



John Millington Synge: a reconsideration

Author(s): T. R. Henn

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John Millington Synge: a reconsideration

by T. R. Henn

I

Mr Provost Fellows and Scholars

I am very conscious of the honour you have done me in inviting me to give this Trinity Monday Discourse*; in the University with which my own family connections go back to the later years of the seventeenth century, and of which I have for six years been a member, however unworthy, by adoption and grace. You have asked that the Discourse should concern one of your many distinguished alumni, whose centenary is now being celebrated. A little more than a month ago there was indeed the official celebration here: for which I had the honour to contribute two essays for the commemorative volumes. We should perhaps pause for a moment to consider the nature of literary centenaries. In the last few years there have been many of them: Yeats, Wordsworth, Synge, Dickens. No scholar would refuse to attribute to them much that is of value even in these gatherings of the critical eagles. New facts are brought to light; new scholars make or mar their reputations; biographers beat once again the bones of the buried, with results that are not always decorous or well-mannered. One who has taught literary history for a good many years may perhaps be forgiven some measure of cynicism; for it is not easy to predict (whatever one's own certainties and loyalties) the vagaries of literary reputation a century or so hence.

But in our own time there seems to be some sort of pattern that we may discern. A great man dies. At once there is a host of telegrams to the Sorbonne, for that university has a rule that

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candidates for doctoral theses may not write of the still-living, only of the dead. (We are told that these have no rights.) The long-prepared obituary notices are brought out from the files. A hundred journals and magazines print their long-stored articles on the victor-victim. Rumours, not all credible or creditable, assume their many tongues. Not infrequently these are substantiated by discoveries; of letters, juvenilia, sometimes of the work which a writer wished to conceal but which he has not been wise enough to destroy utterly. The grim evaluations and revaluations begin. And we remember Pope:

If time improve our wit as well as wine,
Say at what age a poet grows divine?
Shall we, or shall we not, account him so,
Who died, perhaps, an hundred years ago?
End all dispute; and fix the year precise
When British bards begin t' immortalize?
'Who lasts a century can have no flaw,
I hold that wit a Classic, good in law'. . .

John Synge, who died young, has been in his grave for half a century. The Irish Literary Renaissance, in which he is one of the four great figures, has long passed over us. Perhaps, as I think, we are now aware of its

melancholy long withdrawing roar

or, perhaps more accurately—for there is now much economic or fiscal poetry in this city—

The rattle of glasses on the shore
Under the receding wave.

Which terminal dates should we fix for its ending? His death in 1909, or Yeats' thirty years later? The Easter Rising, or the death of Lady Gregory, and the end of that 'grammar school of courtesies' at Coole? That is the business, in a multitude of universities, of what James Stephens called 'the professors whose mouths are gorged with sawdust'; for whatever dates we give to our period it is rich, varied, and deceptively simple to teach and to examine at undergraduate levels. But surely there was never a 'period' when politics, religion, national ideals, and sociological considerations intertwined with such complexity. For evidence we need go no further

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than the Yeats International Summer School of 1970; where Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory were stigmatized by a group who were interested in disruption of more academic deliberations as 'the unholy trinity', and your most important living poet was dismissed as a Fascist and Ireland's Public Enemy No 1. And as the semi-literate propaganda was handed out on the steps of the Town Hall one was reminded inevitably of the notorious counterblast to *The Countess Kathleen*, 'Souls for gold'. It is perhaps fortunate for my purposes this morning that this complexity is less significant in the work of Synge than in that of Yeats, Joyce and Shaw. And I remind myself that this (by your invitation) is a *discourse*, a rare and to me a noble word, with strong eighteenth century and even ecclesiastical overtones. My task, as I see it, is to offer you some sort of perspective.

II

Let us begin with what Yeats called 'detractions'. Synge was at best a very minor poet. Much of his work is influenced by Wordsworth, both in technique, subject, spirit; and it is suffused with a Wordsworthian melancholy that often becomes morbid. Out of the mass of the poems we might pause on three or four ballad-like pieces, notable for a fierce energy, written in conformity with his theory set out in the *Preface*. This is a challenge to Victorian sentimentality, a plea for a return to brutality: 'for it is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there is no great poetry that has not its roots among the clay and the worms'.¹ Here his allegiance is not to Wordsworth, but to Villon, Shakespeare, Nashe, Ben Jonson, Donne; we may remember that Yeats, in a famous letter to Grierson, speaks of the revelation of the primitive Eden that Donne had revealed to him.²

Synge's prose rests mainly on two reflective books of travel and observation: *The Aran Islands* and *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara*. They are of considerable personal interest, and they remain indispensable as setting out for us the sources of thought, plot, even the phraseology of many of the plays. The 'occasional' articles, commissioned by *The Manchester Guardian* and illustrated by his travelling-companion Jack B. Yeats, are competent and interesting journalism. But a good deal of the prose-writing is, to use the term my friend C. S. Lewis used of the sixteenth century,

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'drab'; only occasionally does it show the patient, acute and often dramatic powers of observation that are apparent in the plays. Synge did not do for Aran what Maurice O'Sullivan or Tomas O'Croghan did in *Twenty years a-growing* and in *The islandman*: and one could name several contemporary books of travel in Ireland that remain longer in the memory.

Nor can Synge's critical writing compare, in scope and in depth, with that of his major contemporaries. It is confined to two slight prefaces to *The playboy* and *The tinker's wedding*. One of these contains the famous pleas for an anti-Ibsen drama that is to mirror what is 'superb and wild in reality' and for the speech out of desolate places that was to be 'as fully flavoured as a nut or an apple'. The second plea, less effective, was for a sense of humour in a people; the ability to laugh at themselves, in the traditional manner, when they were satirized. It was not a fruitful plea; many years were to pass before *The tinker's wedding* could be performed in Dublin. Perhaps it would have been better if a portion of the Dublin audiences had shown themselves to be, like the people of Tiryns,³ incurably flippant.

III

It is, I believe, in the plays that his reputation must rest. We have to consider one tragedy, two near-tragedies, and two 'critical' comedies. In comparison with the output of Lady Gregory—I have been reading in proof the new edition of the three volumes of her *Collected plays*—the bulk is slight. But most of it is work of astonishing quality and depth, as Lady Gregory's plays are not. I am not aware of any adverse criticism of *Riders to the sea*, the only perfect 'miniature' tragedy in our language. It is a remarkable example of sheer purity and economy of dramatic technique. It exhibits, perhaps strangely, all the structural features of a great drama, and I need not labour the 'recognition', the 'reversal', the choric elegy at the ending; whose qualities are enhanced by Vaughan Williams' music. This purity is made possible by the integrity and universality of the Horatian theme of the drowned sailor, the quiet and the unquiet grave,⁴ the certainty of the eventual sacrifice demanded by the sea in all parts of the world where men use it. The plot is too well-known to need rehearsal here. Only I ask your attention to the fidelity of observation, and the dramatic economy: which is indeed so compressed (and like all his work

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intensively revised) that in the hurry and imprecision of a stage performance we may easily pass it by. It is as if mysterious threads of meaning are being woven about us. Why are the two horses red and grey, and why does the phantasm of Michael ride the grey, and what is the connection (if there is any) with the horses of *Ezekiel*, *Daniel*, *The Apocalypse*? How is this colour-contrast related to the red and the grey cocks (the cock being linked to Theopompus, the herald of the dead) that are woven into certain of the Scottish ballads? Why does the phantasm of Michael have new clothes, new shoes on his feet? Is this yet another instance of the 'quick' coming for the dead, as in *Clerk Saunders*? By what craftsmanship are we confronted (as *Christ in the carpenter's shop*, for which Millais' sketch was on Yeats' mantelpiece) with the 'fine white boards' for the coffin? and yet Maurya, who has seen many coffins made, has forgotten the nails (with all their associations) for this, the last of them. The rope that hangs on the wall will serve as a bridle to take the horses to the fair, or in an island funeral to lower the coffin 'into some wet crevice in the rocks', or even to hold its frail sides together. The two girls find difficulty in undoing the knot of the bundle of Michael's clothes. Synge had noted how quickly cloth or fibre rotted in the islands because of the salt-laden air, and it was to be expected that the shrunken cord should be drawn tight; but in some corner of our minds we may be aware of this perennial imagery of 'that subtle knot, which makes us man'.⁵ More obvious (but not less disturbing) is the imagery of the cake baked for the journey, that should be given to Bartley beside the spring well; and—this is an additional touch in the best production I have seen—one of the girls hastily wipes down with a cloth a table on which the flour for the cake has been mixed, and on which the body of Bartley is to be laid.

It is never Synge's method to make this kind of imagery explicit; I am aware of it rather as a grey mist swirling about the borders of consciousness. Behind his technique there is, I believe, a profundity of reading and reference in a limited but well-meditated area of the classics: and that these authors are largely what I. A. Richards once chose for his great course at Harvard which some called 'the roots of the mountains'. We may rehearse them briefly: the Bible and the Liturgy; Shakespeare; Montaigne; Cervantes; Petrarch; Villon and Ronsard; Molière; Wordsworth, Shelley. And unlike Yeats, whose agile and voracious mind ranged so widely

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but I think superficially, Synge lived with his chosen authors; so that the references (shaded with subtlety in all kinds of ways) are yet integral with the dramatic statement.

Behind most of the plays there is what I would call an epic perspective, hinted at rather than stated at a number of levels. Sometimes this quality is perceived in terms of a Homeric or Horatian simplicity. Maurya's

No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.

has resonances too familiar to need quotation. Man's conflict with the sea and with the hills is perennial. Behind Synge's sheep-farmers is Wordsworth's *Michael*, and the climax of defeat that Arnold noted as an example of the Grand Style:

And never lifted up a single stone.

The shade of that heroic half-legendary man, Patch Darcy, moves in the background of *The shadow* as an example of magnificence of strength and wisdom, and perhaps of heroic love, and certainly of the macabre of death: he is

eaten by crows in the butt of a ditch.

Once again we are reminded of Villon and the Scottish Ballads, and especially of 'The two corbies'.

I have referred to two of the plays as semi-tragedies. Like *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for measure*, perhaps *A winter's tale*, they are plays which include in themselves situations and characters which would not be out of place in a normal tragedy, but which are manipulated by the dramatist to provide an ending which leaves our judgements ambivalent or confused. At the end of *Troilus* heroics and anti-heroics dissolve into bad and bawdy verse by Pandarus. At the end of *Measure for measure* some 'judicial' remarks are made, but we wonder whether they do not leave the permissive society of Vienna much as it was before. And in *A winter's tale*, for all the critics' high talk—valid enough in certain contexts—of 'regenerative symbolism', we wonder whether the price of a dead son, and old courtier torn to pieces by a bear, a lady immured for sixteen years to provide a dramatic dénouement—where have the 'values' gone?

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So, I imagine, of *In the shadow of the glen*. A corpse on a table, the horror of a woman's loneliness in the farm at the head of Glenmalure; a picture of greed and cowardice on the part of a would-be seducer, the small farmer of the plains,⁶ (for the wooing of Nora is little short of that) and we end with the Tramp and Nora going out to the life of tramps or tinkers: she, clear-eyed, bitter, her heart cleft by the Tramp's words:

but you've a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go.

We can, I think, isolate the causes of offence to the moderately-riotous audiences of 1905, and we do well to remember Clement Scott's attack when Ibsen first came to London. Some are clear enough. Nora—I have seen her prototype in the West, as the Victorians saw Hedda Gabler and Nora Helmer in London—is the Irish 'unwomanly woman' unable to bear the situation which 'romantic Ireland', and perhaps her religious tradition, expected her to tolerate. There, too, she revolts against her circumstances which arise primarily out of economic causes, of the marriage to the old man, who was always 'cold'. His appearance is wholly unpleasant. It is an archetypal situation, the January-May marriage. Restoration comedy indeed attempts to right the balance by making seduction by a younger man tolerated, if not actually meritorious.⁷ But to the Ireland of 1905 the thought of rebellion against the loveless marriage, loneliness, the unremitting tasks of the small farm, was, in this social class, inconceivable. And the wind, fog and rain, which acquire in the play mythical and malignant proportions, enhance the horror. Glenmalure offers none of the companionship of the clusters of houses, the visiting at night, that Synge noted on Aran.

There were other causes of offence: a woman left alone with a man (this is to recur in *The playboy*) the faint suggestion of a flighty woman who has already had clandestine meetings with Michael Dara, may even have had an intrigue with the dead Patch Darcy—all these were repugnant to the peasant image which idealists from Goldsmith onwards had put forward; and which had been reinforced by the contemporary mythology of the absolute chastity and obedience of the women of the Isle of Saints. But the springs of action were neither so complex nor so powerful as those which produced the *Playboy* riots.

IV

Because protests, demonstrations, mob violence are of particular interest today in even the most ancient universities, we may examine the *Playboy* happenings in some detail. In general terms we are familiar with what psychologists, anthropologists and zoologists call 'displacement activities'. Acts of rage or violence become the channels for a more profound malaise. This, I gather, is observable in Arts faculties that are overcrowded. The wife (we are told) who smashes a vase in a tantrum perceives in it the shattering of her husband's skull. The undergraduate who riots on the grounds of 'idealism', of psychic assistance to some remote brigand chieftain, may be 'displacing' his dislike of examinations, or of his teachers, or of whatever government is in power, in his own country or elsewhere. If he riots in the name of morality or convention the pretext may be of the most ridiculous; such as the repeated anarchy in the theatre over the run-on Alexandrine of Victor Hugo's *Hernani*.⁸

The Playboy riots took place in the week following 24 January 1907. They are of immense importance in the history of the Irish Theatre. I myself believe that they accelerated Synge's death, as did the notorious review in the *Quarterly* for Keats. They are, perhaps, the first cloudings that herald the dark night of Yeats, and of the Abbey: that period that begins with 1909 and comes to its fruitful dawn in Yeats' bitter volume, *Responsibilities*.⁹ They were projected into the Abbey players' visit to America, but here they were more organized and political, and even more aimless. We may remember that two telegrams were sent that first night; the first that all was well, no morality outraged; the second—

Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift.

We may consider the whole phrase. Christy Mahon is wooing Pegeen. He speaks of 'a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern world'. It is worth attempting a little exegesis. Some of the audience might have known that the word 'drift' was applicable to a collection of heifers. The woman-cow comparison is a vehicle of abuse in many languages and ikons. To a Mayo man the Eastern world may have been Dublin, but more likely there were some vague associations with *The Arabian nights' entertainments*; it is not impossible that some of the audience were familiar with that widely-circulated piece of Victorian

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pornography, *The lustful Turk*. 'Shift' was in any event a key-word to the improprieties; we remember Bloom of *Ulysses*, and perhaps Synge's letter to Stephen McKenna: 'I have as you know perambulated a good deal of Ireland in my thirty years and if I were to tell, which Heaven forbid, all the sex horrors I have seen I could a tale unfold that would wither up your blood.'¹⁰

But the phrase was surely no more than a catalyst or point of discharge for a cumulative uneasiness that must have been building up throughout the play, with memories of the immorality of *The shadow*, and a phrase that might have seemed to reflect upon the infallibility of the priesthood from *Riders to the sea*:

Didn't the young priest say the Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living?

—It's little the like of him knows of the sea.

And as if to emphasize the point this is the phrase that Nora has quoted from her brother at the onset of the play:

Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute, says he, with no son living.

But in *The playboy* the goading phrases start early in the play, and they continue throughout. I want this morning to gesture towards my view of Synge as the anti-clerical; the agnostic, of a long lineage of churchmen, turned quasi-pantheist; the critical intelligence of the 1890's as developed in France directed, in the fashion of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Molière, against certain practices of the church. It is common knowledge that he rejected the tradition of his family: that his reading of the Saints (which seems to have led him momentarily to the verge of faith)¹¹ was rejected in Brittany; and that, in Dublin and in America, he, like Yeats, was widely accused of blasphemy. From the standpoint of an Irish audience of the first decade of our century, without a tradition in drama of licensed satire of the church and its ministries, there was much justification. (We may imagine the comments of Irish journalism of the 1900's on *The tale of a tub*). In the *Preface to The tinker's wedding* Synge had pleaded for a sense of humour, of proportion, that belongs more to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It seems likely that such attitudes are predominantly southern—witness Chaucer—and European, and did not appeal to an Ireland that was still provincial and acutely self-conscious.

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We may recall what seems to me one probable cause of offence. Pious expletives and invocations are common in the talk of the people in the west:

Where now will you meet the like of . . . Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland, till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet.

Shawn Keogh is enjoined to remain in the shebeen to guard the chastity of Pegeen:

Don't stop me, Michael James. Let me out of that door, I'm saying, for the love of the Almighty God. Let me out. Let me out of it, and may God grant you His indulgence in the hour of need.

Is it killed your father?
With the help of God I did surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul.

More subtly, perhaps,

Aid me for to win Pegeen . . . Aid me for to win her, and I'll be asking God to stretch a hand to you in the hour of death, and lead you short cuts through the Meadows of Ease, and up the floor of Heaven to the Footstool of the Virgin's son.

Widow Quin: There's praying!

We might multiply these instances: Shawn's collocation 'Oh Father Reilly and the Saints of God!'; the parodied benediction that the drunken Michael pronounces over his daughter and the Playboy. Behind them is the popular denunciation of the whole theme of the play, in spite of the authority of Synge's source that he had learnt on Aran. We may quote from the account of the riot given in the *Freeman's journal*, when W. G. Fay went to the footlights to ask for quiet so that the play might go on:

Mr. Fay: There are people here who have paid to see the piece. Anyone who does not like the play can have his money returned.

Cries of 'Irishmen do not harbour murderers'.

A voice: 'We respect Irish virtue.'

I continue from the same report:

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There was booing, hissing, shouting, cries of 'God save Ireland', counter-singing from the Trinity youths of 'God save the King', stamping, 'vociferations in Gaelic', and striking of seats with sticks . . .

At last the curtain descended on the first section of the production amidst howls, cheers, and the singing of national songs. During the interval the police withdrew from the theatre.

Two points are worth noting. This is the account of the *second* night. It seems likely, with our knowledge of mob-psychology, that the rumour had gone round of a *general* immorality in the play. There was no need, therefore, to have read it. The patriotic songs, and the pleasantly-termed 'vociferations in Gaelic' are classic instances of the familiar displacement activity, wholly oblique to the ostensible cause. Moralists have observed that each age selects a specific vice against which to crusade. We may quote Yeats' epigram, *On hearing that the students of our new university have joined the agitation against immoral literature*. (This must be among the longest poetic titles on record; it is pleasant to see that in the Princeton Concordance, for which the computer would accept no title of more than fourteen letters, it becomes *Students Agit.*).

Where, where but here have Pride and Truth,
That long to give themselves for wage,
To shake their wicked sides at youth
Restraining reckless middle-age?¹²

Violent preoccupations have seldom been conducive, in history, to a sense of humour.

I have mentioned the European background and, as I see it, its effect in liberating a national literature from undue self-consciousness. Synge himself said 'It may be hinted . . . that there are several sides to *The Playboy*'. There are. One possible perspective is—following, perhaps, the example of James Joyce—to regard it as a kind of comic *Odyssey* transplanted to Connaught: in which Pegeen is Nausicaa, the bevy of giggling girls her maidens, and Michael is the king her father. There is the hospitality to the wandering travel-stained hero, the open wooing of him, the triumphant games on the strand, and the archetypal conflict of two women competing for one man; there is the departure of the hero, and the woman's utter despair. ('Dido and her Aeneas' may also be relevant in the pattern):

Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World.

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Turn this many-faceted crystal again, and it becomes a semi-parody of the Celtic heroic cycles: of the violent hero who attains his stature by giving good blows. And as the epic narrative becomes subject to improvement the violence increases in those primary virtues of epic: ferocity, courage and strength.

'There are several sides to *The playboy*.' It is a satire, an expression of a fierce Dionysiac gaiety; it is at times brutal and cruel; it can rise to lyric heights. But it is, like *The shadow* and *The well of the saints* and perhaps *The tinker's wedding*, 'free' comedy that verges upon, and retreats from, in its own intrinsic rhythms, 'great' comedy. (I use the terms of Bonamy Dobrée.) It is 'free' because the problems which it raises are left in balance or tension when the curtain falls; it can be 'great' because it seems, in some indefinable manner, to be a significant mirror of a world. It is 'free' as *Measure for measure* and *A winter's tale* are free.

And here we may have in part the reason for the rejection in Dublin and in America. The history of the Irish theatre of the nineteenth century is very largely that of melodrama, of closed-circuit comedy, of standard character-types, of predictable endings. Synge is perpetually raising problems—not what he calls (no doubt referring to Ibsen) 'the dregs of many seedy problems', but issues which are of such importance that their resolution lies only in their total statement. If an audience has grown accustomed to a drama in which the intellectual pattern is tied up, neatly and finally, it will not tolerate with any patience a so-called comedy in which the crooked questions are left open. Is Oswald in *Ghosts* given the poison by his mother? Does Nora Helmer return to the Doll's House after that final slam of the door? (The German producer found it intolerable that a good bourgeois wife should not, and altered the ending accordingly.) Is blindness and illusion preferable to sight and disillusion? Under what circumstances may a young wife desert an aged husband? What would a lesser dramatist have made of an act showing Nora and her Tramp, a year later, after walking the roads?

V

There remains the question of Synge's language, so frequently and so bitterly attacked. The criticisms range between St John Irvine's description of him as 'a faker of peasant speech' and the qualified praise of T. S. Eliot; whose reservation was that his

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language was useful only for Synge's type of drama, and that the mine was narrow-veined and easily worked out. I think this is true; but is it not true also of any such innovation? And to say that he 'invented' it is nonsense.

Here I can only record my own opinion.

Synge's dramatic language is subject to the eternal dramatic laws. It is based on the idiom and rhythms of the speech that he had known in his boyhood in Dublin and Wicklow. On these Gaelic constructions, and more subtle intonations, float (as it were) the waves of tudor English, reinforced by his own reading in Marlow, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Nashe. I believe that we can also discern, though faintly, traces of French constructions. Like all dramatic speech it is heightened, intensified, compressed. We may discern in it Biblical usages and cadences, as in Shakespeare's prose. It is not universally adaptable: in *Deirdre*, except for those speeches which reflect and maintain moments of high emotion, it seems to me to fail. It is fatally easy to parody, as in *The mist that does be on the bog*. It can degenerate into the *maniéré* dictum known as 'Kiltartanese'. Its failure in that mode can be seen at its worse in Lady Gregory's use of her idiom to write religious drama, notably the plays on the captivity in Egypt¹³ and on the crucifixion.¹⁴ (Yeats was wiser in *Calvary* and *The resurrection*.)

In Synge himself it is, I think, variable in quality; and this quality is probably related to the care with which he revised his work. There are touches of *opus alexandrinum*, which I myself could wish away, in some of *The playboy* speeches. I find the first act of *Deirdre* flat and contrived. It is when the emotion rises under the pressures of approaching despair that he seems to me surefooted, moving, with a lyric integrity, drawing upon 'the masterful images' that rise from a poet's imagination to serve him. For it is the images that are rooted in the rich simplicity of the countryside, and set in rhythms which stand comparison with those of the King James Bible, that achieve greatness. It is never very easy to speak of matters like these, isolated from their settings in the plays; but I am going to ask you to consider two contrasting passages. They are, very roughly, comparable in tone and intention. The first is from Lady Gregory's *Kincora*:¹⁵

It is not to banishment they will be sent. I will go meet my own death with them, with Sitric and Maelmora. I will not go on living after them. My heart will break in me, and I will die! It is soon we will all be in the ground together.

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This is adequate but wholly commonplace; we could have done without the exclamation mark after 'and I will die!' Some of the phrases are nearly if not quite exhausted. By contrast, this:

I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies. It was not by a low birth I made kings uneasy, and they sitting in the halls of Emain. It was not a low thing to be chosen by Conchubor, who was wise, and Naisi had no match for bravery. It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs, and the loosening of the teeth. It was the choice of lives we had in the clear woods, and in the grave we're safe, surely.

We may look at this more closely.

... 'Sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy'—there are reverberations (rather than echoes) from the *Psalms*¹⁶ as well as *Deuteronomy*,¹⁷ for the shoe is the base thing, worthless, yet suggesting dominion also ('Over Edom have I cast out my shoe'); but also that which is removed when one enters a holy place. 'Muddy' is both of travel, the long journey from Alban, and perhaps the earthly garment, the 'muddy vesture of decay'.¹⁸ Deirdre's life will be 'envied by great companies': royal courts and gatherings, but with the subsidiary sense of 'companies', historic married companionship. Her beauty has made kings 'uneasy': we are brought up sharply by the deliberate understatement. The next two sentences take on an incantatory tone. They are sanctioned by medieval rhetorical devices. Then the vivid 'grey hairs' (also with Biblical overtones) and, if we accept the Rabbinic exegesis, of *Ecclesiastes* 12.4. We may remember the less effective adaptation by Yeats:

What made us think that he could comb grey hair?¹⁹

And with the last phrase we have shifted from the 'classical' cadences²⁰ of the first four chapters of the speech, cadences which depend on the light final syllable, and change to the so-called 'English' type.

The diction, as I have suggested, seems to me uneven. I find the language of *Riders* flawless, restrained, and employed with that tact and dignity that reminds us of plainsong. I could, I think, do without the much-praised passage in *The playboy*:

If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing backwards and forward, with a nosegay on her golden shawl.

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This seems to me at once contrived and derivative; whereas the passage that immediately precedes it seems to work:

It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's, or an earl's itself, when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in His golden chair.

because behind it there is Synge's own poem, 'Dread' and behind that the Greek. Again, the diction seems supremely effective in vituperation, and in speeches which are not developed at any great length; and in which Synge's talent for the pregnant word or phrase has full scope—

where you'd hear a voice kissing and talking deep love in every shadow of the ditch.

dreading that young gaffer who'd capsize the stars.

You'd a right to throw him on the crupper of a Kerry mule and drive him westwards like holy Joseph, in the days gone by.

The confused memory of an icon of the flight into Egypt? He did, as T. S. Eliot said, create a new diction that was an adequate vehicle for his subject-matter.

It had, in the hands of his imitators, grave disadvantages. It is fatally easy to write without distinction. The inversions, the excessive use of present participles, and, even worse, the attempts to suggest accent by spelling, can easily become irritating and ineffective. The truth is, I believe, that Synge deliberately created a poetic diction that was based on what he had heard; in conformity with his own desire for wildness, energy, and Marlovian 'high astounding terms'. I believe it to be most effective in crisp simple dialogue and, above all, in passages where the prevalent tone is elegaic or defiant. A great playwright has his ear attuned to the histrionic or meta-physical phrases that may still be heard; but whose incidence, for obvious reasons, is now much less than it was in the early 1900's.

VI

My real theme this morning is the ambivalence of Synge's outlook; which I see as being the force behind his irony and his anti-clericalism, his understanding and compassion and intense apprehension of place. One of the heaviest stones thrown at him is the accusation

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of being Anglo-Irish, and no true Irishman. He did not mirror the true Ireland (who has ever dared to do this?). He maligned her peasantry. He should have written in Irish (can we name a play that has achieved an international reputation in that medium?). And this, the journalism of the 1905-9 period (and even later), adds up to the accusation of some kind of betrayal. We recall the attacks made on Yeats, Lady Gregory, Lutyens, Lane, on similar but more complex indictments. And we remember that Shaw was expelled for atheism by the Wexford Bee-Keepers' Association: more nearly, we remember the fate of O'Casey, and the long list of other literary exiles.

For we who are Anglo-Irish have faced both inwards and outwards. I do not mean that we have faced both ways. I do mean that we were committed, by birth, tradition, religion and perhaps politics, to a view of Ireland and her people that is necessarily distanced, selective, ambivalent; and this seems to be supported by the views, and even the conduct, of the writers themselves. We were, perhaps are, informed by a distrust and contempt for English stupidity and incompetence while admiring the capacity of English administration to impose law and justice. We were committed by an intense loyalty to the countryside, its beauty, the kindness of its people. At the same time we were conscious of drunkenness, sloth, incompetence, of every sort of blackguardism that maimed cattle, and burnt houses, and sent us coffins badly drawn in red ink. For almost everything that was cultural we turned to England, and through England to Europe. Synge's characters might inveigh against the Boer War, the hanging judges, the poverty and distress in the west. That was the outcome of mismanagement, stupidity; but it was also—this Synge did not see clearly—the consequence of the wave of the economic depression of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, itself one of the many waves of the groundswell of the two revolutions at the end of the eighteenth.

He was not concerned with the politics of his Ireland. His protest on behalf of the peasant world is in part against the government, civil and ecclesiastical; but it is mainly a protest against the human situation. That in his view can be met in many ways; by stoicism, by laughter, by the 'nourishment of the imagination'. But behind it there is the oppression of humanity; by the cruelty of the sea, by the hill fogs; by the 'silent feet' of age, by the passing of all beauty. Behind it always there is the solitude, the quest for

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a love that it was his fate to find and to lose. Solitary, often morose, capable of being greatly moved to height and depth; loving passionately in the country of hill and wood and stream. And if (as I think) Yeats' image in *The fisherman*²¹ and in *The tower*²² is based on memories of Synge, I cannot do better (nor forge a stronger link with my own boyhood in Clare) than quote:

I leave both faith and pride
To young upstanding men
Climbing the mountain-side,
That under bursting dawn
They may drop a fly;
Being of that metal made
Till it was broken by
This sedentary trade.

Notes

1. Preface to the *Poems*.
2. *Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Wade, p. 570.
3. This illuminating story is in Athenaeus.
4. See (e.g.) Horace, *Odes* I. 28; and several of the Scottish Ballads.
5. Donne's *Ecstasy*. But the image is perennial.
6. We may reflect on the vast gap, then as now, between the world of the Wicklow hill-farms and that of the lowlands.
7. As in Dryden:
The gods and fortune take their part
Who like young monarchs fight,
And boldly dare invade that heart
Which is another's right.
8. 'Sérà-ce déjà lui? C'est bien à l'escalier
Dérobé.'
9. 1914.
10. *Letters*, Synge to MacKenna. Ed. A Saddlemyer. Quoted in *Massachusetts review*, vol. v, p. 281.
11. *Collected works*, vol. ii (prose), pp. 31-2.
12. *Collected poems*, p. 105.
13. *The deliverer*.
14. *The story brought by Brigit*.
15. *Collected plays*, vol. ii, p. 68.
16. *E.g.* 60:8, 109:8.
17. *E.g.* 25:10.
18. *The merchant of Venice*, v. 1. 64.
19. *In memory of Major Robert Gregory, C.P.*, p. 148.
20. See Henn, *Collected works of J.M.S.* (1963, pp. 16 ff.)
21. *C.P.*, p. 166.
22. *C.P.*, p. 218.