the railway bad sight was more serious than bad manners, because it might result in a claim.

On the Saturday night I was sacked I read my first paper. It was in Irish, and the subject was Goethe. For me, my whole adolescence is summed up in that extraordinary evening—so much that even yet I cannot laugh at it in comfort. I didn't know much about Irish, and I knew practically nothing about Goethe, and that little was wrong. In a truly anthropomorphic spirit I re-created Goethe in my own image and likeness, as a patriotic young man who wished to revive the German language, which I considered to have been gravely threatened by the use of French. I drew an analogy between the French culture that dominated eighteenth-century Germany and the English culture by which we in Ireland were dominated.

While I was speaking, it was suddenly borne in on me that I no longer had a job or a penny in the world, or even a home I could go back to without humiliation, and that the neighbours would say, as they had so often said before, that I was mad and a good-for-nothing. And I knew that they would be right, for here I was committing myself in public to all the vague words and vaguer impressions that with me passed for thought. I could barely control my voice, because the words and impressions no longer meant anything to me. They seemed to come back to me from the rows of polite blank faces as though from the wall of my prison. All that did matter was the act of faith, the hope that somehow, somewhere I would be able to prove that I was neither mad nor a good-for-nothing; because now I realized that whatever it might cost me, there was no turning back. When as kids we came to an orchard wall that seemed too high to climb, we took off our caps and tossed them over the wall, and then we had no choice but to follow them.

I had tossed my cap over the wall of life, and I knew I must follow it, wherever it had fallen.